



Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Spain

Rosa Martínez-Cuadros

1. General presentation:

On 14 March 2020, the Spanish Government declared the “state of alarm” through a Royal Decree 463/2020 for the management of the sanitary crisis derived from the COVID-19. This happened only three days after the World Health Organization rated the situation of public health as a pandemic. Initially, the measures taken by the Spanish Government were only for 15 days, but they were extended 6 times. Consequently, the status of the “state of alarm” was in force until 21 June 2020. After these, different Royal Decrees were published which established de-escalation phases until April 2022. From April 2022 the only sanitary restrictions existing in Spain were the use of face masks in public transport and sanitary buildings such as hospitals.

Many of these measures such as restrictions in movement, limitations of capacity during worship activities, and the adaptation of places of worship, had a direct impact on religious issues. Since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has been of interest for researchers in relation to different topics and the impact on religion is not an exception. For instance, the Centre of Sociological Investigations (CIS), which is the national autonomous organism linked to the Spanish Government, launched different specific surveys on the “Effects and consequences of the coronavirus”. In September 2021 the survey included the question: “During the pandemic, would you say that you have become more religious or spiritual?” According to the results, 9.6% of people confirmed that they have become more religious or more spiritual through the pandemic. In the same survey, 60,5% people affirmed that they have changed their values and they now value more things that they did not value before the crisis.

Other researchers also tried to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on religious values. According to the Pew Research Center, in Spain 16% of people their religious faith has become stronger due to the pandemic, while only 5% said that their faith became weaker. However, the Foundation Ferrer i Guàrdia conducted research on secularism in Spain in 2021. According to their analysis the growth of people with no religious consciousness has grown significantly in 2021 (a total of 8 points). This data could show that the COVID-19 has not had a change effect on non-religious people, as the number has only grown a little.

In relation to media, Dr. Cecilia Delgado-Molina presented the paper “Pandemic restrictions to worship: reactions, discourses and tensions” in the 4th International Sociology Association Forum in February 2021. She reviewed digital media including

national newspaper, local newspapers and religious media between March and December 2020, using the keywords: science, religion, COVID and coronavirus. The national media was noteworthy for reporting the reactions and statements of religious institutions and national organisations, such as the Spanish Episcopal Conference, the Spanish Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities (FEREDE), the Spanish Islamic Commission (CIE) and the Spanish Federation of Jewish Communities. These institutions supported the measures and suspended most of their complementary activities. The controversial news were more related to political issues. For instance, VOX, a far right-political party that openly promotes discourses against the presence of Islam in Spain, criticised specific moments of crowded mosques. This was reported by the national press. The media also focused on the impact of the pandemic on religious holidays, especially Christmas Holidays and Holy Week. There was an intense covering of the different measures and of how they could affect these celebrations during the weeks before these periods. Despite the existence of growing religious diversity in Spain, less report was made of the impact on other celebrations such as Ramadan or Pesach. This is a result of the importance that Catholic festivities still have in the Spanish tradition. Moreover, since the Christmas holidays also has a relevant social and commercial character beyond the religious event, there was also pressure from merchants to relax the measures during these days. Then, debates on religious freedom also overlapped with others of cultural and economic importance.

2. Legal aspect:

The declaration of “state of alarm” and the legal procedures during the pandemic was a new phenomenon in Spain. The existing legislation was adapted to the pandemic situation, and it was constantly revised through the evolution of the illness.

The Royal Decree published on March 14, 2020, established in the Article 11 that the religious ceremonies and worships were not cancelled. While other cultural and commercial activities were suspended according to the Article 10, the Article 11 established the following:

“Containment measures in relation with places of worship and with ceremonies civil and religious. Attendance at places of worship and ceremonies civil and religious, including funerals, are conditional on the adoption of measures organisational measures consisting of avoiding crowds of people, depending on the dimensions and characteristics of the places, in such a way that attendees are guaranteed the possibility to respect the distance between them of at least one metre.”

According to this article, the ceremonies and worship activities could be developed under specific circumstances. However, the Article 7 of the same law did not include the assistance to places of worship as an exception for the free circulation in the street. In a moment of strict home lockdown, this article only allowed the journeys for these activities considered “essential”:

“a) Acquisition of food, pharmaceutical and essential products, as well as the acquisition of other products and provision of services in accordance with the provisions of article 10.

b) Assistance to health centres, services and establishments.

- c) Displacement to the workplace to carry out their labour, professional or business benefit.
- d) Return to the place of habitual residence.
- e) Assistance and care for the elderly, minors, dependents, people with disabilities or especially vulnerable people.
- f) Travel to financial and insurance entities.
- g) Due to force majeure or a situation of necessity.
- h) Any other activity of a similar nature”

This resulted in a paradoxical situation: while religious ceremonies could be held following sanitary measures, such as keeping the one-metre distance, people could not freely exit their house to go to their religious centres. They could be sanctioned during their journey to their places of worship, as this was not considered as an essential activity.

On March 29, the Ministry of Health published a text that regulated the wakes and funeral ceremonies in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 (ORDEN SND/298/2020). The religious celebrations were postponed until the end of the state of alarm, although a funeral could be celebrated with the assistance of only a maximum of 3 people “in addition, where appropriate, of the minister of worship or assimilated people of the respective confession for the practice of the funeral rites of farewell to the deceased”.

These legal measures became flexible from 9 May with the publication of some measures that modified the previous circumstances. In this text (ORDEN SND/399/2020) there was new indications for the religious communities about capacity, minimum distances, and hygienic measures in the places of worship and funerals. Regarding the wakes, the text established a maximum of 15 people in open spaces and 10 people in indoor facilities. A maximum of 15 people was also established for the burials, together with the use of hygienic measures (2 metres of distance and hand hygiene). The direct contact had to be avoided, as well as the distribution of books or booklets and kissing or touching devotional objects (article 9)

Moreover, the legal situation became complex as three different levels of restrictions were defined. Each level depended on the illness impact in each territory. Furthermore, some autonomous communities or city halls could include additional measures. Then, people had to constantly check the different regulations in relation to the evolution of the sanitary situation. During the following months, these measures were constantly revised, and the capacity limitation for events and ceremonies was extended through the phases of de-escalation.

3. Sociological aspect:

This legal situation had a clear impact on the religious freedom of people, as there were restrictions for the mobility and assistance to places of worship. The measures were established following sanitary criteria, but there was no close communication between religious communities and the Government. Some articles criticise that fundamental religious rights were negated through the state of alarm or that measures

were sometimes disproportionate. However, the religious institutions have had an active role in implementing the measures and have collaborated with the sanitary authorities. For instance, in March 2020 the Spanish Episcopal Conference published a list of recommendations to take into consideration during the sanitary emergency and assumed the legal measures established by the Spanish Government. Moreover, they suspended the educational activities and religious celebrations in person. They also recommended that old or vulnerable people avoid attending the celebration of the Eucharist. Other religious institutions behaved similarly. The Federation of Evangelical Entities of Spain (FEREDE) also informed their members about the measures taken by the Spanish Government. The Islamic Commission of Spain and the Federation of Jewish Communities also published information to help their members follow restrictions. Thus, the relationship between religious groups and the state can be described as a collaboration one, as there has not been a confrontation.

On May 30, 2022, the Observatory of Religious Pluralism in Spain published a report entitled, "The impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the religious minorities in Spain: challenges for the future scenario". This report is the result of an in-depth research led by Dr. Mónica Cornejo Valle¹, which included 40 interviews for people of the following religious confession: Protestant and Evangelical Church, Islam, Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Scientology Church, Bahá'í Faith, Seventh Day Adventist Church, Christian Science and Paganism. This study shows the main sociological impacts that COVID-19 restrictions and the sanitary situation had on religious communities. Although it focuses on religious minorities, some of the identified aspects can also be relevant for the case of the Catholic Church, which is the main religious confession in Spain.

According to this report, the COVID-19 had a clear impact in the following aspects:

- Places of worship: Despite the fact that no measure obliged the closure of places of worship, most religious communities decided to close them. The restrictions affected specially the small centres in which it was difficult to adapt the distance requirements between members during celebrations. Some places opened in order to offer social assistance which was especially relevant during the pandemic. When they were open, they all adapted the spaces for the sanitary requirements, such as limitation capacity, provision of hydroalcoholic gel and the use of face masks. An additional difficulty was the maintenance of some locals rented by the communities. As most religious centres were receiving less income with the cancellation of events and ceremonies, this has affected the payment of rents.
- Collective celebrations: The prohibition of mobility in the first part of the lockdown directly limited the celebration of events and other activities related to religious duties (for example, preaching activities). Most activities tried to be adapted to online formats. However, not all communities expressed this alternative as a successful one. For instance, as the report states, the practice of collective songs was not easily adapted to online format, as there were technical issues that always affected the potential harmony and emotion of the moment. One key strategy

¹ The researcher team included : Mónica Cornejo Valle, José Barrera Blanco, Borja Martín-Andino Martín, Alaitz Penas Cancela y Carolina Estesó Rubio

undertaken by some religious centres has been the use of shifts to control the limited capacity.

- Assistance tasks: Most communities have undertaken this type of task during the pandemic, in order to help their members and feel useful to society. However, some people have also been directly affected by the crisis affecting their economic situation.
- Virtual activities: The use of online format was useful for administrative and educational tasks. Moreover, the use of online platforms also had a positive impact on the increase of the audience and participation, as well as on the internationalisation of their activities. Despite this, some communities also expressed a nostalgia of in-person community life and others recognised a limited use of online platforms. The limited use of online platforms is sometimes related to a greater economic impact, especially due to the reduction of direct donations.
- Participation and organisation: Regarding the participation, it seems that the assistance increased at first but then dropped under the levels before the pandemic. In most cases, the use of virtual tools meant the involvement of young people. Nevertheless, this was temporary because young people soon became tired of virtual activities, most probably because school was also closed for a long period, and they also had to attend virtual classes.
- Economic impact: One of the biggest challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the economic crisis that derived from the suspension of productive activity. This negative impact had direct affect with the reduction of religious communities' incomes. Most of these incomes come from the on-site activities. One of the strategies has been the inclusion of donations through online payment platforms after the celebration of virtual activities.
- The crisis meaning: It is also relevant to analyse the way religious communities have interpreted the crisis and the pandemic. The media and some international studies have often focused on conspiracy theories and the negationist arguments against the vaccines. However, according to this report most of the meanings of the COVID-19 was addressed mentioning the historical change, the human responsibility towards collective suffering, the responsibility towards nature and the greetings of everyday life².

The COVID-19 crisis has meant many changes in how religious groups organise their activities and in how people reflect about the world's situation. It is still early to know exactly to what extent these changes will be temporary or lasting. According to the report cited above, some of the main teachings are:

- The advantages of the digital platform: Through this, some religious communities have had a global impact and started to engage young people. Moreover, this format has been considered highly useful for administrative tasks such as short meetings. Nevertheless, the online activities have also had some disadvantages for those people who do not have access to internet and digital platforms. This has also caused online

² More details about the different meanings of COVID-19 in pages 49-54, Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso en España, 2022. El impacto de la crisis del COVID-19 en las minorías religiosas en España: desafíos para un escenario futuro, Madrid. Available online:https://www.observatorioreligion.es/informes/el_impacto_de_la_crisis_del_covid_19_en_las_minorias_religiosas_en_espana_desafios_para_un_escenario_futuro/index.html.

fatigue, especially for young people who were constantly exposed to virtual activities through school and university classes.

- The value of the community: The focus on digital platforms has also caused nostalgia of the personal contact. Then, the COVID-19 has also meant a great value of face-to-face meeting and the importance of addressing loneliness, especially for sick people and for the burials.

-Intracommunity solidarity: The crisis has evidenced the existent inequality between religious communities, as small communities with fewer resources have been much more affected. The pandemic could be an opportunity to stress the importance of community solidarity that meant the development of coping strategies to overcome the situation.

-Reflection about the human being in the world: The COVID-19 pandemic can also be an opportunity to reflect about the role of the human being in the world, especially addressing our relationship with the environment and the interpersonal relationships. One of the common aspects of people interviewed in the report is that they see the crisis as a call for change to take consciousness and responsibility. Thus, moral, and spiritual teachings could also be relevant after this crisis.

4. References (publications, reports, surveys...)

CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2021. Efectos y consecuencias del coronavirus (IV). Estudio 3346, Diciembre. Available online:

Contreras Mazarío, José María, 2022. *El impacto del COVID-19 en la libertad de conciencia y religiosa*, Colección Alternativa, Tirant lo Blanch: Valencia.

Gutiérrez del Moral, María Jesús, 2021, "Libertad religiosa en época de COVID-19 en España: normativa estatal y normativa autonómica", Anuario de Derecho Eclesiástico del Estado, vol. XXXVII, pp: 101-197.

Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso en España, 2022. El impacto de la crisis del COVID-19 en las minorías religiosas en España: desafíos para un escenario futuro, Madrid. Available online: <https://www.observatorioreligion.es/informes/el-impacto-de-la-cri-sis-del-covid-19-en-las-minorias-religiosas-en-espana-desafios-para-un-escenario-futuro/index.html>

Martínez-Torrón, Javier, 2021. "COVID-19 and Religious Freedom: Some Comparative Perspectives", *Laws* 10: 39. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10020039>

Panadero, H., Mañé, J. y Gorina, J. (2021) "Laicidad en cifras / Análisis 2021", en VV.AA. *Feminismos, Religiones y Libertad de Conciencia*", Barcelona: Fundación Ferrer i Guardia pp. 116-171. Available online:<https://www.ferrerguardia.org/es/actividades/noticias/1084-pandemia-acelera-perdida-religiosidad-espana-no-creyentes-aumentan-hasta-37-informe-ferrer-guardia-2021>

Pew Research Center, January, 2021, “More Americans Than People in Other Advanced Economies Say COVID-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith”. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/>

Simón Yarza, Fernando. (2020). Reflexiones sobre la libertad religiosa ante las restricciones impuestas como consecuencia del Covid-19. Biglino Campos, P.; Durán Alba, F. Los Efectos Horizontales de la COVID sobre el sistema constitucional, Colección Obras colectivas, Fundación Manuel Giménez Abad, Zaragoza.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47919/FMGA.OC20.0009>