



NORWAY

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion

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1. General presentation:

- General data regarding the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on religion: restrictions, main events related to the topic, statistical data (if any) etc.
 - On March 27, 2020, urgent Covid-19 measures prohibited all cultural events and gatherings, including religious services and meetings. Over the course of the pandemic, these restrictions were gradually amended several times, in order to allow marriages, burials and baptisms, though with strict restrictions on attendees.
 - After gradual easing throughout the summer of 2020, new restrictive measures were introduced in November, distinguishing between events in localities with permanent seating (up to 200 attendees) and localities with temporary seating (up to 50 attendees). Because most religious congregations have pews or benches without singular, permanent seats, these were restricted to 50 attendees, while cultural events in cinemas, theatres, sports stadiums and so on were allowed up to 200 attendees. These numbers were gradually adjusted and were subject to some debate in the media.
- The density and scale of public debates on religion in the context of the pandemic, main points of interest in the debate.
 - Public debates on religion in the context of the pandemic were largely restricted to isolated cases where certain “super spreader events” were held by singular congregations, leading to local outbreaks. There was some concern about the extent to which “religious and cultural norms” played a role in immigrant communities where the rate of transmission was higher than the general population, and some concern about whether vaccination may be resisted by some religious communities.
 - There was some discussion about the necessity of restrictions affecting specific religious rituals, in particular burials.
 - There was moderate media attention about religious practices at home. Guidelines on how to perform the Muslim prayer at home featuring images of male heads of households in charge of home prayer led to a debate on equality among Muslims.
- The interest of researchers or state institutions to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion reflected in publications, articles, studies, surveys, conferences, etc.
 - Several small-scale research projects have been started, notably a project about rituals by KIFO, Institute for Church, Religion, and Worldview Research, and about the ways in which majority churches in the Nordic countries communicated in social media during the pandemic, by researchers at the University of Oslo.
 - A two-day conference on the effects of the pandemic on religious communities was held at the University of Oslo in November 2021.

2. Legal aspect:

- Was there already legislation in place to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic / natural disaster?
 - o No specific legislation on religion, only generally formulated legislation on the prevention of transmittable diseases.
- Main legal texts, drawn up to fight the pandemic, which have affected religious life. Are legislative changes related to religious life temporary or permanent? What restrictions have most affected religious life?
 - o Restrictions amending the legislative framework on transmittable diseases were temporary, and did not target religious life specifically, only as a subset of general restrictions on meeting places.
 - o Restrictions on the number of attendees at services and rituals have most affected religious life.
- Regulations concerning specific areas of religious life, including hospitals (chaplains and rights of ministers of religion) and funerals.
 - o All areas of religious life involving human interaction were affected by restrictions put in place in order to prevent the transmission of Covid-19.
- What religious rights are claimed to have been violated and by whom (state, religious groups), and who issued such claim? What challenges or appeals have been made and by whom? Decisions of the courts, if any, on this issue; possible religious discrimination.
 - o There have been no court cases. A legal note by law firm Wiersholm, commissioned by a conglomerate of religious actors, concluded that most measures were legitimate and proportionate, but that the distinction between permanent and temporary seating appeared to be insufficiently argued by the authorities.

3. Sociological aspect:

- How was collective religious life affected during the pandemic? - church attendance, pilgrimages, major religious holidays, etc. Importance and modalities of digital use (videoconferencing, etc.).
 - o Collective religious life was severely affected by the pandemic. Church attendance, however, increased in some congregations through digital attendance. Major religious holidays were turned into opportunities for digital innovation in many congregations.
- How has the pandemic influenced people's religiosity? - secularisation or secularisation; changes in religious behaviour regarding funerals, commemorations, marriage, baptism, etc. Some religious practices (ritual gestures, dietary practices, etc.) had to be modified because of the pandemic. Have the changes brought about by the pandemic situation lasted or have they been temporary?
 - o It is too soon to tell if the changes put in place during the pandemic will have lasting effects. There is little evidence that digital attendance has continued to be on offer after the pandemic.
- How can the relation between religious groups and the state during Covid-19 pandemic be described? - collaboration, confrontation, neutrality? Did religious groups facilitate or hinder the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus?

- The main picture is one of collaboration, particularly about the importance of following the guidelines, but with occasional confrontation – partly in relation to smaller congregations and communities accused of not adhering strictly enough to the guidelines, and partly in relation to what was seen as regulatory overreach.

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

Hodø1, Hans-Olav, Roy Emanuelsen & Geir Christian Johannesen. (2022). Kirker, korona og nettbaserte gudstjenester. *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, 28(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2021-02-02>

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Eggen, N. S. (2021). Profetsitater i koronavirus-pandemiens tid. Om hvordan muslimer i Norge forvalter profeten Muhammads arv. *Din*, 2, 13–40.

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Holte, B. H. (2020). Covid-19 and The Islamic Council of Norway: The Social Role of Religious Organizations. *Diaconia*, 11(1), 51–70. <https://doi.org/10.13109/diac.2020.11.1.51>