

RELIGION AND RITUAL IN TIMES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

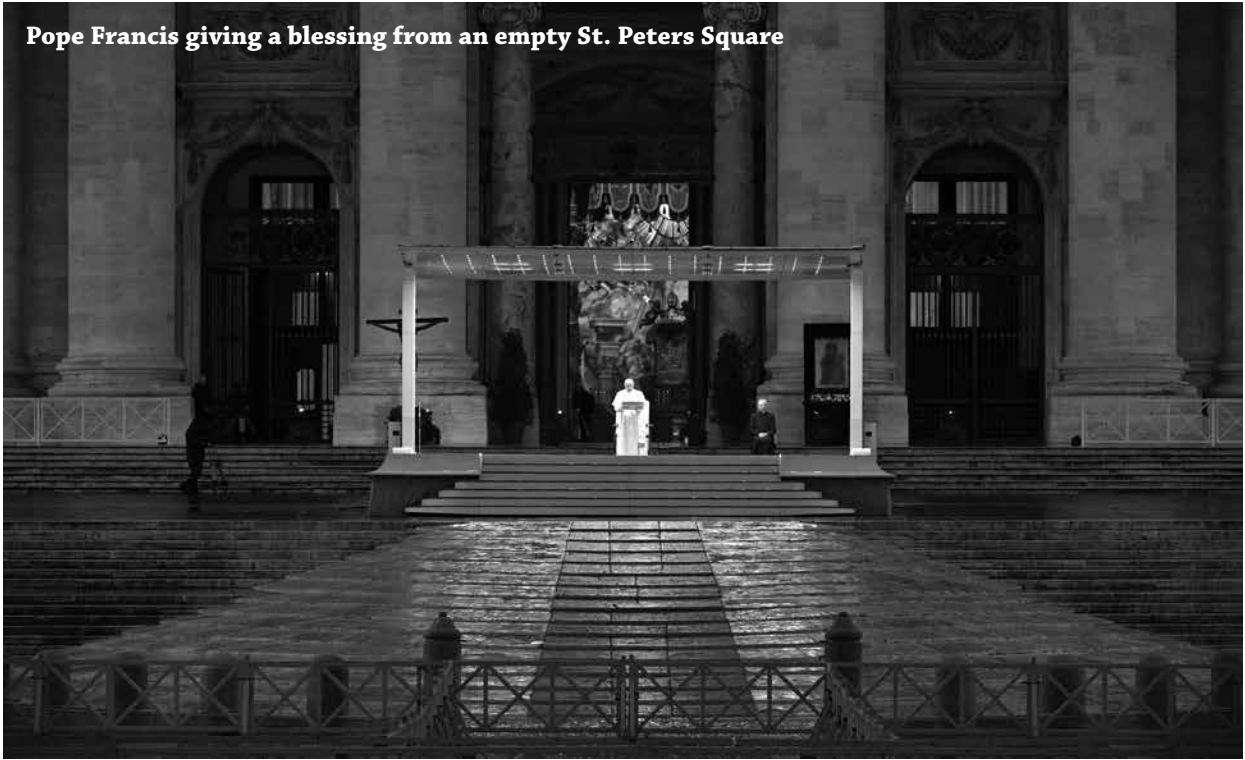
Back in early March, I became concerned with the spread of Covid-19 in my city of residence, Newcastle upon Tyne. Like many others, I would look online to track the spread of the virus in my region. I learned that one of the first confirmed cases in Newcastle caused the shutdown of a church where a man who contracted the virus attended services. In reporting the case, the BBC cited the church's representative who declared, "Had he not come to church, he would have gone somewhere else ... he could have gone to the Metro Centre [a shopping mall], he could have gone to a Newcastle match..." This reasoning surprised me since religious officials have traditionally insisted on the unique status of prayer houses as spaces that are distinct from secular venues. By equating the church with public venues that could have posed a more serious risk to public health, the church's representative reduced a religious location to its spatial capacity when addressing the secular public's concerns.

We might ask why a religious space is not just simply another "venue". For a start, several religions contend that participation in the performance of liturgy can equip believers against life-threatening dangers. Similarly, famous holy sites, like the city of Mecca, have been declared unaffected by plagues. Furthermore, a congregation that assembles at a certain prayer house is taken to share a spiritual affinity, a moral credo, and in some cases – like in Jewish congregations – a common ethnic background. Their shared background starkly distinguishes members of congregations from a crowd milling about a public space.

Religious practices – such as rituals and ceremonies – are longstanding pillars of communal gatherings. Religious communities appear as stable collectives because they ingrain religious practices in tradition. Members of a religious community are not merely a part of their congregation; rather, their commitment echoes the values of past generations. The link of believers to their community is thus taken to overcome the hurdles of time. As billions of individuals around the world were forced into quarantine during the current global health crisis, the solace of communal belonging became precious. With their enduring ability to bring people together, religious communities had the potential to ease social isolation and estrangement in the face of a highly infectious, dangerous pandemic. Yet social distancing, the major tool used by national and local governments to fight the spread of the pandemic, has set

by Yael Almog
University of Durham

Pope Francis giving a blessing from an empty St. Peters Square



major restrictions on religious gatherings. During the pandemic, ad hoc guidelines have limited the authority granted to religious collectives. These regulations have affected traditional rituals, including collective prayer. Subsequently, congregations introduced historically unparalleled measures like the online streaming of religious services. These measures undermined the view of religious ceremony as dependent for its successful conduct on participants' physical presence in specific spaces. This destabilizing effect threatens the very notion of a religious community.

Philosopher Charles Taylor's 2007 book *A Secular Age* was a milestone in the study of the transformation of faith in modernity. Taylor distinguishes modernity from earlier periods (he takes 1670 as a point of transition) based on a transformative phenomenon: the view of disbelief in God as a legitimate option. Whereas religious freedom in earlier historical periods related to the choice between different faiths, Taylor argues that the choice to refrain from *any* religious faith is a novel modern scenario. While he places disbelief at

the centre of his history of secularity, he also argues that political secularity, defined as the separation of church and state, is its underlying condition.

TAYLOR ARGUES THAT THE CHOICE TO REFRAIN FROM ANY RELIGIOUS FAITH IS A NOVEL MODERN SCENARIO

Four propositions elucidate this approach: 1) secularism does not imply a decline in power of religious faith, but rather its adaptation to modern conditions; 2) accordingly, religious communities are not viewed as antagonistic to modern state institutions, but as compliant with the conditions that have shaped these institutions; 3) the modern age marks the detachment of rational subjectivity from its previous embedding in spiritual entities, such as the church; 4) faith is thus permeated by an individualist approach that takes believers to be autonomous and rational.

Liberal democracies attempt to accommodate citizens' diverging religious affiliations, opting to define religious practice as a private choice, suggesting that citizens are free to practice religion as they wish in designated spaces. In contrast, regulations such as those concerning public health and legal procedures generally pertain to the state's public realm, and are conceived as neutral to religious convictions. As discussed before, the relegation of religion to the private sphere has been taken as a key feature that characterises modernity as a secular age. This relegation was taken to set limits on the influence of religious institutions and ideologies on public policies, or at least to maintain a clear separation of church and state.

Secularism does not imply the absence of religion from modern societies; rather, it implies that the belonging to a spiritual community (and the ensuing participation in ceremonies and rituals) has largely been understood as an individual choice. The tensions embodied in the modern view of religious practice as a choice emerge in such practices as circumcision. Since antiquity, this practice has been seen in Judaism as a marker of the child's belonging to the community. According to the traditional conception of this practice, by means of being born Jewish the child is a part of the religious community. In circumcising boys the community carries on its ancient treaty with God. As things stand, however, both Jewish and non-Jewish communities have been forced to reflect anew on this practice. Liberal societies contend that the decision to conduct changes in one's body should be the individual's choice. The same goes for the decision to engage in ritual practices. When the lawfulness of circumcision was debated in state courts, as was the case in Germany, the public authorities were granted the power to intervene into citizens' private religious practices. Reflections on the moral stakes of the rite alongside debates on its legality mark a break with tradition. This represents a clear example of the rise of individual spirituality: it shows the disembedding of individuals' religious belonging from rites that centre on material or physical elements.

During an urgent health crisis, countries and local governments interfere with religious practices. To prevent the spread of Covid-19, citizens have been advised to practice social distancing. This order at

times treated religious practices as an exception and at other times required religious officials to amend or even cancel rituals. While acknowledging the cultural and psychological value of spiritual gatherings, governments enforced social distancing practices within religious communities. Digitalisation of ceremonies that ordinarily require participants' physical proximity is a way to reconcile these two stances. This adaptation of ceremonies to virtual platforms allows us to understand contemplation as distinct from the physical-ceremonial frameworks handed down by tradition. Contemplation is conceived as an intellectual, reflective, and individualistic practice, the spiritual value of which can be understood within the secular paradigm. In fact, the growth of the abstract "digital congregation" alongside the relaxation of traditional religious laws mark the power of spiritual contemplation to transcend material constraints.

I will now consider two instances that represent radical changes to the physical conduct of rituals in two centres of the pandemic: the United States and Italy. These transformations show how state policies have unsettled the longstanding status of religious rites as defining the contours of religious communities. The crisis has affected, or dissipated, the dependence of religious belonging on material and physical conditions.

In mid-March, as the pandemic became widely recognized in the U.S. as a threat to public health, a photograph of a minyan (a group prayer with the presence of at least ten members above the age of 13) in Williamsburg, Brooklyn was circulated on Twitter. The photo features members of the ultraorthodox Haredi community that has been famous for its uncompromising adherence to traditional religious practices amidst radical changes to the surrounding urban environment. Orthodox Jewish law dictates that only the presence of at least ten men counts as a minyan, as this is taken to be the minimum number that constitutes a community. These conditions are crucial for seminal prayers, including the prayer for the dead, which cannot be otherwise conducted. Two sets of children bikes at the centre of the photo touchingly remind us of the dislocation of the ceremony, which has been removed from the synagogue to the street.

Rabbis in the United States and elsewhere were unsettled by the impact of social distancing on group

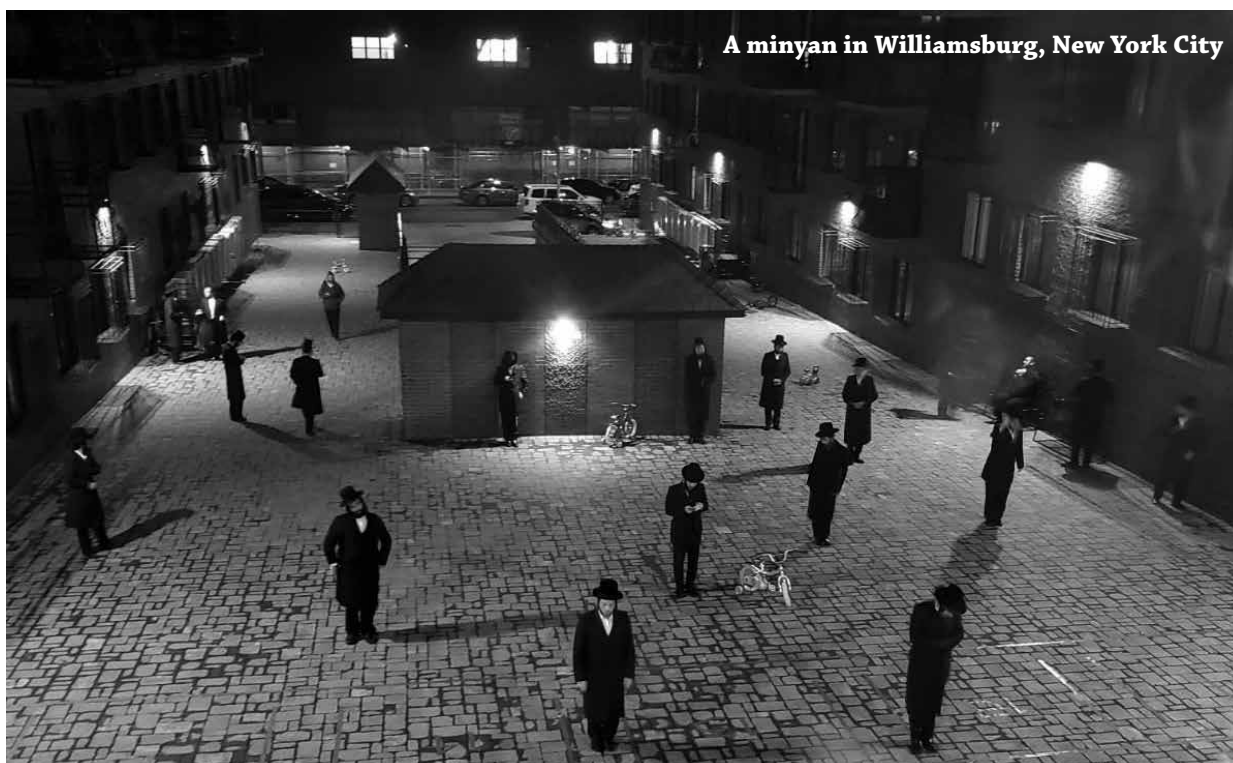
prayers, including the conduct of virtual minyans, as participants “congregated” online. These alterations are at odds with traditional religious law. *Shulchan Aruch* (literally: a set table) has been the seminal guide to Jewish religious law since its composition by Joseph Karo in 1563 for Jews in their respective worldwide communities. This mandates that a minyan demands the physical proximity of its members. Discussing the minyan, *Shulchan Aruch* notes that the participants must gather together behind a closed door, a parameter that marks their distancing from other spaces.

As the photo reveals, state regulations regarding social distancing succeeded in penetrating an insular community, dramatically altering its rituals and institutional structure. The physical proximity of the believers constitutes, according to traditional law, the efficacy of the ceremony. I believe that the image from Williamsburg is startling, but not only because it documents major formal changes to ritual. Since antiquity, Judaism was taken as marginal or auxiliary to the majority religion and as a lesser presence in the public sphere (the State of Israel is a notable exception). Amendments under secular ruling expose

to the public eye customs that would otherwise have taken place in the community’s designated sacralised space. This photo’s dissemination through social media perpetuates this dissipation of the privacy of traditional religious conduct.

If in the United States the Williamsburg minyan shows the overturning of the historical status of a minority religion, in Italy we have at times seen the reverse process. With the worsening of Italy’s health crisis, traditional spiritual services were cancelled or streamed online. However, it has been widely reported that religious gatherings continued to be held in Italy in priests’ homes and other underground locations that are not designated for religious worship. We can thus see how some well-established rites of the majority religion were made clandestine.

On March 3 the Italian daily *la Repubblica* reported that an 88-year old priest Don Antonio Lunghi was reported to the police for conducting Sunday Mass in the village Castello d’Agogna in the province of Pavia. Eight believers were in attendance. Within Catholicism, the sharing of the Holy Communion (the Eucharist),



wherein believers are nurtured by elements that represent Christ, is unavoidably physical. Material elements are thus essential for the believers' spiritual transformation and for the enhancement of their communal belonging.

In his defence, Lunghi said that he was not aware of the new orders forbidding such gatherings because he does not use email – the medium through which the Church has circulated emergency regulations. Lunghi assumes that tradition is insulated from the secular world. The refusal – or inability – to use email protects ritual from rapidly changing emergency laws. Not using email amounts to preserving the community as an intact physical unit of believers. The participants' sense of belonging emanates from occupying the same space. In this paradigm, ritual propagates the perception of space as fashioning the divine presence and believers' contact with it.

Even during upheavals like plagues, natural disasters, and wars, humankind has attempted to preserve religious rituals. Our age is no exception. What makes our current crisis unique are the techniques that intervene in longstanding rituals through the dominance of the internet. These techniques rapidly amend both rituals and their social perception. Unprecedentedly rapid means of communication leave us at the mercy of rules and regulations dictating various degrees of physical proximity and corresponding notions of communities.

The internet fulfils an ambiguous role both in preserving the sense of community that permeates religious practices while at the same time transcending certain longstanding physical or material conditions. For example, under the auspices of technology, the Vatican announced the unprecedented streaming of the Pope's sermons on the internet, with no audience, in front of the empty St. Peter's Square. On the Church's part, this was far from an admission of failure. St. Peter's Square can accommodate around 60,000 people, while the online streaming of the ceremony attracted in excess of 500,000 viewers. More importantly, it made these services accessible to believers all around the world that were perceived as one community. In streaming them online, Pope Francis opened even the morning Easter ceremonies, which are traditionally held in the presence of a select few, to an unlimited audience.

These unprecedented changes to ritual undoubtedly further Pope Francis's attempts to impact Church policies not through written laws and dogmas, but through public gestures of inclusion. In contrast to his predecessor's conservative and dogmatic approach, Pope Francis's public gestures have been directed at audiences previously excluded from the church community, such as divorced individuals and homosexuals. The online streaming of even some of the Church's most private ceremonies advances Pope Francis' far-reaching politics of inclusion by providing equal access to spiritual services. Internet users emerge as a global community united through faith.

THE INTERNET FULFILLS AN AMBIGUOUS ROLE BOTH IN PRESERVING THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY THAT PERMEATES RELIGIOUS PRACTICES WHILE AT THE SAME TIME TRANSCENDING CERTAIN LONGSTANDING PHYSICAL OR MATERIAL CONDITIONS

In Italy, the strict prohibitions on religious practices and the subsequent radical amendments to these practices by the religious authorities were undoubtedly not only the outcome of acute circumstances but also of the decline in the Church's social legitimacy in the country. Defining religious practices as unnecessary social gatherings is not a light decision. In many countries, some spiritual rituals remained intact, since their presence is conceived as essential to human dignity – with funerals being an obvious example. While enforcing strict social distancing, the State of Israel still allowed group prayer and ceremonial bathing weeks after the enforcement of a strict lockdown. The city of Berlin allowed citizens to visit churches, synagogues and mosques for the purpose of religious contemplation amidst strict

prohibitions on social gatherings at a late stage of the health crisis.

Taylor's *A Secular Age* coins a set of terms to define the human experience associated with the decline of an "enchanted world" in which spiritual beings were taken to engage constantly with humans. According to Taylor, modernity marked the emergence of "the buffered self" that posits human existence and the human body as autonomous. Taylor juxtaposes this notion to a "porous self", a form of being characteristic of times in which supernatural beings were taken to penetrate the human body and constantly transform human life. The porous self presumes a reciprocal engagement and constant interaction between humans and spiritual beings:

[T]he boundary between agents and forces is fuzzy in the enchanted world; and the boundary between mind and world is porous, as we see in the way that charged objects can influence us... The porousness of the boundary emerges here in the various kinds of "possession", all the way from a full taking over of the person, as with a medium, to various kinds of domination by, or partial fusion with, a spirit or God.

According to Taylor, the porous self explains pre-modern understanding of illness – both physical and mental. In contrast to the psychological state in which one characterizes oneself as melancholic, "black bile is not the cause of melancholy, it embodies, it is melancholy. The emotional life is porous here again; it doesn't simply exist in an inner, mental space." One can certainly argue that the current pandemic and the changes it has yielded to religious practices serve to enhance this process of disenchantment, further reinforcing the rise of the buffered self. Holy spaces are replaced with an abstract concept of divinity that applies to any space; physical ceremonies are replaced with virtual participation and further emphasize the autonomy of bodies.

Taylor offers a convincing account of the rules of faith that make it more palatable for the modern state. However, his analysis lacks attention to the specific and contingent politics of religious institutions – disputes between Rabbis, disparities between the policies of different Popes, etc. While Taylor focuses

on a master narrative about religion's transformations in modernity, the reality of our current crisis and the diversity of religious reactions with which it is met remind us of the contingency and non-linear nature of the changes to faith. I have shown that a key way in which these amendments occur is the dislocation of religious services from the "venues" to which they were designated, and an ensuing dispelling of the materiality of rituals.

HOLY SPACES ARE REPLACED WITH AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT OF DIVINITY THAT APPLIES TO ANY SPACE

As societies come under increased pressures, the state's intervention into individuals' lives grows radically. If we take state institutions as antagonistic to religious traditions, we may assume that religious institutions will be increasingly stripped of their power. The novel efficacy of state control through digital means reinforces this impression. However, as we have seen, digitalisation is also central to a dynamic wherein religious institutions retain their power by negotiating the status of ritual. The use of digital tools for religious practice is compliant with state regulations and far-reaching state control, but it is also a path through which religious institutions can dramatically expand their outreach. Although we have seen that the renunciation of ceremonies that centre on physical proximity and materiality signals an essential break with tradition, digitalisation – in tandem with the agenda of religious leaders and institutions – facilitates the prosperity of paths to faith that would further detach themselves from material rituals and communal spaces.

*Yael Almog is an assistant professor at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University. Her recent monograph *Secularism and Hermeneutics studies textual exegesis as ingrained in confessional belonging and challenges the modern presumption that interpretation is indifferent to religious concerns.* @YaelAlmog2*