

Religious Responses to Covid-19 in England: An Analysis of the Key Socio-Legal Themes

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Abstract

Religious responses to COVID-19 raised several far-reaching questions with a number of socio-legal implications. How does the historical tension between science, politics and religion manifest itself in global pandemics? What ethical and human rights issues are at play as a health crisis unfolds, and what is the role of the media in mitigating such issues? Finally, how significant is the pastoral role which is thrust upon religious leaders in times of crisis, and how should this role be understood in the materialistic and secular modern era? This article addresses such questions within the specific context of England. It builds upon previous research by the author on the responses of the British Muslim community to the COVID-19 pandemic, by expanding the analysis to explore the broader socio-legal themes that emerged within religious responses to COVID-19 in England.

Keywords: Community; Human Rights; Law; Media; Public Policy; Religion; Science; Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the world's most powerful social forces. This is a fact that few people would contest. More people, however, would contest the fact that it is necessarily a force for good. To the contrary, institutionalized religion is often opposed because of the harmful social consequences it has the potential to inflict (Linders, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic reminded the international community just how powerful religion can be as a social force. It also vividly illustrated how this force can be used for both positive and negative ends. A prime example of the latter has been religious gatherings and their contribution to the spread of the virus (Quadri, 2020; Osei-Tutu et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). When the virus was still in its infancy, a religious gathering held by Christians in South Korea formed the locus of the outbreak in that country (Robinson, 2020). At a similar point in time, a huge throng of over 15,000 Muslim pilgrims in Malaysia were accused of spreading the virus to six other countries, with the incident being described as "the largest known viral vector in southeast Asia" (Mubarak & Zin, 2020). More recently, millions of Hindus were criticized for attending the Kumbh Mela festival, at a time when India was grappling with a devastating second wave of the virus (Shukla et al., 2021).

Religion was also used as a force for good in the pandemic, with abundant examples and wide-ranging effects. Just as some religious communities exacerbated the spread of the virus, many others helped to contain it (Barmania & Reiss, 2021). The Vatican's response is noteworthy in this regard, considering its high-profile political status and the huge number of its followers. When the virus initially spread across Italy and Europe in March 2020, the Vatican announced that "because of the current global public health emergency, all the Liturgical Celebrations of Holy Week will take place without the physical presence of the faithful" (Parish, 2020). The Pope's virtually

broadcasted Easter Sunday Mass was subsequently watched by over 8 million households, a testament to the social impact which the Vatican wields in such contexts (Parish, 2020). Another prominent example is the Saudi Arabian state's decision to cancel the annual Hajj pilgrimage in 2020 by banning all international pilgrims from attending (Hoang et al., 2020; Rahmadhanitya & Jatmika, 2021). Hajj is the largest religious gathering that takes place in Sunni Islam with millions of pilgrims usually attending and had never been cancelled since the formation of the Saudi Arabian state in 1932 (Hoang et al., 2020). Other examples of religion being used as a force for good in the pandemic include altruistic initiatives led by religious communities which sought to serve those in need (Buse et al., 2012) and the role of spirituality in mitigating the mental health crisis which spread through societies because of the virus (Fardin, 2020). More broadly, these religious responses raised some bigger and more far-reaching questions with several socio-legal implications. This article engages with such questions in a thematic fashion, focusing on the specific context of England.

Structure of the Article

Section 1 begins by exploring the complex relationship between science, politics, and religion, as well as the challenges that English policy makers face when they attempt to reconcile between scientific and religious world views during a global pandemic. Section 2 examines the pastoral role which religious groups play within social crises, and the partnership that they can develop with a state to mitigate such crises. Finally, Section 3 examines how the human rights of religious communities can be affected during a pandemic, and the role of the media in this context. Within Section 3, there will be a special focus on the Chinese Christian Community in England. The effect of COVID-19 on this community is particularly interesting and

illuminating due to its special relationship with the pandemic, originating as it did in Chinese territory.

Limitations of this Study

Before commencing with the main body of the article, a brief note about the limitations of this paper is required. As was noted in the abstract, this paper builds upon previous research by the author into the responses of the British Muslim community to the Covid-19 pandemic ([Al-Astewani, 2020](#)). This present article is broader in scope. It maintains a focus on England as a geographical and political region, but it involves a broader analysis of religious responses to Covid-19 in general. Such a broad analysis has the valuable advantage of observing general themes which characterize such responses. Its main limitation however is that some of the nuance which is present in more detailed studies of specific religious communities is lost. Although the focus is on England, references have at times been made to other geographical regions if this is relevant to the analysis. Finally, the analysis in this article has focused on the key socio-legal themes that have emerged within the religious responses to Covid-19 in England. The term 'socio-legal' in this context refers to legal phenomena viewed within their theological, historical, social, political, and economic contexts ([Harris, 2015](#); [Petersen, 2013](#)). This socio-legal focus helps to enrich legal analysis of social events and ensures a more interdisciplinary and holistic study.

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICS, SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY WITHIN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

According to a recent research study on UK attitudes towards science and religion published by the prominent think tank Theos, most young people no longer see religion and science 'at war' with one another ([Spencer, 2019](#)). Their survey, gathering over ten years of

polling data, shows that young people believe science and religion can be compatible with another. It also notes that the 'cultural zeitgeist' that science and religion are incompatible falls apart when questionnaires focus on comparing disciplines like cosmology to specific religions. Despite such findings, this 'cultural zeitgeist' which pits religion in opposition to science persists as an influential sociological trend which frames public discourse in England. Indeed, it was a subject of discussion in one of the leading English Supreme Court cases in the last decade dealing with legal definitions of religion (*R (on the application of Hodkin and another) (Appellants) v Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Respondent)*, 2013). The 2013 case of Hodkin had to reconsider older English case-law which had ruled that the modern Church of Scientology could not be considered a religion for the purposes of legally registering their buildings as places of worship. Lord Toulson, the judge who delivered the leading judgement in Hodkin, decided to overrule this precedent by adopting a more liberal approach to defining religion. His tentative definition of religion began by describing it as a "spiritual or non-secular belief system." To further clarify the meaning of this phrase, he added that "such a belief system may or may not involve belief in a supreme being, but it does involve a belief that there is more to be understood about mankind's nature and relationship to the universe than can be gained from the senses or from science." This phraseology led to several criticisms from academic commentators who suggested that the language invoked a simplistic dichotomy between science and religion (Sandberg, 2014).

So how did this historical tension between science and theology manifest in English religious responses to Covid-19? A useful socio-legal framework for answering such a question is what European scholars of law and religion describe as the three main postures of modern nation-states towards religion (Sandberg, 2011). On one side

of the spectrum is the state-church model, where a legally binding constitutional relationship exists between a state and a particular religious institution (which in Europe is usually represented by a particular Church). England is a prime example of the state-church model, with the Church of England enjoying a special constitutional relationship with the state which distinctively bestows upon it political, legal, and social privileges. On the other side of the spectrum is the separation model, which is most popularly represented by France, where no religious institution enjoys a special constitutional relationship with the state. Finally comes the hybrid model which lies in between these two models. This is represented by states such as Spain and Portugal where the state preliminarily adopts a separation stance but then goes on to make legal agreements with a number of religious groups.

The interesting observation to note based on this framework is that religious institutions which enjoy a special legal and political relationship with the state will almost always support and promote the state's health policies in a pandemic situation. Taking England as our example, the Church of England fully endorsed England's various Covid-19 policies including the forced closure of places of worship during lockdowns, various social-distancing rules and face-mask regulations (Village & Francis, 2021). Indeed, the Church of England sometimes went even beyond the state's requirements, imposing complete lockdowns on all its churches even when this was not legally required (Francis & Village, 2021). This can be contrasted with the response of the Catholic Church in England which does not enjoy any constitutional relationship with the state. Catholic Churches did not follow Covid-19 guidelines as stringently during lockdowns, and the de facto spokesman of the Catholic Church in England, the Archbishop of Westminster, pressed the English government for an early reopening of Catholic churches stressing that Roman Catholics

“wanted to get back to a fuller practicing of their faith, as long as they can do so safely” (Cranmer & Pocklington, 2020).

Other minority religious communities in England showed mixed responses to the state’s covid-19 policies. The British Muslim community is an excellent case at hand, particularly considering its status as one of the most active religious minorities in Europe (Nielsen & Otterbeck, 2016). Amongst the activist segment of the community, the Muslim Council of Britain predictably opted to fully support and promote the government’s health policies from the very beginnings of the pandemic (Al-Astewani, 2020). As the largest umbrella NGO in the community, it played an influential role in this regard with its various precautionary messages broadcasted to its huge base of members. Due to its close political ties with the government and its emphasis on political lobbying, this stance was to be expected and corresponds with the hypothesis advanced above in relation to the Church of England. Another organization which took the same stance was the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA). BIMA’s stance was also very influential within the community. As a representative of Muslim healthcare professionals enjoying an intimate relationship with the country’s National Health Service, its medical expertise was highly valued by many segments of the Muslim community in the context of a pandemic. This was enhanced because the advice of the BIMA was combined with spiritual and theological undertones and was based on a detailed knowledge of the developments on the ground (Al-Astewani, 2020).

On the other hand, several religious leaders within the Muslim community argued that places of worship should remain open in the very beginning of the pandemic, when the UK government had still not imposed a full legal lockdown (Al-Astewani, 2020). They highlighted the sacrosanct nature of worship in Islamic law and said that precautionary measures could be taken by members of the

congregation without the need for full closure of mosques. Their arguments represent a good case of the sophisticated and nuanced ways in which scripture and theology can be used in divergent ways in response to a pandemic. Whilst worship is indeed a sacred principle in Islamic law which requires protection, human life also enjoys the same status as a sacred principle and reconciling both in a pandemic situation poses a difficult hermeneutic challenge. This is made even more sophisticated due to additional factors such as specific scriptural texts on dealing with a pandemic and engaging with state, all of which can be interpreted in several ways. This is why theological arguments were used by different religious leaders both to support and oppose state health policies during the spread of Covid-19 (Tolmie & Venter, 2021).

A pertinent final illustration of this phenomenon is the schism that occurred within the Chinese Christian community in England as a result of Covid-19 state responses (Huang et al., 2021). Cantonese-speaking Christians hailing from Hong Kong were much more strongly inclined to heavily criticizing the draconian responses of the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus. Mandarin-speaking Christians originating from mainland China however felt that such criticisms were often overly exaggerated and unfair, quoting scriptural evidence such as Romans 13: 1-7 as biblical support for submitting to the authority of governments (Huang et al., 2021). Intense debates and discussions took place between the two sides on social media, leading to heated emotions and a distancing of ties. This vividly portrays the complex interaction between religion, politics, and sociology within the context of a pandemic, and is merely a microcosm of similar developments within religious communities around the globe.

WELLBEING, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: THE PASTORAL ROLE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

It is a sociological fact that religion flourishes in times of crisis (Coleman, 2001). History repeatedly shows that human societies seek refuge in religion when times become hard. Whether it is the onslaught of wars, the devastation of natural disasters or the horrors of deadly pandemics, many people will seek comfort in the unique pastoral care which religion has to offer (Snook et al., 2019). Indeed, this includes people who may not usually be inclined to religion or religiosity but are nevertheless forced to change their minds by sudden, cataclysmic turns of events. A good example of this phenomenon in England is the legal requirement which still exists for public schools to hold daily acts of worship which are 'wholly or mainly' Christian in character (Freathy, 2007). This legal requirement goes back to a piece of legislation (the 1944 Education Act) which was passed during the second World War at a time of heightened societal anxiety. The reason that religion flourishes in such situations is because of the ocean of spiritual resources which it harnesses because of its classical and historical focus on the psychological wellbeing of society (Sperry, 2013). It is true that traditional religion now competes with modern pastoral professions such as psychology, therapy, and counselling, as well as new-age wellbeing and spiritual movements such as mindfulness for example (Mueller et al., 2001). Traditional religion nevertheless shows an impressive capacity at adapting to the times and tailoring its pastoral case to adjust to societal changes, which ensures its continued relevance and popularity.

The pastoral role played by religious groups during the Covid-19 pandemic in England certainly corresponds with this historical trend and proved once again just how valued religion is during times of crisis, even in the most 'secular' and 'modernized' societies in the

world. Due to the drastic measures taken to contain the spread of the disease such as strict nation-wide lockdowns and stringent social-distancing, the health crisis precipitated by Covid-19 became coupled with an equally drastic mental health crisis (Dong & Bouey, 2020). Many people were suddenly faced with a very isolated lifestyle, separation from loved ones, and the tragic experience of illness and death amongst family and friends. A particularly tragic experience was dealing with the death of loved ones without having been able to say a final farewell or attend the funeral due to social-distancing and lockdown restrictions. This is not to mention the intense levels of anxiety and fear caused by media coverage of the spread of the virus and the subsequent severe warnings issued by governments around the world.

Religious leaders in England very quickly rose to the challenge of responding to the pandemic with pastoral support to the wider community, and an immediate sign of the positive response was the statistics of unusually high engagement with the wide variety of pastoral services being offered, the majority of these delivered virtually to abide with state lockdown policies. Churches in England for example enjoyed record numbers of attendees in virtual religious services during the early period of the pandemic (Bryson et al., 2020). Another major medium through which pastoral care was offered by religious groups alongside spiritually focused religious services was community initiatives which provided crucial support to vulnerable members of society such as the elderly, struggling families and isolated individuals. Such initiatives included providing food parcels to people's homes, offering up places of worship for use by medical authorities, recruiting volunteers so that they could contribute to the provision of key social services and raising money to support those in need (Wildman et al., 2020). In this way, a constructive partnership developed between religious groups and state authorities who

combined their respective grassroots and political resources for the benefit of the wider society.

THE MEDIA, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE STIGMATIZATION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES DURING A PANDEMIC

The media, like religion, retained a powerful role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Entire communities could be praised or stigmatized depending on the angle of its reporting and the perspective that it chose to favor. A good example of a community stigmatized throughout the pandemic by some media outlets was the 'anti-vaxxer' community ([Mylan & Hardman, 2021](#)). Such stigmatization would be echoed by segments of the public using social media platforms and was even in particular contexts supported by social media companies themselves. Whether this stigmatization was accurate, justified, and necessary is beyond the remit of this particular article. More pertinent to this analysis is the media's stigmatization of some religious communities. A classic example of this occurring is in relation to religious groups who were accused of causing the spread of the virus, as discussed in the beginning of this article. This may have been justified on many occasions, but the media was also criticized at times for exaggerated claims which bordered on racism. In England, the Islamic Human Rights Commission for example filed an official complaint with the British Broadcasting Corporation for what it felt was unfair and inaccurate coverage of the British Muslim community's contribution to the spread of the virus ([Al-Astewani, 2020](#)).

This was also an issue for the Chinese Christian community in Britain. This religious community found itself in a uniquely challenging situation during the COVID-19 pandemic for a number of reasons. The first is that COVID-19 originated in China, which had implications for how the community was portrayed by the media and

treated by the public ([Goodwin et al., 2021](#)). The second is the complicated and tense relationship between the UK and China, which has only been exacerbated during the pandemic due to tensions in Hong Kong, the Russian-Ukraine war, and other political developments. The third is the controversial restrictions that the Chinese government has imposed on all religious groups in China, including the Christian community.

Chinese people living in Europe suddenly found themselves to be a target of racism and xenophobia after the origin of the Covid-19 outbreak was attributed to Chinese territory. Racism has always been an issue in modern multicultural societies; however, it became particularly exacerbated during the pandemic. This is because of the intense fear and anxiety which grips societies during a health crisis and pushes people to act in inappropriate and irrational ways ([Tyagi et al., 2020](#); [Patiro et al., 2022](#)). A classic illustration of such behavior is the panic shopping which became a phenomenon in developed societies around the world, leading to severe shortages in supermarkets of certain products and resulting in unnecessary hoarding of resources. The Chinese Christian community in Britain was no exception to this racism campaign which was directed against Chinese people more generally. This was even though Chinese churches were some of the most efficient religious institutions in the country to respond to the pandemic. By early March 2020, most Chinese churches had complied with the advice of the National Health Service by moving religious services online, encouraging their congregations to self-isolate and contain the spread of the disease, and providing anti-bacterial handwash and wipes on Church premises ([Huang et al., 2021](#)). Racism of course does not pay attention to such details. The media played a positive role in this context, covering reports of increasing levels of racism incidents in schools and public transport. Chinese churches also rose to the challenge by providing

counselling to those affected and calling for support from schools and the police (Huang et al., 2021). This marked another example of state authorities and religious leaders coming together to form a constructive partnership. Overall, racism thus became an additional burden which the Chinese Christian community in Britain had to shoulder in addition to all the other challenges brought about by the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has highlighted several illuminating socio-legal themes that arise in relation to religious responses within a pandemic such as COVID-19. The article began by noting that religious groups played both positive and more negative roles in their immediate responses to the emergence of the virus. A classic example of the latter was large congregational gatherings which led to the further spread of the virus. Examples of the former include the promotion by religious groups of stringent adherences to state health policies and pastoral services offered to society at large in various ways. The theme that arises from this discussion is the extremely powerful social force which religion represents in such crises, having the capacity to influence global events in different directions. This role is enhanced by the fact that religion becomes a safe haven which many people fall back upon in social crises due to the unique pastoral resources which it has historically harnessed, as was examined in Section 2.

Prior to this, Section 1 explored the complicated relationship between science and religion in the context of a pandemic. Two key themes can be deduced from this analysis. The first is that religious institutions with close political ties with the state can be expected to comply with state health policies in a pandemic situation. The second is that scripture and theology can be used in conflicting ways to respond to a pandemic, depending on the method of interpretation

and various sociological factors. In this regard, the examples of the British Muslim Community and the Chinese Christian Community highlighted the various complex decisions and emotions which all religious groups face in both similar and variegating ways during a global pandemic crisis when responding to state health policies. The final section investigated the positive and negative roles which the media played during the pandemic. The key theme that emerged from this investigation was that modern media and technology are double-edged swords which can be used for both good and bad in such situations.

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