

ARTICLE

Observing the Sabbath While the Body of Christ is Quarantined

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Abstract

This article offers an in-depth examination of the religious challenges and creative adaptations that emerged during the March–April 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. Adopting an interfaith and ecumenical perspective, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Rome and Bucharest. The analysis shows that the theological language of the Church as the Body of Christ, together with its connection to the Eucharistic celebration shared by both Orthodox Christians and Catholics, shaped the perception of the pandemic by critically engaging with state limitations on religious practice. By contrast, Jewish and Muslim practices of purification—linking ablution, hygiene—often rendered sanitary measures more theologically and ritually coherent. A marked contrast thus emerges: While many Catholic and Orthodox respondents expressed pronounced dissatisfaction rooted in ecclesiological understandings of the Church as the “body of Christ,” Jewish and Muslim participants tended to integrate pandemic measures within established frameworks of ritual purity. Despite divergent responses in other domains, death and burial practices acted as a unifying element across traditions, as all communities confronted similar constraints and grief under governmental biopolitical regulations concerning the treatment of bodies. Finally, the article examines the proliferation of “homemade” rituals—such as the domestic Seder or Friday prayer—and the inherent limitations of digital technologies in reproducing the sensory and embodied dimensions of traditional religious practice. Notably, the shift to domestic ritual life often intensified personal engagement, relocating

responsibility from collective institutions to individual practitioners and underscoring the centrality of the body in contemporary theological reflection.

Keywords

COVID-19, Orthodox Christians, Islam, Judaism, body of Christ, rituals, digital religions, biopolitics

This article is an in-depth reflection on religious challenges and creative adjustments during the March–April lockdown of 2020, when observants from all religious denominations were obliged to experience religious life in isolation and in the absence of established community. My starting point is my own experience as a lay Catholic woman studying in Rome. This paper focuses on how other believers adapted established rituals while searching for meaning. To nourish my reflection, I conducted ten interviews. My case studies included Christians, Muslims, and Jews who spent the lockdown in Rome and Bucharest, and included one Orthodox rabbi, a male and female Sunni Muslim, a male and female lay Christian Orthodox, one Orthodox monk living in Romania, one Orthodox priest living in Rome, one Catholic sister who spent the lockdown in a congregation in Rome, and two Catholic priests in Rome, one with pastoral responsibilities and one without. Having one orthodox Jew and two Sunni Muslims compared with several Christians reactions is reflective of the religious structure of the population¹. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in March and April 2021 and were conducted in Romanian, Italian, and English—in person for those in Rome and via digital technologies for the others. Their perspectives are to be considered ways to access various interpretations of the phenomenon. Comparing the reactions between two European countries can bring into the discussion various cultural issues.

Being interfaith and ecumenical, my reflection comparatively engages the specific challenges of each denomination and then focuses on general challenges. Different communities need to cope with different issues of religious life, and the explanatory angle of this article assumes that these

1 Romania has 0.02% Jewish population and 0.34% Sunni Muslim (“Afiliere Religioasă (2011),” Secretariatul de Stat Pentru Culte, updated 2011, http://culte.gov.ro/?page_id=132). Italy has 0.12% Jewish Population and 1.46% Muslim (Ufficio Nazionale per l’Ecumenismo e il Dialogo Interreligioso della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Italia di oggi pluriconfessionale e plurireligiosa* [Unedi Roma, 2022], 24).

various aspects are determined by the structure of rituals. By ritual, I understand, as an operative definition, a stable pattern of activity in addressing the supernatural, and I assume that the structure of the ritual is socially established and recognized as such.² This focus on ritual is due first to the fact that the pandemic disrupted and transformed the common practice of rituals, and second because it is the performing of the rituals, more than the content of the belief, which distinguishes between observants and non-observants. Furthermore, the ritual is at the center of religious practice, but it cannot be reduced to its religious aspect. Rituals have various social functions, as they organize the community and give meaning by integrating actions in systems of representations.³ By paying attention to the embodied human experience of ritual, this paper questions how the COVID-19 pandemic affected practicing Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and to what extent adjustments can be made in order to perform home rituals. In addition, it examines the relationship between religion and virtual life on how bodies and religious bodies (quarantined human bodies, the body of Christ, and dead bodies) were disturbed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The present research is at the intersection of two trends: emerging bodies theologies incorporating the body into the reflection on religious experience and the ritualistic turn in comparative theology.

It has been suggested that a focus on ritual can offer a better understanding of the religious other. Indeed, if embodied rituals are important in formatting religious identity, then the way they shape religious experiences needs to be considered in interreligious dialogue.⁴ Moreover, the prohibition of collective rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic impoverished the religious experience of all faithful. This disruption of collective rituals made clear their performative power and their ability to produce meaning.

Religious experiences during the pandemic have been studied from different perspectives. Extensive surveys have analyzed different aspects of religious life in Italy and Europe,⁵ and some Catholic and Orthodox

2 Jan G. Platvoet and Karel Van Der Toorn, eds., *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, Numen Book Series Vol. 67 (Brill, 1995), 42–45. See also, Evan M. Zuesse, “Rito,” in *Dizionario dei riti*, ed. Mircea Eliade (Jaca Book, 2018), 408–410.

3 Gaëlle Clavandier, *Sociologie de la mort: vivre et mourir dans la société contemporaine* (Armand Colin, 2009), 89.

4 Marianne Moyaert, “Comparative Theology between Text and Ritual,” in *The Past, Present and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Terrence Merrigan and John Friday (Oxford University Press, 2017), 184–201.

5 Berenika Sercyżyńska, Lluís Oviedo, Piotr Roszak, Suvī-Maria Katariina Saarelainen, Hilla Inkilä, Josefa Torralba Albaladejo, and Francis-Vincent

theologians have tried to offer insights from their experience.⁶ Another important category of studies has focused on the legal framework, balancing between the interference of the state and religious freedom.⁷ A study conducted in France, which analyzed religious congregation reactions during the pandemic, argues that rites' flexibility appears to be the main factor in explaining the differing reactions of religious denominations, and it also stresses that highly ritualized cults—Catholic, Lutherans, and especially Christian Orthodox—face more challenges in adapting rituals in times of pandemic.⁸ A similar claim can be made for Orthodox Judaism compared with Liberal Judaism in the face of the COVID pandemic⁹.

Anthony, "Religious Capital as a Central Factor in Coping with the COVID-19 Clues from an International Survey," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 17, no. 2 (2021): 43–56. For Italy see, Francesco Strambi, "La religiosità degli italiani alla prova della pandemia. Un approfondimento sui dati dell'indagine ResPOnsE Covid-19," *Clip Salute*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.clipsalute.it/2020/05/25/la-religiosita-degli-italiani-alla-prova-della-pandemia-un-approfondimento-sui-dati-dellindagine-response-covid-19/>.

- 6 Walter Kasper, ed., *Comunione e Speranza—Testimoniare la fede al tempo del coronavirus* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020); N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Zondervan, 2020); Jean Claude Larchet, *Petite théologie pour les temps de pandémie* (Editions des Syrtes, 2021); Maxim Morariu, *Gânduri de pandemie* (Renăsterea, 2020); Lluís Olviedo, "Theology in Times of Pandemic," *Studia Humana* 10, no. 1 (2021): 34–40.
- 7 Antonio Fuccillo, Miriam Abu Salem, and Ludovica Decimo, "Fede interdetta? L'esercizio della libertà religiosa collettiva durante l'emergenza COVID-19: attualità e prospettive," *CALUMET—Intercultural Law and Humanities Review* 10 (2020): 109–139; Francesco Alicino, "Costituzione e religione in Italia al tempo della pandemia," *Rivista telematica* 19 (2020): 1–24; Louis-Léon Christians, "Religion et crise sanitaire: Les nouvelles certitudes du droit," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 51, no. 4 (2020): 566–595.
- 8 Pierre Ouzoulias, "Les cultes religieux face à l'épidémie de Covid-19 en France," L'Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques (OPECST), Note à l'attention des membres de l'Office, July 2, 2020, 15–17, http://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/opepst/quatre_pages/OPECST_2020_0028_note_cultes_covid19.pdf. This is a document issued for the French Parliament, based on the opinions of several religious experts: a historian of religion, a philosopher, bishops, a priest, a Chief Rabbi, and the president of the French Council of Muslim Faith. It is one of the most complex research reunifying aspects on religious freedom, the adjustment of rituals, the limit of personal worships, financial, and psychological aspects and the enforcement of the neutrality of the state pursuant to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 9 David Graham and Jonathan Boyd, "Six Takeaways about Jewish Life under Lockdown," Institute for Jewish Policy Research, September 2022, https://www.jpr.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Six%20takeaways%20about%20Jewish%20life%20under%20lockdown.Final_.pdf, 3.

My own perspective regarding religious experience during the pandemic was shaped by the following interpretation key. Reading William Cavanaugh's "The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics" (2014) on the evening of Maundy Thursday, the precise moment of the liturgical celebration of the Last Supper, I found this passage: "if the Eucharist remains quarantined in a separated, supernatural, sphere, then is not the true body of Christ, the *corpus verum*, at all."¹⁰ I realized that the expression "quarantined body of Christ" reflected my own spiritual experience of the lockdown in Rome. Quarantined for Lent and in isolation from the usual practice of attendance of Paschal Triduum made me feel that not only human bodies were quarantined but also the Body of Christ. The expression captures some insights concerning the experience of lay Catholics and Orthodox Christians around the world who were forced into quarantine and for whom it was practically impossible to participate in communion. Theologically, it also suggests the experience of Christ in the tomb for the three days and thus provoked me to reflect on the incarnate nature of Christian life. Additionally, Bruno Latour has noted the "unforeseen coincidence between a general confinement and the period of Lent" as a good opportunity to reflect on what is important and what is derisory.¹¹ He stresses that the English term quarantine and the Italian "quaresima" comes from the same Latin root, *quadraginta*, meaning "forty," reflecting the 40-day period of Lent.

As the two interpretations concerning quarantine stress, being separated from Christ for a period of time to enhance preparation for future union has a spiritual meaning, but the pursuit of different forms of *sine die* quarantine dramatically changes and challenges the common worshipping in different religious congregations. In the following pages, this article aims to describe the transformation of religious life for the respondents as described in their own words. The article shares wide-ranging experiences and information about the participants' backgrounds. By putting into dialogue Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives, the article discusses both the common challenges and the specific difficulties of each community. I want to emphasize an important point of contrast between Christians on one hand and Jews and Muslims on the other. Although all religious denominations have been affected by the same measures of confinement, it

10 William T. Cavanaugh, "The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics," *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (2014): 384–402; See also Cavanaugh, "The Body of Christ: The Eucharist and Politics," *Word and World* 22, no. 2 (2002): 177.

11 Bruno Latour, "Is this is a Dress Rehearsal?," *In the Moment* (blog), *Critical Inquiry*, March 26, 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.

seems that Christians expressed a higher level of dissatisfaction concerning these measures. Perhaps, Jews and Muslims, being in a minority position in Romania and Italy, wanted to prove that they are good citizens by supporting state confinement measures. To carefully avoid any form of criticism toward their communities, it is possible that they abstained from expressing discontent. While Christians feel safe enough to critically engage with the state, Jews and Muslims focus more on demonstrating their support for the state. Yet, there is another plausible hypothesis. The image of the Church as the Body of Christ is essential to Eastern Orthodox and Catholic theological narratives and, therefore, the Eucharist is at the center of the Christian experience. The Church is the Body of Christ, thus simultaneously the faithful are members of the Body of Christ and during the Eucharistic celebration they nourish themselves with the body of Christ.¹² I believe that the usage of this terminology of the body opened a higher degree of vulnerability in their perception of the pandemic. The Church imagined as the Body of Christ, in contrast to the people of God, for Jews, and *umma* for Muslims, influenced the perception of how public authorities governed fragile bodies during the pandemic. The Christian understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, based on the Apostle Paul's teachings, further developed in Eucharistic ecclesiology—centered around the Eucharist as the presence of the real body—triggered a stronger theological reaction compared with Jews and Muslims. Christians, Muslims, and Jews agree on the sacrality of the human body and the need for ritual purification before the encounter with God. Yet, Catholics and the Orthodox connect the imagination concerning bodies with the doctrine of the Incarnation and of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Furthermore, the interviewed Muslims and the rabbi are persons who give increased attention to purity of the body, compared with their fellow Christians. In their religious practice, the discipline imposed on the body is central. Avoiding contagion with unclean products for religious reasons is part of their religious heritage. Clear boundaries between pure and impure bodies, which became central in sanitarian restriction, play an important role in Islam and Judaism. Perhaps this focus made them more receptive to measures of purification practiced during the pandemics.

The Christian representation of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Jewish and Muslim habits of purification remain in the shadow of what has been said and done, yet they offer a new horizon of meaning. Taking them into consideration can suggest a different interpretation. The ways in

12 See Henri Cardinal de Lubac, SJ, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

which the respective religions teach practitioners to imagine bodies in turn shaped reactions regarding pandemics and confinement.

No Common Public Worship

The Italian Government imposed very restrictive quarantine measures in 2020. Individual movement was forbidden, except for reasons of strict necessity or health needs, and consequently, all public gatherings were prohibited. Thus, from March 9th until May 18th public Masses were suspended, although some parish churches remained opened a few hours a day for individual prayer. Pope Francis encouraged obedience to civil authorities.¹³ “The Italian State did not have the authority to close churches, but somehow the Italian Conference of Bishops (CEI) and the Pope were ready to do this because they understood the danger,” said a Catholic priest. Starting from the 4th of May, the country entered a deconfinement stage, with the opening of non-essential shops, while the prohibition on public worship continued. At this point, the CEI began the process of negotiating with the state to permit the re-opening of public masses; on the 7th of May an agreement was signed permitting public worship starting May 18th.¹⁴ A similar protocol imposing sanitation measures in mosques was also signed with the Italian Islamic Religious Communities.¹⁵

Addressing the question of unforeseen measures, a Carmelite parish priest from my interviews said:

I understand the official position of the state. It is not the responsibility of the state to acknowledge celebration conditions in every church. Consequently, it assumed the easiest decision. But my impression was that the Italian Church gave up its liturgical life too easily. Maybe in the end, it was the right decision, but it could have been done in a different way, with more sorrow. It seems to me it is a lack of testimony concerning the centrality of Mass in Christian life.

13 Alessandro Tira, “Libertà di culto ed emergenza sanitaria,” *Giustizia Insieme*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.giustiziainsieme.it/diritto-dell-emergenza-covid-19/1089-liberta-di-culto-ed-emergenza-sanitaria-il-protocollo-del-7-maggio-2020?hitcount=0>.

14 Tira, “Libertà di culto.”

15 “Protocollo con le comunità islamiche,” *La Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana* (COREIS) website, May 15, 2020, <https://www.coreis.it/documenti-ufficiali/protocollo-con-le-comunita-islamiche>.

There was a certain unity of the people of God, but with no courage to witness, for non-believers. Christians could seem like all others, maybe they did some extra charity.

In his statement one can see the regret that the institution of the Church did not negotiate with the state over restrictions on Mass celebrations. In other words, the rhetoric of the state, which reduced citizens to potentially dangerous bodies, was embraced by the Church.

A bit critical, the priest further commented: “Mass attendance was considered a non-essential activity, and the people of God renounced too easily, like they have been released to fulfil an obligation. There could have been a rebellion against this decision.” This moderately critical statement brings to light the centrality of the mystical Body of Christ and the analogies of how human bodies participate in this Body by coming together in liturgical worship. What lies here are not only questions of praying in common but how *Eucharistic gathering is the physical place where the faithful are in direct presence with what is sacred*. The Eucharistic celebration is the physical space where the faithful find themselves in the direct presence of the sacred.

Consecrated persons from religious orders living in cloisters were dramatically affected by the virus in the first stage of the pandemic.¹⁶ Consequently, priors enforced a strict discipline on going out of the convent. Additionally, when the parish churches started reopening to the public, convents and monasteries postponed public openings. It is plausible the number of deaths of monks and nuns significantly influenced the Vatican’s position on the health crisis.¹⁷ Protecting the vulnerable bodies of elderly people was at stake in the Vatican’s decision to enforce a strict distinction between inside and outside and also impose strict confinement. All activities with people from outside were stopped to protect the fragile brothers and sisters. A religious sister explained:

[T]he children stopped coming for catechesis in the center and people stopped coming for retreat. So we very rarely see people to interact with, except for the sisters in the community. Prohibition on all interactions with the exterior was meant to create a safe space in the cloister by avoiding

16 Francesco Ognibene, “Il lungo calvario delle suore italiane. Decine di decessi nelle comunità,” *Avvenire* website, April 21, 2020, <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/il-lungo-calvario-delle-suore-italiane-decine-di-decessi-nelle-comunit>.

17 Ricardo Benotti, *Covid-19: preti in prima linea* (Edizioni San Paolo, 2021).

any contamination and enforcing the image of those living in the cloister as one body.

In any case, “religious life was deeply transformed for most of the population,” noted a Catholic priest. Another priest observed a decrease in parishioners’ attendance of the Mass, “some because they are really vulnerable, people over 85, but also families with young kids who opted to attend an online Mass of their choice, peacefully staying home.” He added: “One of the mothers from the parish insisted on finding out if at present time she is obliged to attend Mass weekly, and to my knowledge, the decree cancelling weekly Mass obligation was not yet lifted.” He added that “in the long term this can change the structure of parish life, even though now we have reopened, parish life is poor.” Attendance at mass is more than common worship in Catholic tradition. For the believer the question of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist produces an ontological difference and therefore changes spiritual life.

From the Eucharistic Symposium to Snack Eucharist

Even though churches remained open, going out for prayer was not considered a valid reason to leave home. Some churches offered communion during certain hours. On the way to the supermarket, it was, to a certain extent, possible to request communion without the public celebration of service. Offering the body of Christ while avoiding public celebrations was not perceived by the Church as spiritual consolation for not attending Mass, but a statement about the need for Eucharistic food for spiritual life. Although the possibility to receive communion may have been perceived as a blessing that other practicing Christians from around the world lacked, receiving it without liturgical context may distort the spiritual experience. As an Italian Catholic priest says:

Receiving communion is more than receiving the consecrated body; it supposes the experience of liturgical life in its full dimension, receiving it out of the liturgical context can create the impression of almost magic, since it is impossible to enter into a prayer atmosphere in one minute. We had 10-15 people coming daily to request communion, after morning and evening rosary, also on Sundays, but it is not just about receiving it, but also about

how one experiences it, having communion without Mass is impoverishing.

One can see here an attempt to accommodate spiritual and physical health, since the person is both body and spirit. “There is a certain risk,” he continued, “One person became accustomed to asking for communion without Mass. She comes every day at 6:45, rings the bell of the convent, and she has communion like this.” In his words there is special attention regarding the question of the power of the ritual to build community and communion as well as an emphasis on the fact that coming together in prayer constitutes the Body of Christ.

Due to restrictions on individual movements, other denominations not living near a house of worship needed to figure out solutions within the limits of legality. A Orthodox Christian in Italy asked for spiritual assistance during Lent, and this resulted in one Orthodox priest from the diaspora risking a large fine to go to confession and offer communion for parishioners living around Rome. “I cannot let people be without spiritual assistance,” he told me, adding the following anecdote: “Somebody from our parish is working for the sanitation service, so, using his vehicle and uniform, we visited maybe fifty houses, especially around Easter, and dressed like a sanitary worker, I managed to avoid the police.” As we will see in the next part, Orthodox Christians have been the champions of contesting state restrictions in the name of religious freedom. In shaping their arguments, an important aspect was the spiritual need to receive the body of Christ. What we glimpse here is that suspension of liturgical practice made visible the nature of the Church as one body around the faithful consuming the body of Christ. It is the dialectical power of negativity that reveals through absence what Graham Ward called a theology of the body as *societas*.¹⁸

Shared Spoon Communion¹⁹

In Romania, from the 26th of March until the 15th of May, participation of devotees to the common worship was suspended to avoid contagion.²⁰

18 Graham Ward, “The Metaphysics of the Body” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (Fordham University Press, 2010), 225–250, 242.

19 For a history of the use of the spoon, see Alkiviadis C. Calivas, “A Note on the Common Communion Spoon,” Orthodoxia website, May 25, 2020, <https://oclo.org/a-note-on-the-common-communion-spoon/>

20 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, “Libertatea religioasă în România pe timpul pandemiei COVID-19,” Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte website, July 2020, <http://culte.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/>

From my interviews, the rabbi emphasized that this measure “should not be considered as a prison, but rather as a shelter.” On the contrary, priests and deacons could perform holy liturgy and share it online. Spiritual assistance, confession, and communion were legally allowed for old people on request.²¹ An Orthodox priest mentioned that he did not distinguish between old and young people: “I visited those who have asked me to hear their confessions and offered communion. Among them, some were afraid of the virus, some others of the large fines enforced by the police for going out without a valid reason.” One deacon said, “It is not possible that a spiritual father lets his children go without food (the Eucharist is perceived as a spiritual food).” Additionally, there is also a practical aspect. A lay Christian Orthodox recounts:

The parishioners will not forget if the parish priest refuses to give them communion for sanitary reasons! Parishioners can in the future sanction the priest’s behavior, and if any problem were to appear in the parish, we are dependent on their financial support... The priest allowed some of them into the basement of the church: one week somebody, another week somebody else. In normal times, we have 10-15 persons, so I’m speaking about allowing 3-4 people in the church.

The difficulties portrayed here come from the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is this belief that causes so much pain on the restriction to participate in the Eucharistic symposium. Another lay person mentioned that her spiritual father visited old people but postponed meeting younger ones.

In Rome before COVID-19, Catholics had the choice to receive communion in their hands or on their tongue. Additional sanitarian concerns suspended communion on the tongue. In contrast, Catholics in Bucharest continued to practice communion on the tongue. In the Byzantine tradition, communion is administrated with a spoon, the same spoon for the entire congregation, and consequently debates concerning the possibility that the body of Christ can be a means to transmit the disease (COVID-19) appeared. Some Orthodox voices argued that the supernatural nature of the

Libertatea-religioasă-în-România-în-perioada-pandemiei-de-COVID-19-din-5-februarie-2021.doc.

21 Iulian Dumitrașcu, “Noi măsuri privind slujbele și activitățile sociale bisericești,” Romanian Patriarchy website, March 22, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/noi-masuri-privind-slujbele-si-activitatile-sociale-bisericessti/>.

Eucharist makes it impossible for it to transmit the disease, but some others insist that if the material part of Eucharist can suffer corruption, it can also transmit the disease. Some theologians suggest, going back to the ancient liturgical practice of St. James, receiving communion in hand.²² For the faithful, receiving communion is a real encounter with the body of Christ, the most important moment is therefore a concrete act of eating the body and drinking the blood and not a spiritual elevation in prayer.

At the first stage of the pandemic, the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) suggested that devotees who were worried about the contagion may receive communion, not from the chalice but from the pre-consecrated Eucharist for the sick.²³ After public Masses began again in May, the state, by a ministerial decree from the relevant institutions, suggested “avoiding communion, in the cases where disposable teaspoons and glasses cannot be offered.”²⁴ However, this idea scandalized a sector of practicing Christians and priests and provoked many debates concerning the possibility of changing an established ritual. Some voices considered the state’s decisions to influence an established ritual as a serious attack against religious freedom. What disturbed the people and produced such strong reactions against the state was a certain shared imagination about the Body of Christ. This tension and defense mechanism is even more interesting considering that the Orthodox tradition does not have the history of contesting state power that the Catholics have. In Romania, the communist regime entailed a culture of silence and conformity, with religious contestation and dissidence almost absent.

The testimonies bring into view an analogy between individual bodies, political bodies, and the Church body. In state confinement measures, the Orthodox perceived a clash between the political body and the Body of Christ. If the Church is the place where the faithful partake in the Body of Christ, restrictions on Mass were perceived not only as restrictions on public gatherings, but as a serious limitation in encountering the sacred.

22 Nikos Kosmidis, “A Search for a Theology of Life: The Challenge of COVID-19 for Orthodox Ecclesiology and Religious Practices,” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 4 (2020): 624–635.

23 Iulian Dumitrașcu, “Patriarhia Română: Măsuri sanitare și spirituale în timp de epidemie,” Romanian Patriarchy website, February 27, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/patriarhia-romana-masuri-sanitare-si-spirituale-in-timp-de-epidemie/>.

24 Secretariatul de Stat Pentru Culte and Ministerul Sănătății, Ordin nr. 1.070/826/2020, enacted May 15, 2020, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetailiiDocument/22583>.

A good part of concern has been explained in terms related to eucharistic practice. The ROC's official message refused to change the liturgical tradition and used a single chalice and spoon for communion.²⁵ This means that, in practice, a lot of parishes continued the established ritual, using the same shared spoon. One lay theologian commented: "Certainly the body of Christ cannot make you ill, but other people's saliva from the chalice, yes." This manner of expression attempts to reconcile a scientific approach with the sacrality of the body of Christ. Another lay person replied:

I didn't ask to receive communion with a plastic spoon.
I trust the Eucharist. When I first started to go to the
Orthodox Church, it was difficult for me to receive
communion after others, but now I don't think about this
anymore.

Prohibition to attend the Easter Vigil scandalized a lot of Romanians. In the Byzantine tradition at midnight there is the ritual of lighting candles, and the Easter service starts with the priest calling Christians to come and receive the light. Everyone who is baptized—and even those who never attend church service—are invited to perform this ritual, which is both social and religious. One lay Orthodox confessed:

I was so disappointed. I had hoped right up until the last
moment that I could attend Easter Vigil. Somehow, I
imagined that I would go to church and hide inside. I had
asked my spiritual father if he would allow me to come in,
but he refused, and the police were all around.

Initially, there was an agreement between the Romanian Patriarchy and the Romanian Police to distribute the Easter light to all houses with the help of police officers. The decision created both hilarity and debates concerning state-church separation, and thus, the ROC kept the initiative to distribute the light but asked the help of volunteers.

In Rome, police officers regulated the distribution of palms offered at the entrance of the Church for Palm Sunday. As the Italian Catholic priest noted:

25 Gheorghe Anghel, "Îndrumări bisericești pentru starea de alertă," Romanian Patriarchy website, May 14, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/indrumari-bisericesci-pentru-starea-de-alerta/>.

We have blessed the palms. At a certain point there was a congregation of people in front of the Church, and thus the police came to enforce social distancing, but they did not stop us; maybe it is an Italian sensibility.

The candle lighting and the palms are concrete signs of the celebration; these objects connect the faithful with the feast. Their function is to be brought home and therefore to connect the household with the church. In this situation, what is important is the dynamic of the body, the fact that bodies need to move in space to obtain the blessed candles and palms. The public debate in Romania focused on issues related to religious practice and divided the society between defenders of the Orthodox identity and their critics, accusing the faithful of irrational behavior and increasing the contagion. One Romanian sociologist observed media exposure of the ROC compared with the religious life coverage in other Western countries, where this topic had a marginal position.²⁶ To explain this, he invokes the popular aspect of religious life in Romania and the anthropology of religious gesture. I would add an embodiment of religious gestures (kissing icons, touching the holy relics, shared spoon, etc.). On the same topic, a Greek anthropologist compared Western secularized society with non-Western communities. She argues that changing rules and rituals in the light of a crisis for scientific reasons reflects the experience of Western secularization, but it seems very controversial in non-Western communities.²⁷

26 Mirel Banica, “Biserica Ortodoxă Română la vreme de molimă. Inventar de etapă,” Contributors website, June 8, 2020, <https://www.contributors.ro/biserica-ortodoxa-romana-la-vreme-de-molima-inventar-de-etapa/>.

27 Istratii Romina, “Restricting Religious Practice in the Era of COVID-19: A De-westernised Perspective on Religious Freedom with Reference to the Case of Greece,” Political Theology Network (blog), April 15, 2020, <https://politicaltheology.com/restricting-religious-practice-in-the-era-of-covid-19-a-de-westernised-perspective-on-religious-freedom-with-reference-to-the-case-of-greece/>. The author stresses that in Greece some priests have been arrested because they decided to open churches despite legal restrictions. Also, in Romania priests have been fined for ignoring the ban on religious service. Later on, the Constitutional Court of Romania declared that huge fines for ignoring quarantine measures were unconstitutional. Consequently, people were required to contest in court the fine they received. See Constitutional Court of Romania, “Media Release from May 6, 2020,” Curtea Constituțională a României website, May 6, 2020, <https://www.ccr.ro/comunicat-de-presa-6-mai-2020/>.

Homemade *Jumu'ah* (Friday Prayer) and Homemade Seder—But No Homemade Eucharist

Rituals are always embodied practices and never just a state of mind. Ritual disciplines the body, and the body participates in the ritual. Before analyzing collective and individual rituals one needs to remember that ritual is the place where bodies have religious experiences, and by which rituals bodies express a certain agency. Moreover, performing the ritual depends on material conditions: like having a place to perform the ritual, or having a minimum number of participants. Some rituals, like the Eucharist, cannot be performed in the absence of a consecrated person, which is as important as the absence of a quorum. These practical conditions provoke a switch in the religious life towards rituals that can be performed alone or with the family, such as individual prayer or reading holy texts. Maybe the most interesting parts of the religious experience in the midst of the pandemic are homemade rituals and adjustments of religious life. Yet the fact remains that some religious rituals are entrusted to specialists: priests, rabbis, imams, and other administrators of the sacred who have both the know-how and the authority to perform established rituals.

The rabbi and the imam have the authority and the knowledge to lead in prayer the community, but it was practically impossible without a minimum number of male observants. This led to the decision to close synagogues and mosques even in countries where the law permitted to keep these houses of worship open for individual prayers; subsequently, it was also impossible to transmit these types of prayers online. One Muslim woman said, “During Ramadan, we were always performing *tarawih* [voluntary night prayers performed by Muslims exclusively during Ramadan] prayers, but we couldn’t during this period, instead, we read the Quran together; this was allowed also online.”

Similarly, in Judaism, the kaddish cannot be performed in the absence of a minimum number of ten members above the age of thirteen.²⁸ The rabbi maintained:

If you have enough people, you perform the prayers, if not, no. When conditions are fulfilled, the common worship is

28 Giacomo Kahn, “Coronavirus: Comunità Ebraica Roma, Sospese Cerimonie Religiose in Sinagoge,” Shalom Comunità Ebraica di Roma website, March 10, 2020, <https://www.shalom.it/blog/roma-ebraica-bc7/coronavirus-comunica-ebraica-roma-sospese-cerimonie-religiose-in-sinagoge-b771121>.

performed, when the conditions are not achieved, we do not perform the common worship. In this sense, the quarantine is neither preventing, nor helping to perform religious duties. This is not the first time in history when Jews cannot go to the Synagogue, my great-grandfather was the only Jew in his community, he was going to the Synagogue only for great religious feasts.

Religiosity in the Jewish framework appeared to be connected to a Judaism performed at home, still connecting the individual and the community. Jewish identity is ensured by performing the same ritual although not in the same place. In both Orthodox Judaism and Sunni Islam, the individual is bound to the community by clear non-negotiable rules, like observing the *Mitzvot* (commandments) or the practices of *salat* (prayer) or *zakat* (charity) for Muslims. In a way it can be said that the sense of belonging to the community is already imprinted in the body.

Another important question arising from the rabbi's account concern the level of religious education: Are devotees prepared to perform established rituals alone? Morning and evening prayers for Christians, or five daily prayers in Islam, can be considered simple, but some other practices suppose a more complex ritual, and observants may need specific advice to perform these rituals.

This brings into discussion the question of know-how. Sisters or lay persons involved in parishes possess an in-depth knowledge of religious rituals. Innovative applications of rituals can only be envisaged given a prior acquaintance of the existing ritual. Furthermore, this shapes the debate around the question of discernment concerning the adjustment of the ritual and personal responsibility, which presumes that believers are rooted in their own traditions. The rabbi stated:

Some members of the congregation used to rely on the officiant attending in a passive way, and now everybody realizes that they are accountable, and they shall put into practice the ritual by themselves. We are not only part of the community; everyone is responsible for his own practice.

Accountability for their own ritual has an intellectual part in learning the meaning and content of the ritual, but more importantly a practical part. Performing certain acts of worship, in this case embodying the ritual gesture by themselves, is seen as an occasion for a deeper experience compared to a

classical situation where the faithful came to synagogue to see and hear in a passive way what the celebrant is doing.

Thinking about the next step, one Orthodox monk stressed: “After the pandemic, the urgent need of the Orthodox Church will be catechism. People are zealots but often lack necessary knowledge about religion.” The same subject arises during a discussion with a Muslim man: “The imam taught me via Zoom to perform feasting prayers. I have become the imam of my house, praying with my wife and children.” A Catholic priest also noticed that families started doing more than entrusting children to catechism, for instance by reading the Bible with them at home. When contrasting individual and collective rituals, a decisive importance is accorded to commitment and an integral participation in the ritual: homemade rituals become occasions to deepen one’s faith by performing the ritual independently.

Religious experience in the time of a pandemic depends first on the exact position of each member of the community. For the Catholic and the Orthodox Church, the priest is the minister of the sacraments. For male consecrated persons, living Lent and Easter in lockdown was like “experiencing a hermit monastic life.” “We have calmly prayed and focused on Mass,” said an Italian priest. He continues, “[B]ut in the conscience of any priest is the fact that sacerdotal service is not for himself, but for the people of God.” This resulted in discriminatory access to the sacraments for lay people and female religious orders (with the exceptions of some female orders who have priests living in the same buildings). Consequently, and only for them, it was possible to continue a normal sacramental life.

A male congregation in Rome, aware of this privileged access, decided not to celebrate Paschal Vigil. As an Assumptionist priest says:

In communion with the people of God, we decided to fast together and, consequently, to abstain from Easter celebrations. We suppressed the celebration of the most important Christian feast of the year, and like millions of other Catholics watched the Pope’s celebration online. The way these priests understood their function was derived from an image of the Church as a body where members need to serve each other. Priests are members of the Body of Christ with the privilege to celebrate the Eucharist, but this privilege is to be used for the benefits of all members.

Praying via Digital Technologies

The pandemic generalized the practice of providing Mass online. This exceptional practice was determined by the will to accommodate the spiritual needs of the ill and immobile persons who could not attend in person. In the case of an incarnated religion like Christianity, by investigating the consequences of this form of disembodied worship, one can ask if religion was losing its corporeal reality and becoming a mere show and tell.²⁹ Several Protestant Churches opted for virtual communion, which means bringing elements from their own household (bread, wine) and consuming them during the livestream Eucharist.³⁰ The point of contrast between different Protestant churches and the Catholic Church is the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This belief is a decisive factor in deciding material criteria to participate in communion. For a Catholic, after Vatican II, participation in the Eucharist is the most perfect act of religious life. Due to the suppression of Mass, Catholics around the world were invited by the Pope to engage in spiritual communion. From the Middle Ages, the Catholic church has developed the tradition of spiritual communion,³¹ but home-streaming pajama spiritual communion has very different psychological effects and can secularize the ritual. As a lay Christian confessed: “It would have been terrible without online Masses, but still, for

29 Vincozo Bova, “Creedere, obbedire, convertire. Chiesa cattolica Italiana e Pandemia,” Osservatorio delle Libertà ed Istituzioni Religiose, *Osservatorio delle libertà ed istituzioni religiose*, April 14, 2020.

30 Edward Foley, “Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition,” *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 1–12. Because of this practice, I voluntarily excluded Protestants from my survey as well as Reformed Christians and Evangelicals. In their cases, the discussion is more complex and implies a lot of Eucharistic and ecclesiological assumptions different from church to church. Online Eucharistic streaming and digital Eucharist are two different topics intertwined. Although almost no congregation was against live streaming the celebration, livestreaming Sunday mass can encourage preparing your own home-made communion in the protestant milieu; this is why, one Anglican priest, Andrew McGowan, Dean and President at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, argues that Eucharist cannot be celebrated in isolation from the community and suggests that only other services, like evening and morning prayers, could be transmitted online. Thus, he does not recommend celebrations of the eucharist via digital technologies. See Andrew McGowan, “Liturgy in a Time of Plague: A Letter to a Colleague,” Saint Ronan Street Diary (blog), published March 14, 2020, <http://abmcg.blogspot.com/2020/03/liturgy-in-time-of-plague.html>.

31 Edward Foley, “Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age,” 6. Some medieval theologians distinguish between reception *corporaliter* and reception *spiritualiter*, whereas Foley stresses the difference between spiritual communion and Eucharistic adoration.

me, it was very difficult to pray online.” Because ritual performances are made to engage with the whole person, as a social, imaginative, emotional, and embodied mind, as Moyaert asserts, virtual rituals proved to not have enough power to discipline the body, and thus, to create a context that nourished the need of belonging to a community.³² Yet, in this difficult period, the need to come together in prayer became stronger, since collective rituals are more effective in affirming an identity. Therefore, members from all communities learned very quickly how to use digital technologies to share online services, whether that be “zooming” to attend sermons, rosary prayers, or the sharing of psalms and hymns in WhatsApp groups. The ritual and its structures shaped the relationship with technology, and Orthodox and Catholic communities shared online masses but refused to confess online. “Confession was almost completely missing in this time, since normally it is done in closed spaces,” testified a Catholic priest. An exception among those with whom I spoke, a young Orthodox priest said: “Why not do it online? Grace was the first Wi-Fi in history.” If most Christians are skeptical about the validity of online sacraments, this is related to the physical separation from the sacraments. There is a vast literature of debates on online communion that cannot be analyzed here, but it is important to underline that arguments from this field connect theology of the Eucharist with theology of the body.³³

On the contrary, catechism continued online in Italy for both Catholics and Orthodox. In Romania, confessional religious education is part of the public education system, and consequently, it followed educational restrictions.

Muslim communities used Zoom to organize Ramadan events and read the Quran together. While some rabbis in Israel allowed Zoom to facilitate celebrations with friends and family at a distance, they restricted its usage for the Sabbath and Seder (worshippers were allowed to open Zoom before the Sabbath and close it when the Sabbath ended).³⁴ Before

32 Moyaert, “Comparative Theology between Text and Ritual,” 193.

33 See C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (Church Publishing, 2021); Andrew Village, “Attitude Toward Virtual Communion in Relation to Church Tradition during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United Kingdom,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 35, no. 1 (2022): 95–117; Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Fortress Academic, 2021).

34 Noam Zion and Mishael Zion, “Seder in Time of the Plague: Reflections, Suggestions, Readings, Activities for a Seder where Families are Separated,” Shalom Hartman Institute website, updated March 2021, <https://static.hartman.org.il/dev/uploads/2021/03/Coronavirus-Seder-Planner-Updated-2021.pdf>.

the pandemic and the generalization of virtual reunions, Graham Ward asked the question: What is happening with the bodies when communities become imagined? He argues that when belonging to religious or political communities became abstract, in contrast to the experience of being rooted in a concrete community, “bodies become virtual, disposable, because [they are] dispersed across networks of symbolic exchanges, enmeshed in the march of metaphors (to cite Nietzsche).”³⁵ For him, this situation is an example of “bad metaphysics” that urges a rethinking of the body, both as an individual and as a political body. In light of his idea, one can see that during online prayers the faithful participated only by their cognitive functions. Perhaps this is an unforeseen example of reducing the body to the spirit. In the absence of the usual sets of gestures, sounds, smells, and positions, all of which compose a ritual, the faithful’s experience of the sacred was diminished.

Arguments against mediation of technology play a role in the refusal of some congregations using virtual mass. Yet, this refusal might be informed by an anthropological study of the embodied experience, a refusal to reduce the person to their will and intellect which can attend online. In this sense, the pandemic offered a lesson on the importance of incorporating the body in theological reflection.

Indeed, some orthodox communities refused to use technology for feasts. The rabbi I interviewed expressed his reservations: “We have used Zoom for the preparation of the ceremonies, we have taught people how to perform the rituals, but technology cannot be used during the Sabbath.”³⁶ He added: “In my opinion, using Zoom for Sabbath is not a solution; it is better to respect the feast alone.” It is possible, however, for the Pascal Seder. As this rabbi notes: “Usually, we celebrate the Seder surrounded by family, but it is possible to do it alone as well. For example, Maimonides said: ‘If you are alone, you should ask and replay it for yourself.’” It would be an error to assume that his perspective is determined only by a conservative way of understanding the relationship with technology. His words testify that ritual is a collective event connecting the individual with the community, even when one is doing the ritual alone.

35 Ward, “The Metaphysics of the Body,” 232.

36 Also in Italy, Zoom was used for religious education; see “L’Italia ebraica e il coronavirus, il racconto sui media israeliani,” Moked Pagine Ebraiche website, March 3, 2020, <https://moked.it/blog/2020/03/30/litalia-ebraica-coronavirus-racconto-sui-media-israeliani/>. The French Chief Rabbi enforced using Zoom for education but not for the Sabbath or Pesach dinner (Ouzoulias, “Les cultes religieux,” 18-20).

Digital technologies enhance interfaith dialogue, as can be witnessed during an online event in Romania, which reunited an Orthodox priest, a Catholic priest, an Adventist pastor, and an imam, all expressing interfaith solidarity and reflecting together on the vulnerability and the difficulties of religious life in time of pandemic.³⁷ During the pandemic, diverse religious communities realized the urgency to pray together. May 14th was dedicated to fasting and praying to end the pandemic.³⁸ In Romania, during normal times congregations avoid praying together, but the exceptional danger justified new approaches. Theological differences have been left aside in front of the common danger and the common objective to implore the end of the pandemic.

As the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, an interfaith prayer for peace was held in person, called “No One is Saved Alone: Peace and Fraternity,” promoted by the Sant’ Egidio Community, which was organized in the presence of Pope Francis, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Chief Rabbi of France Haïm Korsia, Superior General of the Human Fraternity, Mohamed Abdelsalam Abdellatif, the Italian president Sergio Mattarella, and other religious leaders from around the globe.³⁹ This encounter is organized every year, yet, the event in 2020 insisted on the need to go out of confessional boundaries. Family, brotherhood, and common home were the religious metaphors used to speak about the need of mutual accountability and interconnection. Religious narratives about brotherhood in Abrahamic tradition tell the story of a biological relation that must become spiritual through spiritual effort.

37 Asociația pentru Dialog și Valori Universale (ADVU), “God in the Time of Pandemic” (title of a conference organized ADVU on May 21, 2020). The leaders and volunteers from ADVU came from the Turkish Muslim community in Romania, and their focus is to promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue. See ADVU, “Coronavirusul și Dumnezeu,” Facebook, May 21, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ADVURO/posts/957494871382062>. Some of the questions addressed by ADVU at the conference include: Should the pandemic be considered a form of God’s punishment? Is the pandemic helping us to realize the fragility of the human being? What can faith communities do to avoid domestic violence, especially in this time of pandemic? Most notably, questions related to freedom of religion have been addressed.

38 Vatican News, “Covid-19: Faithful Respond to Pope’s Invitation to Pray on 14 May,” Vatican News website, May 12, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-05/covid-19-faithful-respond-to-popes-invitation-to-pray-may-14.html>.

39 Sant’ Egidio, “No One is Saved Alone: International Meeting of Prayer for Peace,” Sant’ Egidio Incontri Internazionali di Preghiera per la Pace website, October 20, 2020, <https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/31256/langID/en/tab/31288/Rome-2020.html>.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Intensifying Factor in Religious Life

One editorial observed that religious communities in the time of a pandemic can intensify responses.⁴⁰ In my opinion, the pandemic plays an intensifying factor. It accelerated all pre-COVID-19 tendencies, and thus the pandemic sped up and intensified all kinds of pre-COVID-19 customs, both by increasing and decreasing religious life.⁴¹ Thinking about post-COVID-19 effects, one French Catholic priest said, “Statistics show that after the lockdown in France religious practice declined by 30 percent.”⁴² On the contrary, a Romanian Orthodox priest in diaspora reported, “After the lockdown, Mass participation increased, and in order to respect social distance, we needed to start it at 6:00 a.m.” A Muslim woman stated, “In fact, our faith grows stronger, because we are helpless, and we have nothing. Everything is at the disposal of Allah and we are tested in this world.” Similarly, a Catholic sister said, “The restrictions from going out rather intensified my prayer life, during those times, and on a daily basis we had retreats, conferences, and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, but online with the Bishop of the Diocese. So, it was a period of more prayer for me.” Likewise, a man from the Muslim community considered:

During the pandemic we had more time to reflect on the meaning of our religion. I took more responsibility of my own religious practice and also on educating my children. Every day I used to read with them one page of the Quran, whereas in normal times we may read a page a week. I did the five prayers every day, studied more on the life of the Prophet, and the meaning of fasting.

40 Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis, and Uffe Schjoedt, “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 10, no. 2 (2020): 115–117.

41 “COVID-19: La religiosità degli italiani alla prova della pandemia”, A survey conducted in Italy between April 20th and May 15th stresses that practicing Catholics follow more masses online than before the pandemic. Contrary to my observations, the study assumes a general growth of religious practice <https://lastatalenews.unimi.it/covid-19-religiosita-italiani-prova-pandemia>

42 This claim appeared in one of my interviews, but additional sources enforce it: Héloïse de Neuville and Caroline Celle, “Messe du Dimanche : Ces paroissiens qui manquent à l’appel depuis le confinement,” *La Croix* website, January 7, 2021, <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Messe-dimanche-paroissiens-manquent-lappel-confinement-2021-01-06-1201133460> .

The interviewed persons read the disruption of standard activities as a passage between active life and contemplative life. Putting economic activities on hold and dedicating oneself to prayer and reading Scriptures is what keeping the Sabbath means for a Jewish practitioner. In Jewish thought the Sabbath supposes the resting of the body which brings spiritual benefits. During the Sabbath the body is no longer used as a productive instrument, therefore it becomes a receptacle of the sacred. The above testimonies witness a similar experience during the confinement.

Quarantined in *Secula Seculorum*

Governing bodies is a central aspect of political practice, especially during a pandemic. However, these bodies are not just living bodies, but also dead bodies. Until this point, I have explained how differences in the structure of the ritual ground differences about what is permitted or not during the pandemic. But death proved to be a unifying factor; it seems that concerning dead bodies and the suspension of burial service there is no substantial difference. If quarantine is an isolation for a limited amount of time, burial is a prolongation *sine die* of this isolation in order to protect society from possible contagions. (Looking into the mirror, maybe this analogy with death is one of the reasons why part of the population had psychological issues with isolation measures.) A study on funeral practices observes that every stage of the funeral chain (end of life, farewell, moment of death, and mourning ceremonies) were fundamentally disturbed by the COVID-19 crisis.⁴³ It adds, the status of the deceased body was deeply altered, associated with biomedical waste and handled with care to avoid contaminating the living.

In Italy, the suspension of religious services applied to funeral services as well.⁴⁴ Firstly, to avoid all gatherings; and secondly, because it presumed that the bodies remained contagious even after death. Religious denominations accommodated state decisions, and no funerals were held in public squares, in churches, or in cemeteries until late April. From April 26th, 2020, funeral

43 Pierre Ouzoulias, "Crise du funéraire en situation de Covid-19: mort collective et rituels funéraires bouleversés," OPECST Note à l'attention des membres de l'Office, July 2, 2020, 1, 30, http://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/opepst/quatre_pages/OPECST_2020_0027_note_rites_funeraires_covid19.pdf.

44 Sergio Mattarella, "Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri 8 marzo 2020," *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana* website, March 8, 2020, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/08/20A01522/sg>.

services were limited to fifteen people.⁴⁵ Although funeral services are not a sacrament, there is a fundamental human right to be buried in a dignified manner and in accordance with one's own will or the will of the family, and it is a right acknowledged by the Italian state. Furthermore, during the state of emergency, cremation was preferred for COVID-19 victims, although it was not mandatory.⁴⁶ The Union of Islamic Community in Italy criticized this option as it is contrary to the Islamic ritual of inhumation.⁴⁷ Additionally, Italian Muslims, especially in Northern Italy, had to cope with the lack of burial space in non-Catholic cemeteries.⁴⁸ Most Muslim residents prefer to have the deceased repatriated to their country of origin for burial in a Muslim cemetery; however, this was not possible during the lockdown.⁴⁹

Restrictive legislation on funeral services applied in Romania during the emergency period, reducing service attendance to eight people, but funeral services were not banned.⁵⁰ Referring to the sensitive balance between caring and protecting life and piety for the dead, a rabbi confessed:

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- 45 Annalisa Cocco, "La Scelta della Cremazione in stato di pandemia/The "Choice" of Cremation in a Pandemic State," *Actualidad Jurídica Iberoamericana* 12 (2020): 86–95.
- 46 Cocco, "La Scelta della Cremazione." The author argues that cremation was a choice not only for sanitary reasons avoiding contagion but also for personal reasons. Taking into account the high number of deaths in that period, it was difficult to find an burial place close to family's residence. See also Ministero della Salute, "Circolare 08 aprile 2020, n. 12302—Indicazioni emergenziali connesse ad epidemia COVID-19 riguardanti il settore funebre, cimiteriale e di cremazione," Studio Cerbone & Associati website, April 8, 2020, <https://www.studiocerbone.com/ministero-della-salute-circolare-08-aprile-2020-n-12302-indicazioni-emergenziali-connesse-ad-epidemia-covid-19-riguardanti-il-settore-funebre-cimiteriale-e-di-cremazione/>.
- 47 Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia (UCOII), "Vademecum Ritualità Funebre per la Comunità Islamica Italiana," UCOII, March 2020, <https://ucoii.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VADEMECUM-RITUALITA-FUNEBRE-PER-LA-COMUNITA-ISLAMICA-IN-ITALIA-1-1.pdf>. For the situation in the US and a debate on Muslim duties related to funerals, see Jianhui (Jane) Xiong, Nazila Isgandarova and Amy Elizabeth Panton, "COVID-19 Demands Theological Reflection: Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian Perspectives on the Present Pandemic," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2020): 5–28, 20.
- 48 Stefano Dambruoso, "Covid-19 e la sfida delle sepolture islamiche," *Formiche* website, June 12, 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/06/sepulture-islamiche-coronavirus/>. See also Antonio Cuciniello and Paolo Branca, eds., *Malattia, Morte e Cura: Mulsmami e l'Emergenza Sanitaria* (Vita e Pensiero, 2020).
- 49 The same problem exists in France: Ouzoulias, "Les cultes religieux," 30.
- 50 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, *Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte* (Litera, 2019). The debate on funeral service is an ongoing debate, although the number of persons

We honored the memory of the dead by ensuring the burial ritual without endangering other lives. Once, I received a call and somebody asked me to accept more than eight participants to the inhumation ritual, how can I accept that if the authorities have decided these are strictly necessary protective measures?

In both Romania and Italy, the COVID-19 deceased were buried naked, although in Italy clothing was allowed to be placed near the body, even while embalment and cosmetic rituals were prohibited.⁵¹ The law does not provide details concerning Jewish and Islamic ablution rituals, but from the interviews I conducted, the practice was reduced to symbolic gestures. In Italy it was impossible to say the prayers without the minyan, the required number of ten males required by Jewish law to be present for a religious service. A non-virtual adjustment was suggested with some Italians asking the opened synagogues in Israel to recite Kaddish in the memory of the deceased.⁵² Flowing from these political decisions, a contemporary French philosopher, Vincent Delecroix, is investigating this practice. As he puts it:

So, the dead will be allowed to bury the dead, in order to preserve the life of those alive. But what would happen if a modern Antigone decided to assert the archaic law of what is owed to the dead against the modern law of health precaution?⁵³

This rhetorical question is utterly disturbing, since in Sophocles's tragedy Creon's decision is rooted in a vision of the common good of the city and, hence, the body of the enemy of the people is a powerful political symbol. Thus, Polynice's body should not be buried, nor mourned. In direct

allowed to participate in funeral services has increased. According to a press release of the Minister of Health from April 8, 2021, there was a negotiation with religious leaders from several denominations, and clothing was allowed to be placed near the body. See Ministry of Health, "Media Release April 08, 2021," <https://web.archive.org/web/20210409092229/http://www.ms.ro/2021/04/08/ministerul-sanatatii-a-organizat-astazi-8-aprilie-a-c-la-sediul-ministerului-o-intalnire-cu-secretariatul-de-stat-pentru-culte-si-reprezentanti-ai-cultelor/>.

51 For Romania, see Ministerul Sănătății, "Ordin nr. 570 din 6 aprilie 2020," Portal Legislativ website, April 6, 2020, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224715>; and for Italy, see "L'Italia ebraica e il coronavirus."

52 "L'Italia ebraica e il coronavirus."

53 Vincent Delecroix, "La morte chez nous," *Revue Esprit*, May 2020, <https://esprit.presse.fr/article/vincent-delecroix/la-mort-chez-nous-42713>.

opposition to his decision, Antigone assumes a different vision of the common good based on *pietas* towards the deceased and the right to mourn.⁵⁴ Creon's decision to exclude a body from funeral service can be interpreted as the ultimate expression of political power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all bodies presumably contagious have been considered public enemies, and it can be argued that state decisions concerning funeral service are a form of biopolitics, since the treatment of a dead body became the object of political decisions.

“Maybe the most inhuman aspect of the pandemic was the fact that people have died alone, without the comfort of friends or family, and this is a terrible experience, both for those who left and for those who remain behind,” stated a priest. Catholic priests accompanied coffins (some at the cemetery, some from the houses of the deceased) and said brief prayers, but with no funeral service, some celebrate a Requiem Mass for the deceased alone and/or on Zoom and in the absence of the body and of the family. From my interviews in Rome, one Catholic priest said that he was invited by the deceased family to bless the body, and, for him, this was the most tragic part of pandemic. When it became possible to pray, some families requested a Requiem Mass. The same was true for an Orthodox priest in Italy, who performed both funeral services and the special memorial services consisting of psalms, litanies, hymns, and prayers. These were offered three, nine, or forty days after the person had died, but before the actual burial of the body. While the body was in the morgue, waiting for repatriation, the priest performed the memorial service for the family. Not all used Zoom for the mourning; a Muslim from Romania stated, “My father died, and I could not participate because he was in Turkey and I was not allowed to travel, and there was no option for Zoom, but they sent me some pictures.” The absent body became a specter haunting the memory of those who remained. This is a traumatic experience variously recounted by the three traditions. As the work of Derrida underlines, the specter is the opposite of a body, but only a former body can become a specter.⁵⁵ Besides, the time when the specters haunt is the time out of joint, a non-linear time similar to the one experienced during the pandemic.

Death was both visible and invisible in public spaces.⁵⁶ The army tracking the transporting of coffins from Bergamo to remote cremation sites was maybe one of the most powerful images of the pandemic; the numbers

54 Hrvoje Cvijanović, “Death and the City: Political Corpses and the Specters of Antigone,” *Political Perspectives: Journal for Political Research* 9, no. 2 (2019): 7–37.

55 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Galilée, 1993), 25.

56 Delecroix, “La morte chez nous.”

of deaths were published daily at 6:00 p.m.⁵⁷ People quarantined at home checking the daily numbers of the deceased was an apocalyptic experience in Italy. One Catholic priest confessed: “I am still checking it, every day, but I have noticed that different countries have different policies on this issue. In France, for instance, the statistics cover the number of contagions and not the number of deaths.” The decision of counting dead and/or alive bodies is a political one.

Finally, to enforce quarantine measures during the state of emergency, public authorities in Italy and Romania closed cemeteries, since visiting them was not considered a valid reason to go out.⁵⁸ This decision resulted in further anguish and distress. There is no doubt that this measure was addressed to living bodies, yet, in the general atmosphere it was perceived as a quarantine also for dead bodies.

Some Conclusions

Reflecting on religious life during the pandemic in an interfaith manner helps to identify common challenges and vulnerabilities, such as disembodiment, loneliness, sorrow; one can observe common tendencies of increasing social-distance charity by developing an awareness to those in distress. It takes a commitment to nourish one’s own faith with alternative activities, whether that be online or individually. Maybe the most notable aspect is that homemade religious life increased personal commitment: collective responsibility to fulfil rituals was replaced with individual responsibility. Overnight everyone became the master of ceremony for their own house. This focus on individual devotion and observance can, to a certain extent, challenge the traditional role of religious leaders, but it can also help to reevaluate the place of faith in each person’s life. Ritual modifications not ingrained in tradition threaten the orthodoxy of the congregation. Accordingly, addressing the question of ritual accommodation can bring into discussion issues related to authority and the role of religious leaders. Rituals can be adjusted to a limited extent, and there is a need to provide guidelines rooted in tradition in order to distinguish between practices that can be adapted and practices that need collective worship. Most often, religious leaders are the guardians of this knowledge. Ritual accommodations require both creative thinking and expertise, and expertise implies theological

57 Statistiche Google Malattia da coronavirus, <https://health.google.com/covid-19/open-data/explorer/statistics?loc=IT>

58 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, “Libertatea religioasă în România.”

formation and historical knowledge of similar situations. Invoking past challenges of religious life, such as references to early Christianity, to the experience of Christians during the communist regime, or to quoting hadiths related to quarantine, helped people find adequate responses to deal with isolation measures.

Among the wide range of reactions from respondents described above, differences can be noted, both cultural and religious. In my opinion, differences are due to cultural expectations, shaped by the level of religiosity of the country, obedience, trust in the civil authorities, and by the particular requirements and duties of each religion, but future work is required to demonstrate these connections.

For my part, I tried to extract from the interviews and from the literature review ways of imagining the body and the ritual imprinted in religious traditions. The way in which Christian theologians think of individual bodies and the corporate body of the Church as the body of the Incarnate God made an important difference in shaping the perception of the pandemic, as did Jewish and Muslim habits of purification connecting ablution with hygiene. The comparative approach I developed spotlighted implicit hermeneutics of the body imbedded in each religion. Perhaps, hermeneutics of the body and the structure of the ritual are the two key factors that merit special attention because they determine the ability to preserve rituals in the exile of digital technologies. Taking into account the tendency towards digitalization, in the future all religious communities may consider enlarging their reflections on bodies, until now shaped by questions of abortion, sexual behavior, and euthanasia. These reflections could address the question of physical presence in common worship, the status of dead bodies, and last but not least, how religions should understand the double meaning and function of the Latin term *religare* (rereading and reuniting) in the digital age.

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