



“I’m talking into your living room from my living room.” Religious belief and practice at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the second podcast in a series of eight exploring how the pandemic has changed our relationship to home, a research project involving museums and universities in London and Liverpool.

This second podcast looks at the impact of COVID-19 on religious practices. It explores how people of different faiths responded to the ‘Stay Home’ directive, how they sustained and adapted religious practices during lockdown and the challenges faced by faith leaders in relation to pastoral care.

I’m Eithne Nightingale from Queen Mary University of London talking to Miri Lawrence, Alastair Owens and David Geiringer also from Queen Mary University of London.

Eithne: Alastair, could you tell me what your role is and your involvement in this research?

Alastair: So, my role is as one of the co-investigators on the Stay Home Stories project and I am involved in various different strands of the research but particularly recently in relation to looking at the impact of COVID-19 on people’s everyday religious lives.

Eithne: And Miri, could you tell me your involvement?

Miri: I am a post-doctoral researcher on the Stay Home project.

David: I am a post-doctoral researcher as well. I am actually working on a separate project with Alastair on Anglican clergy in the inner city and their experience of home but I am currently collaborating with Miri and Alastair as part of this project as well.

Eithne: It is a really fascinating project.

Eithne: So, Alastair. Maybe I can start with you. What is the impact of the Stay Home directive on religious communities?

Alastair: Faith is so often built and strengthened, actually, around fellowship, around congregation, around communion and around coming together for collective witness. It is an intensely personal experience too. It is rooted in individual spirituality, but it is also often about that kind of embodied form of social connection, and it is an experience that reinforces belief and provides people with meaning, it provides people with joy in their spiritual lives.

So COVID-19 then was deeply disruptive of that, particularly as people retreated from kind of the ‘real’ and physical spaces of worship and into their homes and onto the digital realm. So Shahin, A Zoroastrian faith leader we spoke to, captured this really vividly:

We have festivals of water. We’ve just about - it’s the time of the year where we have a Water Festival. It’s such fun, and we get together to have fun. We can’t do that this year. We have Fire



Festivals. We celebrate the legendary discovery of fire. Another excuse to get together, we haven't been able to have that. You know, before Persian New Year, which is our big festival, we always have fun and we get together. We have dinner dance, we have dancing, and we have certain celebrations before that. We haven't been able to do any of those festivals. So, that is really sad because getting together is so much part of keeping our identity going

Eithne: So, was this a common response, Alastair?

Alastair: Well, many people we spoke to felt a strong sense of loss at not being able to go to 'a place to be at peace' as Leanora, one of our respondents put it. 'A place to be at peace just when you most needed it most'. So, we also spoke to somebody called John. He was a Roman Catholic. In fact, he was an organist who spoke for others when he described attempts to replicate some of the most profound elements of religious practice on platforms like Zoom

So, come lockdown, everything was removed. It was like tearing the heart out of me, because music is intrinsic to my worship, and I do hate using jargon. But I've literally felt bereft during lockdown, and people have been doing streaming and online services, it does nothing for me. Being among the people, the congregation, the choir is important to me. And certainly, to Anglo-Catholics, the most important service is the mass. Well, you can't take communion through a computer screen. I've actually not been able to bear going online. Yes, people have been doing it for all the right reasons, and if it does something to somebody, that's fine, but it's just not done anything to me. So I feel as I've been sort of ripped out of my universe and dumped in outer space.

Eithne: So how did faith leaders respond to all these challenges?

Alastair: Well, many worked creatively to replicate online communal and participatory experiences normally experienced in physical locations. Others were actually sceptical or even sometimes mocked the idea. One Anglo-Catholic Anglican priest seemed rather amused by some of his more enthusiastic Evangelical colleagues broadcasting online from lots of different angles, lots of different camera angles. As Charley, a Liberal Rabbi, put it to us: 'How do you build a community while you're looking at a one-dimensional computer screen rather than a 'three dimensional' person?'

Eithne: Yes, he has a point really. How did worshippers respond to these online initiatives?

Alastair: Interestingly some seemed to really enjoyed the experience.

One of the things I like about the Zoom service is actually looking at all of us in our rooms, in our own spaces, and there we are, each in our own little bubbles, but the bubbles are all nestling together. I really do enjoy that.



Miri: Yes, some people really benefitted not only from the comfort and convenience of worshipping at home but also the intimacy. For example, David, an Orthodox Jew found a much deeper relevance in the first New Year service that he celebrated at home as opposed to the second New Year service that took place in the synagogue.

I felt it more being at home, to be honest, so much so that on Yom Kippur I didn't go to shul [synagogue] either, I stayed at home and felt that it was going to be more meaningful to me and hopefully to God that I would be at home.

Eithne: So, was this true of other people, of other faiths that they really liked to be at home?

Miri: Yes, certainly we had many examples, in particular Faizan, who is a practising Muslim, echoed similar sentiments both about Eid and Ramadan.

I think certainly in the Ramadan time was a big change because obviously one of the big parts is obviously going to the mosque in the evening and also going to other people's houses. Because often you get invited for what we call the Iftar which is the kind of the dinner and that was a big part of the kind of community, family, friend spirit. So, a lot of that was I guess, lost. But that also meant there was a lot of time to actually reflect and develop a much more personal practice with – in – in relation to building with God.

Eithne: So, the home became a more important religious space than it had previously?

Miri: That is interesting because I think that some faiths, for example, Islam and Hinduism, already have a very strong tradition particularly of creating sacred space for worship at home but other faiths, too, made a real effort not necessarily to create sacred space but to curate the space around them. For example, one vicar felt that it was important to stress that he was very consciously saying “this is my living room that I’m speaking to you from”.

We were very intentional about what people were seeing. But I think part of what we felt was a real strength of the online live streamed from the home is that it is from the home. So we did not want to pretend we were in a studio or in a church so actually it wasn't this house but I imagine it would have looked like this. Very consciously saying this is my living room that I am speaking to you from.

Eithne: How did different faiths respond to the government guidelines during the pandemic?

Miri: Well, I think the first thing to say was that there was real confusion about the regulations and this, also, in turn caused some conflict, particularly between family members as deciding as to what each of them thought was safe. This in turn put faith leaders in a very difficult position as they had to make decisions as to when to open up and, when numbers were limited, who could come and who couldn't. As Bisharka, a Bengali Hindu, put it



'Nobody knew what is right.' And there was clear resentment if one place of worship opened and another locally remained closed, and probably one of the biggest examples was when lockdown was reimposed the night before Eid as everybody had already prepared their meals but, by contrast, there were relaxations that were put into place so that people could celebrate Christmas.

Eithne: Yes, I remember that. I remember families in my street being very concerned about the closure of Eid the night before. Did different faiths, therefore, face different challenges?

Miri: Yes, I mean there were the shared challenges of not being able to meet together, not being able to sing or share meals but across different faiths there were very specific challenges. Christians could no longer share Eucharist together. Evangelicals could not participate in call and response. Jains and Hindus were able to pray in front of statues in their respective temples. And, also, within denominations of different faiths so, for example, while Liberal and Reform Jews could worship online Orthodox Jews faced particular challenges in their virtual worship because this was prohibited on a Sabbath and festivals. But interestingly Liberal Jews as well, as described by Charley, who is a Liberal Rabbi, also found that they missed certain rituals.

Liberal Jews, interestingly, have never been, you know, don't have that great ritual amongst – around the Torah, in the sense that in Orthodox synagogues you get people turning to face it and touching it. Many traditional Liberal Jews have been quite sceptical about that kind of ritualisation of the Torah. And yet, what we've seen is this kind of huge, emotional, sudden connection to the physicality of a synagogue building and particularly the Torah. It's almost you don't know what you've got until it's gone, right? So, now it's gone, that people want it. And so, I think those rituals that are, you know, that are evocative with a sense that isn't visual have been really missed and have not been able to be replicated in the same way.

Eithne: So, you mentioned the Eucharist or the Holy Communion as it is also named where Christians are offered bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus's suffering. That must have posed a particular challenge at Easter.

Miri: First of all the first Easter was just as the first lockdown occurred. But it was interesting that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, really led the way, I think, by broadcasting the Easter Eucharist from his own kitchen. Michael, who is a Catholic Priest, he described that his inability to distribute communion to his parishioners, he described it as 'extremely painful'. So, as a result, different approaches were taken, which I think were partly dependent partly on denomination but also on personal decisions. Some priests took communion on behalf of the congregation. When rules were relaxed, and small groups were allowed into church, some provided wine and wafer in individual packets. Other churches organised drive throughs and a number of clergy, troubled by the relocation of



communion online, planned to send out blessed Communion wafers in jiffy bags to congregation members' homes.

Eithne: So, were there a range of different responses and opinions as to what could be transferred online and what could happen in the home?

Miri: Definitely, and I think one example of this is of baptism. So, one Church of England minister really felt that it wasn't possible to replicate online.

I think most of the people who want a baptism, either if they've got a strong personal faith it's doing it in the context of the congregation that really matters, or if they've got a more traditional view, again it would be in the church building that mattered.

Miri: But by contrast Mark, a lay leader in a Black Majority Church, explained how baptism could be replicated at home and how his community facilitated and empowered congregants to do this.

The baptism bit, as I spoke about, about taking the water, the holy water. What it really comes down to is just giving instruction, the pastor would pray over the water, bless the water, it is now consecrated. Now, take it to the member who requires this, and giving them instructions, as it were, how to do this making the sign of the cross on the forehead, etc what prayers to say in presenting this child there. So, the head of the house would actually take on that responsibility, as it were. Ideally, it was not ideal because really to have a baby baptism is something that is ideally expected to be inside the church building. It was really – there's something about the church gathering together to say to God, "Thank you for this child. That the child and the mother has been spared to bear this child, we're giving thanks and we are symbolically giving back this child to you." But so, that element was also missing, the fact that the congregation as a whole could not be a part of the celebration of life and baptism of the child. That was missing all from it.

Eithne: So, some religious, they really went to great lengths to ensure such rituals carried on during lockdown.

Miri: Yes, I think it is really impressive how they adapted. For example, Bisharka, a Hindu, explained how her priest showed how people could still pray to a deity at home.



We usually pray to an image. So we keep the image for a few years. It's a clay model... But this time he [the priest] couldn't get it from storage and all. And it's – you know, the house is not big enough for those. So he [the priest] had his own image. And he set up a shrine and everything there. And his wife helped him to do the prayers. And we were all asked that if we want to put a picture or some image in our homes, to do that. And most people have got something, as I say. So we were actually sitting in front of the image there.

Eithne: So, some faith leaders were really proactive?

Miri: Yes, as one Anglican vicar explained, leaders were often extremely innovative in offering religious instruction and guidance.

People have done brilliant stuff on Zoom... someone did a brilliant Bible reading, so they'd recorded the Bible reading in church as a sort of drama on Zoom, and it was really simple to do because they just got everyone in their home on the screen in their costumes and so on and they'd obviously had a bit of a practice and then they pressed record like we're doing, and they just had the Bible reading with the person at the top left doing the whatever. So I wish I'd thought of that before I stopped being a vicar.

Miri: I think the Orthodox Jewish community faced particular challenges, though, because of the restrictions about access to the internet on the Sabbath and religious festivals, but that did not deter everyone. Daniel, an Orthodox rabbi, because he could not do the services online on the Sabbath and the weekly biblical readings from the Torah, he gave weekly podcasts on other days of the week to enable discussion of the Biblical reading at times when Orthodox Jews could gather online. He also, for the Sabbath and festivals, sent home packs along with guidance notes, puzzles and games to ensure that families could worship and celebrate in their own homes.

Eithne: So, were there instances where it became evident that the home could not replicate the sacred atmosphere found in religious buildings?

Miri: Yes, overall a lot of respondents would talk about things that were really positive but particularly in terms of being sacred but there was always a 'but'. It was never quite the same. But some people described it really well and I am thinking particularly of Atul, who is a leader of the Jain community of London. And he really talked about the difference of the sacred space in the temple which wasn't the same at home.

Doing the Puja in the temple is very special because that murti is consecrated. You know, the image is consecrated, right, so you know, you



can do the same thing at home, but the effect is different... In the sense the energies and the vibration and, you know, the temple is a sacred space.

Miri: Yes, there were other instances. For example, a Quaker who I interviewed, and this was not common to all Quakers I have to say, but, for this particular respondent, he really felt that online meetings could not replicate the depth of experience of a traditional Quaker meeting. I remember him saying it wasn't the same as breathing the same air as everyone in the room.

I haven't experienced the profundity of silence in a Zoom meeting that I've experienced in a present, traditional Quaker meeting.

Miri: Others described rituals as deficient in other ways. The overwhelming response was that it was never quite as good as the real thing. An as Mark, who is a lay leader in a London Black Majority Church explained, 'there's always a 'But'. Some participants expressed a feeling connected to other places of worship both within and beyond their usual faith but at the same time sometimes they expressed that they felt but isolated from their own. Others, like Charley, celebrated this move away from the parochial:

And actually, because of the power of sharing one community, joining up with another, suddenly that's in, you know, in Brighton the following week, and that just wasn't happening before. So, I think that's really exciting. I think Biennial for me, both services-wise, but also just generally wise was really, really exciting both years, just in the different ways of how can communities collaborate together? And a move away from a parochial kind of, "What's good for my community, I'm going to do it. I'm going to work on my own." You know, to a new model, which is actually – it's really possible to be part of a shared rabbinate or shared leadership team, and not be at the same community. And that can only be a massive creative wealth or, you know, the idea of not replicating. And we've still got a way to go, but I think that was something pre-COVID that I would have loved to see that actually COVID has allowed to happen. And because sole rabbinate is a bad idea. It's a really, really bad idea. It's lonely, it's draining, it's not – you know, you've got nobody to bounce off. Whereas shared rabbinate, shared communal leadership is, you know, much better. And people thought it was one or the other but actually, I think COVID has changed the whole way that leadership has the potential to work. That's been a real highlight.

Eithne: So David, can I bring you in here? What about the question of pastoral care? That must have been a real challenge for faith leaders.

David: Yes, absolutely. I think many rose to the challenge of meeting people's needs. I think this was articulated by a member of Hounslow Friends of Faith.



And from my experience, the faith communities have been doing quite a lot during the pandemic, both for their own communities and opening their doors to, you know, anyone in need. So things like food, you know, food banks, visiting people, well a lot of the faith communities have really come to the fore. And you know, it's the ethos, of course, of a lot of faith communities about charity and giving. And I think it's really, you know, it's come into its own, which is great.

David: Yes, I think it's really that idea of faith coming into its own in the context of COVID. You know, the lockdown shining a light on the work that faith communities are doing is really interesting. Of course, there were challenges too, particularly around health-related concerns in any face-to-face work not just for faith leaders but also for their families, for the other people living in clerical homes. This was well explained by an Anglican vicar's wife, whose anonymity we are protecting, and she highlighted how the pastoral responsibilities were shouldered by everyone in the pastoral home and the wider family. And this is because the vicars' homes, the religious leaders' homes were permanently on show and were in some ways inescapable.

At the beginning of the lockdown, especially with this one person because he [a local homeless man] would come to the door at any time, and he's quite aggressive, he'd be banging all over the place and I don't think he really understood what was happening. He didn't get the message. And so he wouldn't keep a distance or anything like that and I found that quite threatening. And it just made me realise that if we lived in a normal house, we wouldn't have all these people coming and touching the door.

David: Of course, digital technologies have prompted both a reimagining of pastoral activity, but also created a heightened expectation about religious leaders' availability. This further erosion of the boundaries between the public and the private can have real impact on the mental health and wellbeing of faith leaders, so one rabbi who we heard from earlier, Charley, explained this.

I have a really strong concern about where the mental health of rabbis will be at the end of this period, because pastoral support has never been done in this way. And rabbis, you know, like many caring professions, find it very difficult to switch off and to take time out. And actually the pastoral demands on the rabbinate have been –



on any clergy, has been huge during this time and there's been no way of shutting off from it. So, they've had to reinvent how pastoral support has been done, where they couldn't get into people's homes. And at the same time, you know, congregants are WhatsApping, emailing, phoning rabbis in ways that are kind of, you know, there aren't the same boundaries. I found, you know, even not having a congregation that suddenly I look down at my phone and someone's FaceTiming me, you know, because they have my mobile number. And instead of pushing the phone there – like there's an assumption that, you know, you can see people all the time. And I think that's exhausting.

Eithne: So, that is really clear, the shepherds are in need of a shepherd.

David: Yes, exactly. And I think these impacts of the pandemic has been less discussed by 'top-brass' religious leaders and it is certainly something that needs to be addressed and discussed.

Eithne: Yes, I would like to ask all of you really, to open up the discussion and you know what is the long-term impact on faith communities? Will it ever go back to the way it was before? Will it ever go back to normal?

David: We discussed this with an Anglican bishop. Alastair and I were both present actually at the interview. The bishop was of the opinion that the cat is out of the bag now, the genie has been let out of the bottle, and in terms of the way faith works, and worship works on an everyday basis things will change for ever. And part of this is about accessibility and inclusion, you know, going to a cold and maybe quite a remote church is something that certain members of the parish, or the community, struggle with. So, I think in this sense digital technologies have widened the participation and the capacity to be involved in religion for a number of vulnerable individuals.

Eithne: Have you got evidence of this?

David: We did not probe that too much, did we Alastair? But I think his evidence, actually to be fair, he was speaking to his clergy people and his clergy in his area were saying that this was something that, the feedback that he was almost getting, they were getting from parishioners and from congregants that they were finding it easier. And I suppose it is quite



intuitive, isn't it? To be able, if you are going, it's going to be difficult to get to a place of worship. It is much easier to do it in your pyjamas in your front room on a Sunday morning

Miri: Well, no I agree with David. I think one of the biggest things that has come out of this is inclusivity and the one thing that we do have data on is that numbers of attendees has really increased at this time and I think one of the worries as we go back to religious buildings is how do we sustain those numbers. The convenience, not having to add on travel time and so on, has really enabled people to access religious services that perhaps they could not in the past. But really what we are seeing is that people that were vulnerable, that were isolated, this does not apply to everybody, but a lot of people were included that weren't previously. I think my biggest worry for the future, I think it won't go back to how it was. I think the hybrid, multi-access is, definitely, the way forward and that is already happening in a lot of communities. Two things worry me, one is that the emotional impact on everybody is going to take a long time, particularly for those who could not say goodbye to their loved ones when they were dying, who could not visit in hospital, who could not attend funerals. Something that is already very difficult has been magnified because of not being able to see our loved ones in person. And I think that is going to take a lot of mending and I think that is going to be another thing that faith leaders are really going to have to address when, as we have already heard, many of them are already worn out and quite a few of the participants that I interviewed actually retired during lockdown because it was just the final straw really and really difficult to maintain that level of support.

So that is one thing that worries me, and I think the other thing is and we have not really covered this in the research because I think it is sort of happening now that although we are returning to faith buildings and sometimes with the opportunity to access either in the building or at home but being in the building is not the same either. So, one person described it to me as 'If you have got the Perspex screen you feel like you are in the dock' so you have already got that physical barrier as the faith leader, the congregation for the most part are wearing masks, sitting at a distance, not being able to congregate for food and to socialise. And some of the rituals still can't be performed or I have heard, for example, of the Eucharist being administered with gloves and tweezers. And so the religious experience at the moment is not as it was. The foreseeable future is really uncertain. So. it is now like this happened, it has now finished and we go back. Everything is different, going back to mosques and churches and synagogues is not the same. It is a sanitised version so we are still mourning the loss of something that we had. So. for some remaining at home is actually preferential to actually going to a faith building where it is still not the same.



Eithne: Great, Alastair, do you want to add to your perspective to the sort of present and the future really?

Alastair: So, I think there are some positive things also that will be important to the future in terms of how we responded or how faith communities responded to the lockdown. So, one of the things we heard and actually we heard it across a number of faiths. OK so communities could not come into places of worship, into churches, into temples or synagogues or whatever it might be, congregations could not come into those buildings, but also, however, at times congregations go out into the community and do things in their communities. We heard of many really good examples of how the pandemic mobilised people to try and respond to some of the hurt, the harm, the difficulty that was being experienced in local communities so faith groups running food banks, faith groups going and visiting people, ringing people up, faith groups running homeless, shelters. A lot that was happening anyway, but I think maybe the pandemic has given that a kind of renewed sense and purpose.

Eithne: Great. Can I just ask because I am aware that in your examples of ritual you did not include funeral or weddings in fact? Was there a reason for that?

Miri: I was involved in another podcast for another research project that was specifically on funerals, and I think rightly it is a subject on its own. So, I think I made that decision because I did not want to give one very small example to something that, actually, really requires an in-depth discussion because I think that sort of touches on the pastoral challenges, loss, so much to it that it's probably a podcast on its own. Weddings were interesting. I did speak to participants. I did not speak to participants whose own wedding was delayed or carried on, on Zoom but I did speak to participants who had family members or friends and certainly speaking to faith leaders. One viewpoint that I thought was really interesting, which also extended to other life cycle celebrations, was that when people decided to get married, even though it meant that they would have a much more lower scale celebration, that faith leaders felt that the couples really focussed on what the significance of getting married was particularly in a faith context. And although they did not have the same celebrations they might have had before lockdown it was actually more spiritually rewarding for them and really showed a commitment. Now that is just one view. It does not mean that those who didn't delay did not have that same commitment. But it did not come out very strongly things in the interviews but really, I think we are going to be looking at death and dying as a separate, very individual area that needs to be looked at in detail.

Eithne: What do you hope people will get out of this podcast?



David: I was just going to say I think hopefully it will offer people a perspective on the diversity, the kind of range of both experiences that people have faced in COVID, that there isn't kind of one model and that even within faiths there has been a great range of different responses. But also, I think Miri has touched on the emotional, psychological responses to try to make sense of this but also to get through this period so also, hopefully, deepening and diversifying the way faith responses to COVID is understood.

Eithne: So, can you tell us no, we are sort of mid-way through the research, what are your plans for the research's future?

Miri: I think we are about three quarters of the way through now and we have just looked at one area today and there are lots of different aspects of faith life including education and so on, so this is just one part of the research but the main thing. the next project for us is to develop a tool kit

Eithne: OK, What in a post COVID world?

Miri: Well.

Eithne: Or present COVID world?

Alastair: I think it is a living with COVID world.

Miri: I think it is a living with COVID world unfortunately. But I think that is why it is important because sadly it does not look as if this is something that we have moved on from so by sharing all these amazing things that have people have done, thinking of the ways that we can support both community members but our faith leaders as well is sadly something that I think we are going to need in the future.

Eithne: Great. So it is an interfaith tool kit which will draw on the kind of challenges but also the good practice.

Miri: Absolutely, yes.

Eithne: That sounds a really brilliant idea. That has been a wonderful interview. Thank you very much Miri, Alastair and David. And good luck with the rest of the research

Miri: Thank you very much.



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With thanks to all contributors and to Jonty Lovell for the soundtrack *Blip*, a recurring sound he created to reflect the monotony of lockdown life, but also to instil a sense of optimism that things will get better. Follow him on Instagram [j.lovemusic](https://www.instagram.com/j.lovemusic).