

Virtual Religion During a Global Pandemic

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

This thesis is about changed plans and how we work to make the most of inconvenient situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone has been forced to look at their everyday lives and evaluate which activities must be removed, which can be slightly changed, and which can go as planned. In religious communities around the United States, congregations of all faiths have had to trade a portion of piety for the sake of their members' safety. In this paper, I observe multiple communities who have had services online and I see how this has altered practices.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Dr. Robert Phillips for being my thesis advisor, honing my abstract ideas into more defined ones, helping me every step of the way, and, most importantly, for being a cherished friend.

Further, I must thank the congregations from Temple Beth El (Muncie, Indiana), Temple Sinai (Marion, Indiana), Union Chapel (Muncie, Indiana), Emmanuel Catholic Church (Dayton, Ohio), and Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam (Atlanta, Georgia) for hosting services online that could be attended by all.

Finally, I am grateful to all of the people who have worked to curb the emotional strain of this crisis and those who try to give us all a little bit of normal during this time.

Process Analysis Statement

I began this semester with a plan. That plan was to study Jewish and Muslim relations in Muncie, Indiana. To do this, I planned on breaking the study up into two points. While I was waiting for IRB approval (something they ended up saying I did not need), I was going to use archival data about the histories of both religions in Muncie. The second half of the semester would be spent attending services and events from both communities and then to record my experiences as a participant-observer. At the midway point of my study and just before I began attending events, COVID-19 made its way to the United States and the health risks became so great that religious communities began shutting their doors and opting for alternative forms of worship that did not require people to gather in large numbers. This has not been a unique situation to religious communities, however. Restaurants have been forced to close dining areas, stores have bolstered pick-up and curbside delivery options, and millions of workers have been furloughed as a result of businesses that have been considered “nonessential” closing their doors to reduce social contact.

This was a serious blow to my study and the plans that I had made. In many ways, this paralyzed my attempts to work on a thesis at all, given the fact that I felt that I wasn't going to complete anything on my original plan and that there would be no option for another. This ended up not being the case when Dr. Phillips came to me with a new idea: *In light of everything that had changed, why not study virtual religion and attend services that way?* I was instantly sold.

As I began to research this topic, it became apparent that this was not something that most churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. had prepared for. I did not find a wealth of information on these institutions preparing to go virtual before this situation. This being said,

there have been developments in the virtual space, to be sure. Apps such as *Shabbos* have been suggested to give users the “ability” (I have put “ability” in quotation marks as the legitimacy of these claims is up for religious interpretation) to communicate via text messaging on Shabbat, a sin in Orthodox Judaism (Phillips, 2019).

Still, people of all beliefs are being rattled by this pandemic and are being forced to relearn how to be a member of their religions during this time. This thesis will take a look at the ways in which religions are changing during this time and the things that people are doing to mitigate the pain and disorientation that comes with such changes to services and congregation interactions. It will examine articles that are being written on the topic and will also examine virtual services. While this thesis will not come to a conclusion as the pandemic is only beginning, I will attempt to make a prediction about how things will end up and if virtual religion will become, if not *the* new normal, then *a* new normal.

Literature Review

There have been several articles written in the past few weeks that have detailed the changes happening within religious circles ranging from pastors being put in jail for continuing to hold services despite orders not to (Lush, 2020) and religious groups holding Zoom calls for services (Bishop, 2020). This is a topic that is developing more every week and there will certainly be more research done on the topic well after this thesis is complete. As it stands, however, there is one book and a handful of articles that will serve as the foundation of my literature review. These discuss the advances in digital religion or the changes that religious groups have made over the past few weeks as a result of COVID-19.

In the section entitled, “An Ambivalent Jewishness: Half Shabbos, the Shabbos App, and Modern Orthodoxy,” written by Dr. Robert F. Phillips, the *Shabbos* app is discussed. In Orthodox Judaism, it is forbidden to use any sort of electricity on Shabbat, also known as the Jewish Sabbath. To do so would be a sin. This being the case, there can be no driving, no cooking, no television or internet, not even *texting* is allowed. So, when Dr. Phillips heard that there was an app in development that seemed to circumvent this standard, he was intrigued (2019).

There are a number of issues when it comes to using a phone during Shabbat. One, the battery begins to warm the more a user is on it. To avoid this, the app developers were going to maintain a certain level of power usage throughout the day of Shabbat. Another issue is one of human creativity, where typing (or *creating*) words would break the Law. To avoid this inevitable issue, the creators were going to make a word bank that the user could add 30 additional words to on a day other than Shabbat for use in simple conversations on Shabbat. As

with many modern technologies that are designed to add to a religious experience, it was met with significant amounts of scrutiny and suspicion. Many called this an excuse to break the Law and, therefore, was worse than just texting in the first place. Others maintained that, by encouraging the use of the app, one would be teaching children and all believers that breaking rules that one deemed as “inconvenient” would eventually lead to a catastrophic domino effect of religious believers being given the God-like ability to decide what was and was not really a sin. *If texting on Shabbat is no longer an issue, then why not flip on the lights? The lights are already on, why not make myself a sandwich and watch some TV? And so on.* Further, others argued that a person who was unable to put their phone down for one day had another issue entirely and that that issue should not be masked by an enabling app (Phillips, 2019).

In short, this app was instantly met with opposition and never made its way out of development. There will be no assertion made of the motivation on the part of the developers here, though it is worthy to note that this app did raise money on Kickstarter, had a release date, but never came out (Phillips, 2019). However, whether or not this information is pertinent to the discussion is irrelevant. It remains interesting to see how modern technology is being used by and finding its way into religious practices. As technology continues to be used more and more, religions of all creeds are trying to establish boundaries for what could be utilitarian applications. Such advancements are useful in a time like the Coronavirus pandemic, though it would be hard to assert that any religion was sufficiently prepared for something of this magnitude.

In Ohio, a Hindu temple has been closed due to COVID-19 regulations and precautions. Because of this change, priests have been live-streaming prayer services for followers (Reynolds, 2020). At the nearby Emmanuel Catholic Church in Dayton, Ohio, the clergy decided to upload a

35-minute video of the Stations of the Cross, allowing members of the church to participate in this ritual from home. The purpose of this ritual is to reflect on the steps that Christians believe Jesus Christ went through on the way to his being nailed on the cross and subsequent death. This is one of the most significant rituals in the Catholic Church, and with churches not being open to physical services for Easter, the clergy decided that, at the very least, a video must be made. Similar situations were found at a number of religious institutions around the city and its suburbs. In Oakwood, a Rabbi has been posting his weekly Dvar Torah, or his discussion of the Torah readings that he does on a given week. While most in-person services are closed entirely, funerals continue in the city, though the large gatherings that would have taken place only a month ago have been dramatically reduced to immediate family and one's closest friends (Reynolds, 2020).

How religious institutions change for COVID-19 is one thing, but how it affects the congregation is another. For Jewish families who have missed out on the festivities of Purim this year, for example, such a loss has affected their morale. It is not the same to watch a live-stream service in the place of grogger-shaking and carnival-attending. While this is not the most important holiday in Judaism, nor is it the most widely observed, to those who do choose to celebrate, it is certainly the most fun. Missing out on this holiday was certainly a blow to children and parents alike (Yurieff, 2020).

Jews are not the only group who have had to rethink holidays or traditions. Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam, are both found in Saudi Arabia. It is expected in Islam that all who are able to make the journey to these sites should do so at some point in their life. In late February, the government of Saudi Arabia determined that they must restrict travel from 25

countries and close down the sites for nearly two weeks (Hassan, 2020). Shortly after reopening the sites, the government determined that still more needed to be done, leading to the halting of holy tours of Mecca and Medina, the cancellation of all Friday prayers (something unheard of in the country), the forbidding of praying inside and outside of the two holiest mosques in the country, and so on (“Saudi Arabia bans prayers...”, 2020). The Prime Minister of India chose to stay away from the Hindu holiday of Holi in a cautious move because of the disease (Yurieff, 2020).

In these times, any sort of human contact helps the psyche, especially for congregants who are used to seeing their friends every single week at services and events. As a result, many churches are ensuring that the most vulnerable in their congregations are being taken care of, called, and socialized with—from a distance, of course. All across the country (and the world), congregations are encouraging their members to check up on one another and to meet each other’s needs as best they can. Groups such as the one at Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis, Indiana have been strongly encouraged to heed health experts’ advice in avoiding contact and, in doing so, hope to slow the spread of the disease (Law, 2020). Indeed, it was a Jewish congregation in New Rochelle that is suspected to be the epicenter for the outbreak in New York, which at the time of writing this is the hardest-hit state in the U.S. by COVID-19 (Smith, 2020). This brings congregations to the live-streamed services and the benefits and drawbacks that come with them.

Since the outbreak, Congregation Beth-El Zedeck has conducted regularly streamed services for its members and has even streamed a live conversation with a health expert for the edification of its members on the matter. This sort of thing both comforts and attempts to fill a

void left in people who usually participate in religious activities but are no longer able to. In addition, people who are not typically religious have taken the opportunity to join in on religious meetings during this lonely time. Taking part in rituals and traditions during such a tragic event can bring one comfort and a sense of normalcy (Law, 2020). A look at Google search trends shows that the search term “online church” has never been looked up more in the history of the site than it was in March of 2020. The second-closest month was April 2010, but this month had only 67% of the number of “online church” searches that March 2020 had (“Online church” search trends...”, 2020).

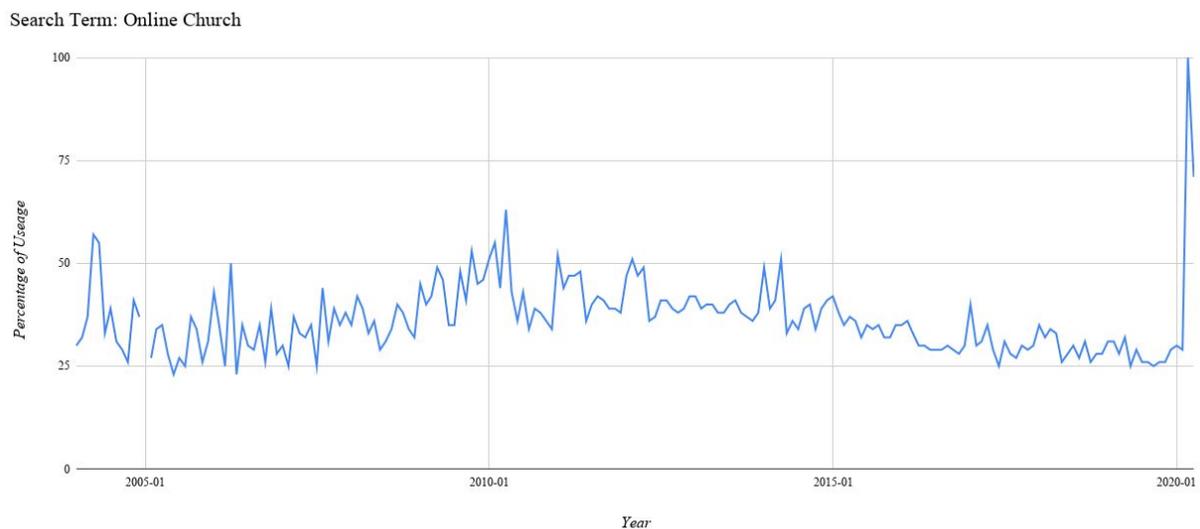


Chart showing the Google Trends data from January 2004 to April 2020 for the term “Online Church.”

Even with all the online options surfacing, many people who have opted for the physical experience thus far find it hard to connect in the same or even in a similar way. One family who discussed their at-home-in-our-pajamas experience of Purim this year said that they found it much more difficult to watch a screen than to take part in a physical service. They found themselves getting up and being distracted more often (Yurieff, 2020). In truth, some communities were more prepared than others and some audiences were more accustomed to the

virtual medium than others. Joel Osteen, for example, has long had a large television and internet viewership; much larger than his actual Lakewood Church building (capacity 50,000) could ever hold. Anyone who relied on his services online has remained unaffected, at least with respect to their church attendance (Smith, 2020). There are a multiplicity of congregations in similar situations, not just Christian ones. Those who had been attending Lakewood Church in person, however, may find themselves longing for the feeling of singing in a room full of people rather than viewing a full-stage, empty-seats conundrum on their laptop at the kitchen table. Even though the church has had the technology up and running for years at this point, there will still be people adversely affected by the total in-person shutdown.

And so, religious leaders' approach is, at least for the time being, that online services are not going to be a replacement, but merely an uncomfortable alternative. One such "uncomfortable alternative" would be the Islamic Center of Passaic County in New Jersey which has opted to continue holding Friday sermons online but not to give a live stream of the prayer service. It has chosen not to stream the prayer service as it cannot be replicated online. The exact reasoning was not clearly stated beyond this, though my most educated guess would be that group participation plays a major role in these services, and this just is not possible over a Zoom call. These prayers typically see an attendance of one thousand. As a result, members must pray at home alone. Further, with an aging religious population in the United States, the elderly are being forced to decide whether to learn decades-worth of technology on the fly or miss out on services entirely. This is something that religious leaders cannot necessarily fix and social distancing only exacerbates (Smith, 2020). An interesting *Forbes* article by Robert Glazer analyzes how the pandemic will affect each generation. His assertion for Baby Boomers: they

will learn the internet (2020). Time will tell how effectively they are able to accomplish this, although it seems possible, if not probable, in part because of the necessity of using services such as Skype and Zoom for religious services.

The purpose of this section was not to arrive at any answers, but simply to show the many challenges that are facing congregations around the United States as they try to adjust to this new way of serving their congregations and to look at how these challenges are (in some way or another) being passed down to the members of these congregations. Though this literature review has been brief and could be updated daily as this pandemic continues, it should be viewed as a snapshot of a particular place in time during the course of the COVID-19 outbreak. In the next section, personal experiences with a few online religious services will be discussed and the reader will be able to see how these experiences aligned with, or perhaps differed from, the ones mentioned in the literature review.

Participant Observation

Over the month of March 2020, I had the opportunity to sit in on several live-streamed and prerecorded services from a variety of congregations and belief systems. I will detail a few of my experiences and will attempt to provide my own personal analysis of this medium as the (albeit temporary) replacement for in-person services that it has become. Though I have never attended physical services of either Jewish or Muslim congregations, I still think that a view into their experiences during this crisis is valuable. As such, I have chosen to include these experiences in this section.

The first experience that I had was a Shabbat service on 20 March 2020 that was streamed over Zoom by the congregations of Temple Beth-El and Temple Sinai. These congregations are found in Muncie, Indiana and Marion, Indiana, respectively (Diamond, 2020). The two congregations chose to participate in these services as one, a decision that seemed to work well over the course of the service. It was interesting to see how the couple leading the service (Becca Diamond and David Jaffe) chose to acknowledge the virus and the bringing together of the congregations.

To begin with, it was clear that next to no one knew how to handle Zoom quite yet. Becca Diamond mentioned from the beginning that she was going to mute everyone because the previous service had been a challenge as voices carried over the internet tend to arrive a second or so later than when they were projected, leading to a song that would be simple in a normal service to become a muddled mess quite quickly. So, from the very beginning, the community aspect of hearing everyone sing as one was taken away. I was not able to hear anyone read the text together, sing together, or the grunts of agreement or contemplation that one hears in a

typical religious service. The whole thing felt a bit stale and impersonal, no fault being laid on Becca or David, to be clear.

COVID-19 was discussed at multiple points in the service, both as a recognition that service was different and COVID-19 was the reason, and as Becca reminded everyone to pay close attention to what health experts were advising and to heed their warnings. In many ways, religious services are a break from the outside world. One is caught up in the magnitude and history of what they are partaking in, a feeling that is rare in everyday life. What is done in a service very often is what has been done in services for years, if not centuries. This situation has seen the outside world shake religious tradition into a very new experience, something that was evident on the faces of the elderly attendees of this particular service.

All-in-all I enjoyed this service and observing how Jewish services go (to the extent that I could see during a virtual meeting), but I felt that there had to be a lot missing in the experience, as well. I noticed that families sometimes had trouble keeping their children still, members of the congregation would disappear from their video feed for a time and then reappear, as if they had remembered something they needed to add to their grocery list or felt they needed a cup of coffee to keep going. Typically, in a physical service, these impulses are squelched for the sake of oneself and the people around, but in a virtual service, it seems all too easy to walk away and reappear. This became apparent from the very first service that I attended, and it continued to be clear from the service I attended later.

Next, I observed the March 22 service that was streamed by Union Chapel in Muncie, Indiana with my family (Perris, 2020). I am not a regular attendee of the church, but I have been to a few services and have a general idea of what the place is typically like. Union Chapel is a

non-denominational, protestant church with services drawing around 200 attendees each. The virtual service began with music, something that my family by and large ignored. I watched the band play and imagined how bizarre it would be if we all stood there and sang in the living room with our pajamas on. It would have been more bizarre than if we just sat there in silence and waited for it to be over, not to mention the fact that the music began as we were still finishing our breakfast.

Once the music was over, the pastor came up and began delivering his sermon. At the beginning of sermons at this particular church, the congregation is encouraged to read aloud the section that is being preached on that day, and that assumption was carried on into the live-streamed service. The text was put up for everyone to see and the pastor encouraged us to read along. A few members of my family read the text under their breath, but no one read it with the veracity that one would expect in a physical service. This, along with the absence of sing-along participants, was a difference that I saw between both the Shabbat service and this one. Whereas the Shabbat service was held over Zoom where most everyone could see each other, this service was simply streamed as a video, eliminating the accountability of participation. I am not certain if this was the cause of the difference or not, but it stands to reason that, if you can see everyone's face and they are singing, you may just follow along.

The sermon was delivered after the reading of the text, and this felt equally strange to me. I could tell that the pastor was not used to presenting a sermon in this way. He was used to presenting his message in ways that included participation from the congregation if only that meant head nods and the occasional '*Amen.*' He seemed out of his element, as we all were,

evidenced by the fact that I saw a few of my family members (and admittedly myself) reach for their phone from time to time.

It was as if we were watching a television show and not Sunday service. And, as such, a great deal of the seriousness was lost in the process. No longer did we choose to wait to go to the restroom. No longer did it feel disrespectful to look out the window for a few minutes or say something to the person on the other side of the room. We were watching someone on the television. For all they knew, we could have watched the whole thing intently from start to finish or we could have still been asleep. Attendance to services had been reduced to the number of views that eventually took place, rather than the number of people who showed up and filled up a chair. Needless to say, the feeling of church was lost on me that Sunday.

As I researched this topic, I came across an article (Reynolds, 2020) that mentioned the Stations of the Cross being posted online for members of a Dayton congregation to use (Baldwin, 2020). I chose to view this, in part, because tradition is necessary to maintain even in a crisis like COVID-19. I was interested to see how this important part of the Catholic experience would be preserved over the internet. I began watching the video that had been posted for the Dayton congregation (and anyone who chose to utilize this resource).

I noticed from the very beginning that this was a very rigid video. At no point is the viewer able to see the man (or other people who speak or sing throughout) presenting the Stations of the Cross. It is simply a voice-over slide presentation. This is not a criticism, to be clear, but it is important to note that there was not a “service” atmosphere created with the video. It was merely what was necessary to get the job done. As I watched the video, I felt my attention wane to the point that I was having to convince myself to keep watching. It was only a

thirty-minute video, but I could not help but feel that the experience would have been exponentially better had I been in a cathedral and was able to experience the community aspect of the act. I am not Catholic, but I understand the basic premise of this service and would have enjoyed the in-person event more. It felt more like I was watching a professor for an online class than it did a deacon at a Catholic Church.

I want to be clear in my lack of attention, as I believe that it would be intellectually dishonest not to do so. There was nothing in this, nor in any service's subject matter that I considered boring. In truth, the services from types of congregations I had never been a part of piqued my interest and I was happy to participate. My struggle, then, was not in caring about what was being shared, but in the way that I had to participate. Had I been in the actual Stations of the Cross service, I believe that I would have been far more able to pay attention.

Congregations are in the process of trying to sustain for the moment, and this is not the best time to judge their entertainment value as religions. For this reason (and others), I am making no attempt to judge religions or their congregations on entertainment value.

The final service that I will use for this section is one that was held by a masjid in Atlanta on 27 March (Hamed, 2020). Of all the services that I observed for my research, this one was by far the most engaging for me. This was only a prerecorded audio service, so there was nothing that I was able to watch during the entirety of the (about) twenty-minute message. I went into this particular sermon concerned that this would be the hardest service to pay attention to because of the lack of visuals, but I was proven wrong quite quickly.

The message was about trusting in Allah but also holding a fear of the power that He has. Growing up Christian, this message resonated with me. I had always been taught the same thing.

To be fair, half of my attention given to this sermon most likely was an interest in how Islamic services went. I had never been to or listened to one. In addition, the main reason why I chose to listen to a sermon from this particular masjid was that many of the services that had been posted online by others had been presented in Arabic, a language that I have studied but certainly have not mastered to the point of understanding a sermon.

At any rate, I did find myself distracting my eyes by moving around the kitchen as the audio was playing, but I did not feel like I was cheating the Imam out of my attention by doing so. I was listening to every word and my movement ensured that my mind was not able to drift away from the message being presented. In many ways, it seemed that the lack of video made it easier for me to pay attention. In a normal service, one is expected to look up and watch what the presenter is doing, not just listen to what they are saying. However, in a sermon that is presented as simply audio, the pressure to fix one's eyes on the screen is removed almost entirely, much like when one listens to an audiobook or a podcast. At least, this was my experience in this particular situation. This did not, I am sure, replicate or outdo an in-person service, but it did provide me with a sense of religion.

I had no way of knowing, as with all sermons other than the one presented by the joint congregations of Temple Beth-El and Temple Sinai, how well others were able to pay attention to this service or the number of people who listened. I would not at all be surprised that this sermon could have been listened by many as they drove to work (if they were still able to go) or as they did things around the house. These services, as my advisor, Dr. Phillips, pointed out, seem much more like *consumption* than they are *participation*.

I observed a few other sermons over the course of March and April, but these have not been outlined in this section. I found the information that would have been presented to be unfruitful for this study and redundant. In the next section, I will discuss my conclusions about virtual religion, tying what I researched through archival data in with what I have learned through my participant observation.

Discussion

There can be no “conclusion” over virtual religion in a time of pandemic, as the pandemic has not yet concluded. However, I can discuss the moments that stuck out most to me and how I see virtual religion moving forward through and past this current time. This will be the purpose of the following section.

Change is inevitable. Even so, it is something that is rarely unanimously enjoyed, nor is it almost ever easy. However, sometimes situations are thrust upon individuals and groups and they are left with no choice but to change even the most precious of things. Such has been the case for religious congregations over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. I entered into this study with a plan to view how religion has been changed in a forced virtual age, but I had no idea the magnitude by which it had changed the experience.

Throughout the articles that I read about the topic, a common thread of “people needing hope through religion” was found. Another subject that was not uncommon was online services’ lack of a feeling of connectedness or community. While (as has been pointed out multiple times in this paper) it is no fault of the religious leaders that a sense of community is lost with online services, it is still something that all congregations are now reeling from. *How are we a community if we can’t even be around each other?* Singing along to hymns seems odd, reading along to verses is awkward, and paying attention to someone talking on a screen is next to impossible. So, where does that leave things?

For one, people are going to have to adjust expectations. Virtual services are just not ever going to be the same thing as in-person ones. That does not mean that they have to be viewed as less important. In much the same way that plays and movies are two vastly different experiences,

these two types of mediums are still important and serve a purpose. For the time being, virtual services are a way to protect and preserve congregations. As was seen at a synagogue in New York, continuing to hold religious services during this time could (and most likely *would*) ultimately lead to the deaths of many in the congregation. It is much better to deal with the inconvenience of technology for a time than to deal with the tragedy of death forever.

In addition, virtual religion is teaching older generations how to use technology that, up until this point, has seemed useless or unattainable to them. Perhaps this will cause virtual religion, at least for the oldest and most vulnerable, to be a more widely accepted option. It may never become the standard, but it could most certainly become an alternative for many. Learning the internet will also open the door for other uses of technology that many in older generations have yet to learn as well. This will allow those with limited mobility to communicate with friends and loved ones better and more frequently. This result may not have direct ties with “religion in a time of pandemic,” but it is a tool that they will gain from participating in virtual religion during this time.

Most importantly, in my opinion, the discomfort in virtual religion (and virtual everything right now) will teach us to be more appreciative of community, neighbors, and just being able to spend time together. Perhaps this is what has made religion so popular for centuries: having a group to belong to. There is something so supernatural and yet so human about being in a religious service and hearing everyone in unison sing or read religious texts aloud. As the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged congregations to maintain this sense of belonging, it has also shown how strong this feeling had been before, and how important it will once again be once restrictions are lifted and we can find a new normal. We can only hope and

pray that this new normal will be found sooner rather than later. Until then, however, virtual religion it will be.

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