

Corona and Religion

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Introduction

In the spring semester of 2020, we investigated the topic of COVID-19 and religions within the seminar of the same name. Attention was given to a large range of questions: How do religions, such as religious institutions or public religious figures, react to the coronavirus pandemic? Which answers do they provide in the crisis? What options do they offer in dealing with the coronavirus? And, lastly, how do religions transform in the coronavirus pandemic?

Some of the general results of our research are the following¹: Because of the ban on public assembly, religious institutions had to alter their traditional activities and services of assembly, as well as their communal religious practice. Religious providers mastered this with sometimes more, sometimes less virtuosity. While in Germany the Protestant Church simply distributed sermons online (Jacobs 2020), for example, the Vatican responded with a digital broadcast of elaborate performances of the Easter rituals (Jürgens 2020). Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim institutions also tried to reach their respective adherents with digital provisions (research among others by Susanne Schweikart). Our research has shown that some Buddhist providers, for instance, were even able to reach a wider audience by switching from an offline to an online mode (research by Laura Brandt, Silke Hasper, and Reinhold Bien).

Rituals surrounding burial and grieving could only be performed in very restricted ways due to the ban on public assembly. New, ad-hoc ways of handling these had to be found (research by Kush Depala). Influenced by the coronavirus and the restrictions to social life following it, a tendency towards de-embodiment can be observed in the field of religions on the one hand. On the other, we see an intensification in those religious practices that can be undertaken communally, such as meditations, mindfulness, or yoga exercises where the participants can be connected via image and audio.²

Our article showcases some of the results of our research that struck us as especially important. We present different religious reactions to the global pandemic and their religious provisions for dealing with and overcoming the crisis at the example of the Evangelical movement in the US and religions in China. Particular attention is given to the so-called American exceptionalism and the situation between religion and state in China. Further, this

¹ For more see Kunert 2020; Borup 2020.

² On the digitalization of religion see Campbell 2010, for more results on religions under quarantine see Campbell 2020.

article offers a short introduction into conspiracy theories and approaches attempting to explain the increasing spread of those theories. Finally, our article presents some of our conclusions, particularly on the situation in Germany and on the challenges the pandemic poses for cultural studies.

Evangelicals and Corona (in the United States)

Evangelical Responses to the Pandemic

Evangelical Christianity, meaning the belief in the centrality of salvation through faith alone as well as in the centrality of the Bible and missionary endeavors, makes up about a quarter of the American Christian population, making it the biggest Christian denomination in the United States (Pew Research Center 2014). As varied as American Evangelicalism itself is, the opinions and actions of the community regarding the Coronavirus outbreak vary quite significantly between different churches or public figures, as well as throughout the outbreak. Many evangelical churches stopped in-person services and switched instead to live streaming or other forms of remote fellowshiping. Evangelical organizations have postponed events for several week or months and important public figures like Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, have called on their followers and congregants to follow social distancing and hygiene restrictions as a form of living their ‘pro-life’ doctrine (Kobes Du Mez 2020). A sizeable portion of American evangelicals, however, especially public figures with great social influence, has taken instead to questioning or rejecting the measures taken to limit the virus outbreak or even questioning the severity of the outbreak itself. In the United States, 77% of white evangelicals have expressed their confidence in President Trump’s handling of the virus outbreak, and while according to a recent study 20% of all Americans reported having still been encouraged to continue going to church in person, evangelicals were much more likely to do so, with over 30% of evangelicals continuing to worship in person, compared to just over 10% of non-evangelical Americans doing so (Djupe 2020; Kobes Du Mez 2020; Woodward 2020).

Liberty University, a well-known private evangelical university, did originally follow the guidelines of the state of Virginia to close the school but later encouraged its students to return to the campus after spring break against the advice of public health experts and the Governor of Virginia (Kobes Du Mez 2020). Liberty’s current president also made comments in March 2020 suggesting the possibility of the Coronavirus being a biological weapon designed by North Korea or China, that the public was overreacting, and that political enemies

were using the situation to try and harm US President Donald Trump (Yates Sexton 2020). Similarly, a pastor of a megachurch in Florida was arrested for going against security measures by not closing his church and encouraging his congregants to continue shaking hands as a means of greeting. He denigrated other pastors following the guidelines and cancel their services as losers and questioned their masculinity (Kobes Du Mez 2020; Tallman 2020). Other pastors have called the virus a ‘phantom plague’ or shared other conspiracy theories on the pandemic that are not primarily religious (Tallman 2020; Woodward 2020).

What is interesting, is the recurrent view, that the Coronavirus is vulnerable to Christian faith and practice. When pastor Jonathan Shuttlesworth publicly opined that the virus could not be spread via holy water, he motivated his view by claiming that holy water was *by definition* safe and choosing to not believe in this would negate a person’s whole faith in an almighty God (Tallman 2020). Preacher Guillermo Maldonado publicly stated that God would not let his faithful contract COVID-19 in church buildings (Tallman 2020). Other evangelical leaders of the charismatic variety claimed that, by having god work through them, they were able to cure believers of the Coronavirus. In the case of pastor Tony Spell of Louisiana this served to justify bussing over 1,800 people to one of his Sunday morning services, whom he told that if they were to contract the virus, he would heal them (Tallman 2020; Woodward 2020). And the televangelist Kenneth Copeland has published several videos of himself ‘casting down’ the virus and destroying it by invoking Jesus Christ and god (Kenneth Copeland Ministries 2020).

Faith over Fear: Interpretation of the Virus

With the Coronavirus outbreak beginning in the United States shortly before the Easter weeks, the holiest Christian holiday, the possibility of being unable to congregate in church during this time presented a threat to a Christian community that so heavily builds itself on both unwavering individual faith and the religious community of the congregations. From this perspective ‘faith over fear’ means not letting the fear for one’s health or life win out over one’s faith in the might and goodwill of god (Tallman 2020). In line with a more general evangelical belief in the constant presence of a satanic threat to Christianity and Christians, the Coronavirus is interpreted as vaguely or not so vaguely satanic and ‘evil’ in the Christian sense. It loses the natural origins that can be understood and (hopefully) combatted by science and instead are often discussed with religious rhetoric that makes it seem almost demonic. The perception is that where people stop worshipping in church and completely change up their daily lives out of fear for the Coronavirus, the devil thrives (Tallman 2020). Somewhat

similarly, ‘faith over fear’ can also be one explanation for beliefs concerning COVID-19 being impotent in churches. Belief in the all-might of god, a special personal conversion through the faith, and a potentially literal reading of the bible almost necessitate a belief that God can and will supernaturally protect his faithful and his churches from a dangerous ‘plague’ (Tallman 2020). A different interpretation of the virus, mostly carried by fringe groups of apocalyptic Christians, is as that of a biblical plague, possibly heralding the beginning of the end-times. This is mostly based on passages in Revelations, which refer to seven ‘last plagues’ occurring at the beginning of the biblical end. For evangelicals who in many instances believe in end-times rapture this may be a positive thing; as ‘true believers’ they believe themselves to be saved from all the suffering that is sure to follow. The Coronavirus-as-end-times believers seem to be a smaller number, though.

Evangelicals and the Government's Response

At the same time, it is also no coincidence, that evangelical criticism against the Coronavirus measures often includes positive reference to the federal government’s pandemic response, negative reference towards alleged attempts to use the virus to politically harm the president or both. Since the mid-20th century a more extreme form of American exceptionalism – the belief that the United States is unique, exceptional, and incomparable to other nations – has become not only prominent in American public culture but also became a fixture in churches and sermons (Yates Sexton 2020). This new outlook on American exceptionalism worships power, hyper-capitalism, and white Protestant culture. It has also led to the perception that America’s enemies are inherently evil (in the Christian sense) and that the evil opposing America is also working through secular media and culture (Yates Sexton 2020). Over time evangelical Christianity has merged with more secular worship of wealth and power, explaining the rise of prosperity gospel preachers and ideas in Evangelicalism since the 1980s. Also in the 80s, Evangelicalism became closely entwined with Ronald Reagan’s brand of Republican politics. Reagan was lauded as a truly Christian president because he embraced the support of the religious right and referred to the country as a ‘divine plan’ for people who loved freedom. Embracing Reagan for his religious conservative stance meant also that American evangelicals embraced Reagan’s economic policies that prioritized corporate profits over worker welfare. Legitimizing this view of the economy from a religious standpoint has led to the establishment of the view that poverty was a symbol of godlessness and wealth and power were signs of god’s favor (Yates Sexton 2020).

Parallel to this development, the 1970s saw the rise of evangelical ministries like for example Focus on the Family as reactions to what was perceived to be feminism destroying masculine leadership. They propagated 'traditional gender roles' with a particular focus on returning to 'traditional God-given masculinity'. In this vein, crassness or recklessness were perceived to be examples of god-given manliness (Kobes Du Mez 2020). Following this, scholars are not surprised that Donald Trump as a president appeals to this community, with him being both the poster child for god-given wealth and power as well as god-given masculinity via his public conduct. With how interwoven evangelical religion and politics have become in the United States and how much of their worldview hinges on the success of the president as the poster child of many of the current cultural evangelical talking points, it is not surprising that he has become glorified to an almost religious level (Brockman 2020; Kobes Du Mez 2020; Yates Sexton 2020). As such it must also be understood how and why so many of the prominent evangelical figures support Trump's Coronavirus measures, question the measures of other (local) leaders, and downplay the seriousness of the pandemic.

Similarly, varying responses to the Corona outbreak can also be observed in other religious communities. In Islam, for example, most Muslim communities support and follow the specific national health and hygiene guidelines of their countries, but there are also reports of Iranian clerics breaking hygiene regulations and attempting to heal patients by letting them smell tinctures known as 'the perfume of the prophet' (Aslan 2020; Fazeli 2020).

All in all, it can be noted that American evangelicals are much more likely to disregard state-appointed Coronavirus measures and support the fast reopening of society advocated by President Trump than other religious groups in the United States. This is mostly grounded in an overarching belief in the protective and healing all-might of god and the evangelical faith, as well as in the historical intertwining of American Evangelicalism with the capitalist Prosperity Gospel and conservative Republican politics. While Evangelicals take up a large part of American public opinion-making, the influence levels of religious communities in the public and political spheres vary quite a lot between different countries; not only during the Corona pandemic. Therefore, Merijn ter Haar's insight into the current handling of the pandemic by religious groups in China provides quite a different picture of the situation in the United States.

Religion and Corona in China

Religion and Civil Society in a State of Crisis

In China, we have seen some of the same reactions to the corona crisis by religious communities as we have seen in other countries. For example, there has been an increase in digital offers after the closing of religious sites. Temples would still be functioning behind closed doors under strict government supervision, performing rituals, and offering incense or candles for people who request these services through WeChat, China's major chatting, and social media application (Jones, 2020). Furthermore, to avoid crowds during the Qingming festival 清明節 on the 4th of April, a day when people visit graveyards to clean the graves of dead relatives and leave offerings for their relatives' spirits, this year cemeteries limited the number of people allowed in. However, Alex Linder of the *Shanghaiist* reported how some cemeteries offered services online where workers at the cemetery would perform the rites in one's stead, providing photos, videos, or even a live stream if requested (Linder, 2020). Religious organizations have also made donations to support the fight against the virus, as described for example by Ian Johnson (Johnson, 2020).

However, one important aspect which seems to be different from what we have seen in many other countries, is the absence of Chinese religious organizations in public debates on the crisis, due to the somewhat complicated relationship between the Chinese government and the "field of religion" in China. Governments all over the world have seen themselves forced to take strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus, prohibiting gatherings, implementing lockdown or social distancing measures, or even collecting data on people's movements. This has sparked public debates on the extent of the measures and the amount of power over our freedom that should be held the government both during and after the crisis. Some of the voices in these debates come from religious actors. As Borsch for example describes above, some Evangelical spokesmen in the United States have argued that churches are safe from the virus, and in Germany too some churches have protested the closing of religious sites. Such public debates are signs of an active civil society, an important force in society which works to check the government. On the other hand, during this crisis, resistant forces have at times furthered the spread of the virus, as in the case of the Christian organization Shincheonji in Korea at the outset of the corona crisis there or a Russian German evangelical church more recently in Bremen.

Chinese State Support of Religion

The Chinese government has generally been wary of forces that threaten their power, and it is very much aware of the potential of religious organizations in shaping people's worldviews and in mobilizing large groups of people. Chinese historiography tells of many instances of religiously inspired uprisings, although whether religious motivations played a role in driving the uprisings is up for debate. Religious ideas present beliefs or value systems that may end up conflicting with the intentions of the state. Religions, in their role as socially influential forces, are thus potential rivals of the state. "Religions" are of course not actors by themselves, but I here use the word to cover any religious actors and organizations, as well as texts and other expressions of religious ideas, which can have agency in the sense that they may inspire certain ideas and can thus be important factors in shaping society. One could speak of a distributed agency between a text or idea and its interpreter, as the first carries forth certain ideas or potentials for interpretation that inspire the reader, while the interpreter of the text also has agency in interpreting the text in the way they choose to. Authoritative religious texts or ideas can thus also challenge state authority in the sense that they provide sources of authority to non-state actors.

Many believed the Cultural Revolution in the second half the 1960s and beginning of the '70s had permanently wiped out religious practice in China, but after the government's stance towards religions became more lenient again in the '80s, we have seen a huge revival of religious practices. It is now also clear that even in this period religious activity continued underground or in the countryside as well. The Chinese government currently officially recognizes five religions in China, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Each of these five recognized religions is represented by a national organization (or two in the case of Protestantism) which branches out to the local level and which was in turn overseen by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (国家宗教事务局), but since 2018 this department has been absorbed into the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中共中央统一战线工作部). In this way, all officially recognized religious organizations are placed in a national network under the supervision of the state. Of course, this does not mean the state controls all activities of these organizations, but it works to keep an eye on their activities and it both practically and symbolically places religious ideologies below state ideology. As for religious practices that are not officially recognized, they are often tolerated as long as they remain small and "not

threatening” and some have even found recognition as, for example, cultural heritage. The government’s grip on religion seems to be tightening again in recent years and the corona crisis may have accelerated this trend.

Outlook

Like most countries, in China too religious sites were closed to avoid spreading the virus, and all forms of gatherings were prohibited. But in the articles published by the United Front Work Department and the national organizations presiding over the five recognized religions, we can see shimmering through the wariness of the Chinese government of narratives that might undermine the efforts of the government. Articles call on religious actors to help the Communist Party fight the virus, stressing the responsibility of religious leaders in their role of moral educators to properly inform the public, and stressing time and again the importance of following instructions of the government. The narrative of religions working together with the Communist Party is not new and official regulations of religious affairs also talk about how religions should play a role in maintaining social stability, uphold and teach socialist values, and keep the national unity (the last likely stressed mostly Tibet and Xinjiang in mind). (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan, 2017)

Now, how exactly these policies and announcements are received at the ground level is hard to tell from here. The national religious associations and the United Front Work Department have published many articles praising specific temples and religious communities for their actions, putting them forward as exemplars, but of course, these articles provide a very one-sided view and are filled with propaganda. If there has been any protest against the measures implemented by the government, like people protesting the closing of religious sites, these would not be reported on. I doubt any religious organizations would publicly voice protest since they are aware of the wariness of the Chinese government and are unlikely to risk their hard-won freedom. The state of civil society in China is a matter of much debate, and while some have previously argued for the growth of civil society, the issue has become even more complex with state control tightening again in recent years. Thus, while we do see religious and non-religious organizations providing support in fighting the virus, for example through donations, organizations tend not to get involved in politics. However, despite censorship, there has been a lot of criticism by individuals towards the late response of the government, and the initial cover-up of the outbreak, and dissatisfaction over increased censorship has once again heated debates on the topic of freedom of expression.

Conspiracy Theories and Corona

What's at Stake?

Whether it is 5G, Bill Gates, or the Jews – in times of Corona they are all accused of being linked to the creation or spread of the coronavirus. Such news continued to spread around the world in recent weeks with such frequency and speed that the Director-General of the WHO warned not only of the corona pandemic but also of an "infodemic" (World Health Organization 2020) which is threatening the world. Boosted by social media, conspiracy theories are shared rapidly during the Corona crisis and they are very persistent. However, conspiracy narratives are anything but new phenomena. Already in the Middle Ages and the times of the Black Death, Jews were accused of well poisoning. And even today such ideas meet with approval. Accusations against Jews or the State of Israel are still part of many conspiracy theories, however, it is far from being the only theory currently in circulation.

The results of the Mitte Study 2019 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung shows that a large part of German society was susceptible to conspiracy theories even before Corona: 45% of the respondents strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that secret organizations have a great influence on political decisions. The researchers thus classify them as conspiracy theorists.³ Furthermore, the survey looked at the attitudes of the respondents towards democracy and violence and found that within the cohort of the conspiracy theorists, distrust of democracy, approval of violence and also the propensity to use violence themselves were significantly higher than among the remaining 55% of the participants (Zick and Berghan 2019). This makes it highly relevant, both socially and scientifically, to take a deeper look at the phenomenon of conspiracy theories.

Defining Conspiracy Theory

Just as the definition of religion, conspiracy theory is a very fuzzy term, difficult to define clearly⁴. Nevertheless, there are specific elements of conspiracy theories that are frequently taken up in the literature and are used in different disciplines like psychology, religious studies, or political science that all provide different perspectives on the topic at hand:

³ The extent to which this definition of a conspiracy theory is supported by the scientific debate or reveals gaps will be discussed in the second paragraph.

⁴ On the discussion about wording within the field of conspiracy theories see e.g. Barkun 2006 and Robertson 2017.

First, lots of conspiracy theories manifest distrust or doubt in the main social narrative (Aupers 2012). Often people think that a secret and evil group controls or is trying to control the political and social order, as it was asked for in the survey presented above. Besides, Barkun (2006) identifies three principles of conspiracy theories: a) nothing happens by accident, b) nothing is as it seems, c) everything is connected. The narrative helps the people to understand why bad things happen to them and what they can do about it. It reduces the complexity of a situation and gives an easy alternative. In general, uncertainty and the lack of control are important drivers for the susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). This explains why the narratives meet with great approval, especially in times of crisis, such as the current Corona crisis: In exceptional times where information on how to deal with the virus has yet to be gathered, simple explanations are tempting for many people.

Robertson writes in one of his articles that “Conspiracy thinking is that which we are not permitted to think” (2017, 3). Therefore, the validity of a conspiracy should not *per se* be part of the analytical interest. It is not the researcher’s (main) concern about whether beliefs are correct or not. Even though some conspiracy thinking clearly can be falsified, other ideas turn out to be correct, for example in the context of the Watergate affair. However, when narratives are proven correct, they are no longer a conspiracy theory. There is nothing that makes a narrative forever a conspiracy; it is nothing that is no longer not permitted to think about (Robertson 2015). The aspect highlighted by Robertson shows that conspiracy theories are also part of the discussion about power and knowledge. Who knows what and why and what does this mean for the dominant power structure?

Some of the presented components of conspiracy theories – the search for control of a (crisis) situation or the question of why a specific event occurs – show similarities to another concept, we have been dealing with in the last weeks: Salutogenesis of Aaron Antonovsky (research by Jürgen Dollmann). Based on the question of what keeps people healthy, the sociologist has developed an approach that emphasizes the importance of the sense of coherence, a cognitive schema that enables people to deal with different mental and physical challenges (1996). Antonovsky’s question about health has indeed increased in times of a pandemic, so while it is still surprising, it is understandable why his factors can be rediscovered in a different context.

Religious Studies and Conspiracy Theories

Which perspectives can Religious studies take when looking at the topic of conspiracy theories? In the literature, there are three possible perspectives on religions and conspiracy theories: Conspiracy theory *in* religion, *about* religion, and *as* religion (Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal 2018; Robertson 2017).

When looking at conspiracy *in* religion(s), religion is conceptualized as a concrete social group and the researcher intends to understand how these groups mobilize conspiracy narratives as part of their theologies. In this context, conspiracy theories are often used to explain failure or why a prophesied event did not come true. As a result, religious leaders demonize anything and everything outside of the religion, especially in the secular sphere. Conspiracy theory *about* religion can originate from other religious actors, from a secular or even anti-religious position. Again, such conspiracy theories tend to focus on a specific religious community or group rather than religion in general. The religious group is marked as the enemy and the members within this group become a homogenous mass to whom certain characteristics or goals are ascribed because of their affiliation. With the perspective of conspiracy theory *as* religion, conceptual similarities between the two categories are considered and their existence, as well as their functions, should be explained. In general terms and very briefly, it is asked whether religion is a conspiracy theory or vice versa, are conspiracy theories religious-like.

These are all aspects that religious studies can deal with because it knows how to identify truth claims and put them in the right context. Focusing on context rather than content helps to maintain an analytical outsider perspective. And it can also help explain the content of conspiracy theories (ibid.).

Corona, Conspiracy Theories and Religion

The different dimensions of research named in the paragraph above are now to be further illustrated by short examples from the current Corona crisis.

1. *In* Religion: Rainey (2020) writes in his article at Religion Dispatches about some religious leaders who are using conspiracy theories. From their point of view, both the origin of the virus and its spread can be traced back to an ungodly way of life: “On the sinister side, predictably, some American pastors blame LGBTQ+ people, abortion, opposition to Trump, or general ungodliness for the pandemic. Other charlatans claim that they can defy social distancing directives because God will protect them with mystical visions or

enchanted handkerchiefs.” This quote sums up how the secular, the ungodliness (e.g. the abortion) is demonized by the pastors and in contrast, the religious (e.g. the enchanted handkerchiefs) is glorified. Similar tendencies can also be found for other religions.

2. *About Religion*: One of the oldest and most common forms of conspiracy about religion is Antisemitism. Statements blame Jewish Capitalism, Zionists, or Jewish Individuals to be responsible for the virus. Since anti-Semitic statements cannot be expressed freely in public anymore, conspiracy theorists use codes to share the myth of a ‘Jewish world conspiracy’. Whether the Rothschild family or George Soros - when people behind the ‘financial elites’ or the ‘New World Order’ are specifically named, Jewish people are attributed a central role (Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus 2017). In this context, conspiracy theory is used as a group marker, to distinguish between the evil Jews and the innocent rest of society.
3. *As Religion*: Conspiracy as religion depends very much on how the two concepts are defined. However, so many of the current conspiracy narratives circulate the role of Bill Gates (e.g. Huddleston Jr. 2020), that it brings up the image of central power, influential enough to control everything and everyone. This is an aspect often named as a central element of religions, too.

Another example is the QAnon movement which has its roots in the US and whose members spread very different thoughts about the Corona situation: There is a discussion about whether Covid-19 was used by China and the American Democratic Party to weaken the economy and thus stop Trump's re-election. For others, the pandemic is merely a cover to act against a secret and harmful network of deep state agents or pedophiles (Argentino 2020). In this case, the lockdown was introduced in order not to jeopardize the liberation of abused children (Huesmann 2020). All in all, the danger of Corona is being strongly questioned and played down by the QAnon supporters. These kinds of explanations for something new and extraordinary that happens can be compared to the enchantment of the secular by religions.

How to deal with conspiracy theories?

All this information raises the question of how to react to conspiracy theories. Advice on how to answer conspiracy theorists is outlined, for example, by the religious scholar Michael

Blume in his new book on “conspiracy myths” (2020). One important point is that supporters of conspiracy theories are usually not convinced by rational arguments, because either they do not believe the traditional academic sources or they benefit from a scientific research process which often cannot produce absolute knowledge but is characterized by assumptions, discussion, readjustment, and further development. Therefore, scientists in the same field of research may achieve different results. Conspiracy theories often pick up on conflicting or already discarded academic positions and thus create the appearance of a scientific character. From this problem, the question can be derived what role science can and should play in the encounter with conspiracy theories. In our discussion, we also talked about faith in science and the role of science journalism. Conspiracy theories are thus not only an interesting field of research in analytical terms, but they can also raise questions about the self-image of science itself.

Conclusion

The refusal of individual Christian congregations to obey the restrictions on public assemblies, as well as the role individual independent Christian congregations played in the spread of the coronavirus, temporarily dominated the headlines of news outlets in Germany. For a while, prominent representatives of conspiracy theories about the coronavirus were given attention there, too. Similar developments can be observed in different European countries. Especially the comparison of the situation with the role of religions in the US shows: The way the majority of citizens in Germany dealt and still deal with the pandemic is not determined by their faith or other attempts to explain the world which are analogous to religion like conspiracy theories. The majority followed the directions of the health secretary and made great sacrifices to avoid fatalities and a further spread of the coronavirus. “The secular public exhibited an extraordinary public spirit,” as the sociologist Eva Illouz writes in her article in *Die Zeit* (Illouz 2020, translation by the authors). Without utilizing religious or spiritual reasoning, people abruptly changed their behavior for the benefit of the community. Eva Illouz calls this experience “a milestone in the self-awareness and identity of secular people.”

Apart from Germany and Europe, a noticeable contrast to the situation in the US is visible in the reaction of religions in China to the coronavirus pandemic. Religious institutions in China seem to have mainly supported the directives of the state and showed almost no divergent or critical stances, probably due to concerns about the overwhelming power of the state. The enormous difference in the religious reactions to and treatments of the pandemic in

three politically influential regions of the world, the US, China, and Europe mirrors the transformation of religions in the societies of the three superpowers. They also pose intriguing questions for further work in religious studies.

Our research on the spread of conspiracy theories leaves a big question mark but also an important task: How to deal with conspiracy theories and the distrust in science? The sheer impenetrable complexity of modern societies as well as the spread and accessibility of the cocktails of opinion and knowledge, which are so typical of conspiracy theories, apparently has led to a new understanding of science. Comparable to the problems of climate catastrophe, misogyny, and global inequality, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed a fundamental crisis of science. Science is not perceived as something which always produces temporary results that can be revised upon self-criticism and new results. Rather, it is seen as a means to formulate irrefutable truths. When these perceived scientific truths prove to be wrong, science as a whole is discredited. Religions possess well-tested rhetoric and techniques to continuously adapt their postulated truths to current developments. Perhaps science has to develop new strategies that stabilize the trust in it despite the tentativeness of its findings.

In some cases, derogatory and polemic stances on conspiracy theorists had a great platform in the media. Among colleagues, friends, and even within one's own family, conflicts arose from different assessments of the theories, the origin of the coronavirus, and the right ways of combatting it. Those trusting the statements of scientific and government institutions clash with those convinced that the coronavirus is merely a hoax, part of a world conspiracy or caused by 5G – and vice versa! Emotions are running high. Both sides react with disbelief, incomprehension, and rejection.

In the private setting as well as in science the pandemic poses a great opportunity to make use of communication techniques that carefully separate the opinions from the people holding them. It must be the aim for conversations about and scientific research on conspiracy theories to not be utilized for demarcation from the Other and upvaluation of the Own. As we know from religious history, it is precisely this dynamic of othering (Dervin 2012) which creates many of the antagonisms leading to conflicts and controversies. Conspiracy theories can be viewed as a useful tool for getting to know what other people think (i.e. Bridle 2019, 219–50). Here, it is the task of scholars to have curiosity and composure, in the private and the public sphere, as a strategy for handling conspiracy theories.

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