

## CHAPTER 11

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Religion in Germany

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### Abstract

Similar to the situation across Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government-imposed restrictions had a profound impact on both individual and collective religious practices and overall religiosity in Germany. As physical gatherings became perilous, religious institutions swiftly adapted by transitioning to digital platforms, offering online religious services, creating virtual memorial pages, and broadcasting ceremonies and funerals live. This unexpected shift forced a re-evaluation of the relationship between the state and religious communities in Germany, demonstrating that religion was not solely a personal matter but also a concern of the state.

The federal structure of Germany meant that COVID-19 restrictions differed across the country, but the historically cooperative relationship between the state and religious groups facilitated compliance with COVID-19 measures. A small number of legal cases were tried in the courts, but in general the restrictions on collective religious life found broad acceptance among major religious authorities. Though protests against restrictions as well as conspiracies and vaccine

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hesitancy occurred, most religious authorities actively supported state regulations and also contributed to public vaccination campaigns.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on public life in Germany, affecting very important aspects of religious life. As soon as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, the state authorities in Germany took measures to limit the spread of the virus, which restricted individual freedoms and in particular religious freedom. This chapter proposes to study the impact of the pandemic on religious practices. It aims at analysing how religious authorities, religious groups or individuals reacted to the restrictions that were placed on religions and religious rituals from mid-March 2020 (in particular the ban on religious services and gatherings). What have been the religious implications of COVID-19 and all the measures implemented by federal and state governments in response to the coronavirus pandemic? What do these reactions tell us about the relationship between state and religious communities and about the role and place of religions in public life and in the daily life of the population? Finally, we will look at how Christian churches and other religious groups dealt with digitalisation regarding their religious practices.

This chapter seeks to contribute to the debate on the consequences of the pandemic for the exercise of religious freedom and for the relation between state and religion in Germany, by analysing the responses of religious authorities and religious communities to COVID-19 restrictions on religious life. These questions will be addressed by drawing on different sources of information such as discourses of religious leaders, press articles from religious as well as secular newspapers, complaints and legal action against state authorities, reports or studies carried out by research institutes (e.g. by the Pew Research Center), and available statistical surveys conducted in Germany during the pandemic's first year in 2020.

## Setting the Context

The Federal Republic of Germany consists of 16 federal states (*Länder*), with a separation of state and religious communities and with a con-

stitutionally secured form of cooperation between political and religious actors at the same time. It is characterised by a significant level of secularisation with marked disparities, especially between East and West. As a preamble, I would like to quote a few figures that make clear the extent to which religious affiliations have changed over the last few decades. The German population had grown to 84.3 million inhabitants by the end of 2022 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Members of the Catholic Church and members of the Protestant Church, respectively, represented 25 per cent and 23 per cent of the population (FOWID 2022). A 2023 IPSOS religion survey found that 20 per cent of Germans identified as Catholic, while 24 per cent identified as Protestant/evangelical. Religious affiliation varies greatly according to the regions, with sharp divides between West and East Germany. A majority of 70–80 per cent in the former GDR say that they have no religion.

The landscape of the Protestant Church is highly diverse, but the major organisation is the EKD (the Evangelical Church in Germany/Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), which is a federation of 21 Lutheran, Calvinist, and United (e.g. Prussian Union) Protestant regional churches and denominations in Germany. For the first time in its history, less than half of the German population is a member of one of the two great historic Christian churches. The share of religiously unaffiliated people has increased significantly in recent years and accounts for 44 per cent of the overall German population. Other Christian denominations (including Baptist communities, the New Apostolic Church, and Pentecostal churches) represent approximately 2 per cent of the population. According to the survey published by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in 2021, the number of Muslims with a migration background from a predominantly Muslim country of origin living in Germany in 2019 represented between 5.3 million and 5.6 million persons, namely around 6.5 per cent, of whom 74 per cent are Sunni, 8 per cent Alevi, 4 per cent Shia, 1 per cent Ahmadi, and 1 per cent other affiliations such as Sufis.<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the Jewish population vary widely, but the number of Jews is estimated at 225,000, when taking into account Jews who do not belong to a specific Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> According to the NGO Religious Studies Media and Information Service (REMID),<sup>3</sup> in Germany in 2021 there were 270,000 Buddhists, 167,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, 100,000 Hindus, 100,000 Yezidis, 40,000 members of the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and 10,000 to 15,000 Sikhs.

In addition to the Catholic and Protestant churches, a number of religious communities (such as Jewish communities, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Baptist churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses since 2006, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat since 2013) enjoy the status of corporation under public law, which is granted throughout the *Länder*.<sup>4</sup> This status refers to the historic role played by Christian churches in public life in Germany, where they cooperated with the state from the very beginnings of the Weimar Republic. In addition to the possibility of levying taxes and managing cemeteries, this status still guarantees the Christian churches recognition of their mission of public and social utility, which manifests itself through a whole network of services in the medical and social fields, such as nurseries, pre-schools, retirement homes, and centres for people with disabilities.

## Legal Aspects

In the initial absence of a vaccine or antiviral, the pandemic exacerbated feelings of insecurity; it was unclear how COVID-19 was transmitted and the rapid spread of the virus overloaded the German health system. Following consultations with the minister-presidents (*Ministerpräsidenten*) of the *Länder* by mid-March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic the federal government adopted a wide range of measures aimed at slowing the spread of the virus as much as possible and at saving time with regard to the production of medicines and the development of vaccines against the SARS-CoV-2 infection. The radical political restrictions were unprecedented in Germany, as in most Western liberal democracies. The federal structure of Germany was important for the reaction to COVID-19. The federal health minister was authorised only to issue recommendations and coordinate member states. The *Länder* retained their own responsibilities and powers and were able to exercise an effective right of veto.

The agreement between the federal government and governments of the regional states concluded on 16 March 2020, determined nationwide recommendations to regulate COVID-19, including that no certificate was required to go to work, to shop, to walk, to go to the doctor, or to play sport. Parks remained open, and pedestrians had to respect

the 1.5m distance in public spaces. Supermarkets and essential shops also remained open, subject to specific rules. The agreement provided in addition for the closure of many businesses and for the prohibition of association meetings. This meant that also gatherings by religious communities were closed down, which was particularly painful for many believers.

In a nationwide televised address delivered on 18 March 2020, after having instituted restrictive measures, Chancellor Angela Merkel asked German citizens to recognise the gravity posed by the coronavirus and to do their part in helping to slow down its spread. She called on her compatriots' sense of civic duty and responsibility, described the fight against the virus as 'Germany's greatest challenge since the end of World War II', even larger than German reunification, and appealed for national unity:

I know how invasive the closures that the Federation and the Länder have agreed to are in our lives, and also in terms of how we see ourselves as a democracy. These are restrictions, the likes of which the Federal Republic has never seen before.

Allow me to assure you that, for someone like me, for whom the freedom of travel and the freedom of movement were a hard-fought right, such restrictions can only be justified if they are absolutely imperative. These should never be put in place lightly in a democracy and should only be temporary. But they are vital at the moment in order to save lives. (Merkel 2020)

Merkel's speech was intended to build the legitimacy of the measures implemented against COVID-19 that infringed on individual freedoms (Siess and Amossy 2022). Having lived under East Germany's communist regime, Merkel – a pastor's daughter and herself a regular churchgoer – was well aware of the efforts required of her fellow citizens. A country-wide ban was in place from mid-March to early May 2020. There was a wide agreement on measures to fight the pandemic throughout all political parties except for the far-right populist political party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which often criticised governmental decisions. Yet each federal state could implement its own rules and, after the churches reopened, social distancing measures at church services, determined by local governments and local church authorities, would differ. Less densely populated rural states like

Saxony-Anhalt or Mecklenburg Western Pomerania argued against the most draconian measures (Hallam 2021).

From 22 March 2020, the 16 *Länder* then took specific measures adapted to their own situations, which consisted of contact and movement restrictions including a ban on social, cultural, and religious events and life. The scientific authorities and the federal government regarded religion as an additional risk in the face of COVID-19. From approximately mid-March to the end of April 2020, religious services in churches, synagogues, mosques, or other religious communities were not allowed. In the spring of 2020, most of the measures implemented to curb transmission of the COVID-19 virus affected collective religious life. Thomas Mertens, a lead virologist at Germany's pandemic advisory Robert Koch Institute, said: 'Infection can only be excluded in this space [a church] when religious services do not take place' (DW 2020). All the restrictions on religion (closure of religious buildings, prohibition of religious celebrations or rituals) represented a sudden and unprecedented change in religious life. Many religious practices such as handholding, sharing the communion in Christian churches, and touching or kissing religious objects were prohibited. Weddings and gatherings of more than ten people were banned; funerals were allowed in the open air and limited to 30 participants (RBB 2020) with the minimum distance of 1.5m.

### *Religious Actors Faced with the COVID-19 Pandemic and Contact Restrictions*

Although Merkel eliminated any sign of dissension in her speech on 18 March 2020, some religious actors denounced the lack of consultation with public authorities regarding measures against COVID-19, perceived as an infringement of religious freedom. On 22 March 2020, Chancellor Merkel and the minister-presidents of the 16 federal states decided the governments would ask churches to extend the prohibition of religious gatherings to the Easter celebrations and to cancel in-person Easter services on 4 April, as part of COVID-19 restrictions during a five-day 'quiet period'. They did not consult church leaders or government advisers on religious affairs before announcing the decision. On 24 March, following strong protests by the Catholic Church, the EKD, and business leaders, the federal government withdrew the plan for the 'quiet period'. State authorities eventually negotiated

restrictions with representatives of major churches and religious communities. The heads of *Länder* governments, however, still encouraged churches to avoid in-person Easter services.

At the end of April 2020, state authorities allowed religious services to resume their activities on 4 May, but worshippers had to maintain a distance of 1.5m. Germany's 30,000 mosques and prayer rooms were allowed to open during the month of Ramadan. Churches and other religious buildings could reopen without singing. Some religious leaders distanced themselves from government policies. Protests came from the German Bishops' Conference: 'If the distance rules are respected, there is no reason why singing should be refrained from altogether' (Connolly 2020). The authorities in the Catholic Church were of the opinion that quiet singing and praying should be possible and deplored that places of worship were not considered as such a political priority, despite pleas from religious leaders that spiritual life was as important for believers as shopping, if not more so. These examples reveal the resistance of religious actors to government policies and the limits of compliance with measures affecting religious freedom.

The beginning of the pandemic was marked by a few appeals to the courts concerning the ban on freedom of assembly or freedom of religion, but few were successful. Religious individuals and organisations turned to the Federal Constitutional Court to file a complaint against coronavirus-related measures that banned church services. On 7 April 2020, Berlin's administrative court rejected an emergency application from Catholics who wanted a service for 50 people (DW 2020). On 10 April 2020, the German Federal Constitutional Court, the highest court in Germany, rejected a complaint filed by a Catholic from the state of Hesse (1 BvQ 28/20), who claimed that COVID-19 related measures were disproportionate and significantly affected his freedom of religion. After the Higher Administrative Court of Hesse rejected his complaint, the judges in Karlsruhe ruled that these restrictions were legitimate to prevent the risk of contagion in religious gatherings, which would increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the particular circumstances of the pandemic. In April 2020, the EKD argued that church funerals were not private events and should therefore be exempted from the 30-person attendance limit decided by the COVID-19 regulations. In May 2020, the Stuttgart Administrative Court ruled in favour of the EKD in Wuerttemberg, declaring that the federal government's COVID-19 restrictions for areas with high

infection rates did not apply to church funerals. The Administrative Court found that the federal regulation constituted an infringement on religious freedom.

Before lockdown measures were progressively relaxed in religious communities, in April 2020 an Islamic association in the federal state of Lower Saxony challenged an order forbidding any religious gatherings in churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious places. While the administrative tribunal rejected the claim, the case was referred to the Federal Constitutional Court to examine the legality of suspending freedom of worship and of banning Friday prayers during Ramadan as consequence of general regulations. In a ruling published on 29 April 2020, the Federal Constitutional Court (1 BvQ 44/20) overruled the relevant regulation, which did not allow exceptions to be granted in individual cases. The measure was considered disproportionate, given that it did not admit any derogation and it gave different treatment to sales outlets and stores, which were allowed to stay open to the public. The Federal Constitutional Court granted relief, founding that the ban on meeting in churches, mosques, and synagogues – as well as by other religious communities – was temporarily suspended, especially in the remaining weeks of the fasting month of Ramadan. The proportionality principle (*Verhältnismässigkeitsprinzip*) lay at the core of the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court.

### *Protest by Minority Religious Groups towards Restrictions on Religion*

While most religious authorities initially supported the state regulations that limited the religious freedom of individuals and religious communities, there was mistrust and hostility towards public health rules related to the COVID-19 pandemic by a few minority religious groups (Yendell, Hidalgo, and Hillenbrand 2021). This was the case of the Free Churches in North Rhine-Westphalia and the Adventists in Baden-Württemberg. Yendell, Hidalgo, and Hillenbrand show in their study that ‘only the radical and fundamentalist branches of various faiths, which are often fundamentally closed to scientific knowledge and tend to place the authority of religion above all other domains’ represented a lasting risk factor for the spread of the COVID-19 (Yendell, Hidalgo, and Hillenbrand 2021, 9). Some minority religious communities appealed to resist extended prohibitions on religious



worship, declaring that governments could better achieve their objectives by treating religious needs as essential. Outbreaks of COVID-19 were discovered among Evangelical Baptist Christians in Frankfurt am Main and Bremerhaven, in the environment of Romanian Pentecostal churches in Berlin Neukölln, Magdeburg, and Sinsheim, and in a Mennonite church in Euskirchen, and in small Free Churches in Ulm and Karlsruhe.

## Sociological Aspects

The measures and restrictions implemented by the federal government and by the heads of *Länder* governments to contain the pandemic greatly affected religious practices. They curtailed individuals' freedom of action along with a great number of fundamental rights including freedom of religion, which is enshrined in Article 4 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany:

Freedom of faith and of conscience, and freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed, shall be inviolable. The undisturbed practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No person shall be compelled against his conscience to render military service.

The wording of Article 4 does not contain a legal reservation. This characteristic distinguishes freedom of religion from other fundamental rights. In addition, Article 8 of the Basic Law provides for the right to assemble: '8(1) All Germans shall have the right to assemble peacefully and unarmed without prior notification or permission. (2) In the case of outdoor assemblies, this right may be restricted by or pursuant to a law' (Basic Law 2022). The prohibition of religious gatherings raised legal problems, concerning both freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. All German federal states banned any meetings in churches, mosques, synagogues, etc.

There was no major opposition to measures restricting freedoms from the main religious authorities, which remained broadly in step with political authorities, nor were there any protests from the majority of the faithful.

During the first lockdown, the main religious authorities generally complied with the government decisions to promote pandemic health measures and distinguished themselves as examples of civic sense. Faced with the multiplication of outbreaks and the risk of spread,

access to places of worship or pilgrimage was therefore quickly regulated, even banned in most *Länder*. From 13 March 2020, a week before Merkel's speech mentioned above, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), Germany's largest Islamic federation, closed its 900 mosques for the Friday prayer and other gatherings. In the following days, other mosques or Islamic federations did the same. It was the first religious institution in Germany to take such a drastic measure, and this revealed significant cooperation by Islamic authorities during the first COVID-19 wave. Emmerich concluded in a study on 'Islamic Organisations Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany' that 'top-down and preemptive mosque closures demonstrated constitutional loyalty' and that the pandemic allowed Islamic organisations 'to adapt to external expectations and thereby build a more positive public image of Islam in Germany' (Emmerich 2021).

Leaders of Catholic and Protestant churches urged faithful to show responsibility and to stay in isolation. The Catholic bishop Rudolf Voderholzer asked dissenters if they 'really wanted to boost the virus's spread'. The Lutheran Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chair of the EKD, said the 'guiding principle was saving lives by slowing infection' (DW 2020). The compliance of religious leaders with government policies indicated a high degree of trust in the federal government. Several regional churches (*Landeskirchen*) from the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) recommended – following the government's call to restrict social contact – that religious services be suspended until further notice. In its briefing paper of 17 April 2020, the German Bishops' Conference admitted that the churches consented to the prohibition of religious assemblies.<sup>5</sup> After some discussions, religious services were again authorised from the end of April 2020, albeit with restrictions and subject to the application of hygiene rules.

There were disparities in the way the governments of the German federal states responded to the pandemic. Some *Länder* imposed stringent measures that required the closure of churches or religious places; others allowed churches to remain open. For example, Berlin's regulation did not contain explicit rules for religious services but exempted them from the maximum numbers regarding public events. Minister-President Armin Laschet, the head of government of North Rhine-Westphalia, declared that churches and religious communities had submitted comprehensive and precise protection plans, and announced that it would conditionally allow public religious services

again from the beginning of May 2020. In Brandenburg, religious gatherings (in churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious spaces) with a maximum of 50 participants were once again possible from the beginning of May 2020. Organisers had to ensure that hygiene standards were respected. Brandenburg thus aligned itself with the regulations in Berlin, where religious services were permitted from 4 May 2020. In Bavaria, there were no maximum numbers for attendees but people were obliged to maintain physical distance and wear masks, and congregational singing was forbidden.

The relation between major religious groups and the state during COVID-19 pandemic can be described as one of collaboration. The majority of religious leaders facilitated the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Religious groups largely supported the restrictions. A representative survey by the INSA Consulere polling institute (Wakonigg 2020), commissioned by the Catholic weekly *Die Tagespost* and carried out between 30 October and 2 November among 2,035 adults, produced the following results: 62 per cent of those questioned were opposed to church services remaining exempt in principle from lockdown measures, 20 per cent were in favour, and 13 per cent had no opinion on the subject. That is, the majority of the population was opposed to a derogation for religious services. The ban on religious gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic was well accepted by most religious groups, in particular among Catholics and Protestants: 60 per cent of Catholics and 62 per cent of Protestants surveyed were opposed to exemptions for religious services during the first lockdown, and only 25 per cent of Catholics and 21 per cent of Protestants were in favour. Interestingly, the approval rate among Free Church adherents was different: only 43 per cent were against exemptions for religious services during the lockdown, while 40 per cent were in favour.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, collective religious life (attendance at religious services, major religious holidays, pilgrimages, etc.) was severely affected by the contact restrictions. Changes in religious behaviour – regarding funerals, commemorations, marriages, baptisms etc. – could be observed (in churches, mosques, synagogues, or other places of worship). Some religious practices (ritual gestures, dietary practices, etc.) had to be modified because of the pandemic. Religious leaders supported public health measures such as mask-wearing, handwashing, and social distancing, and encouraged

believers to stay and worship at home and promoted online religious services. They tried to find answers to the question of how to maintain religious practices in times of the pandemic – and, therefore, faced the question of digitalisation of religion. Religious organisations, groups, and institutions had to rethink their services and practices. Almost overnight, the contact restrictions led to a digitalisation of religious practices. Most religious communities found digital alternative offers to traditional services to deal with contact restrictions imposed by the state. A large number of religious communities decided to offer services by videoconference (Hörsch 2020; Neumaier 2023). Religious services and prayers were offered in digital form, on websites or on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. Hörsch analysed how the Protestant Church, a majority religious organisation, dealt with digitisation regarding its religious practice.

The question arises as to what extent the pandemic influenced people's religiosity. Did religiosity increase or decrease during the pandemic? According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 5 per cent of Germany stated that their religiosity increased during the first wave of the pandemic. This is low compared to France and the UK, where 10 per cent ticked this option, but less than Sweden and Denmark, where only 2 to 3 per cent found that their religious engagement had increased (Pew Research Center 2021). Have the changes brought about by the pandemic lasted or have they been temporary? Kanol and Michalowski question demand-oriented secularisation theories, according to which religiosity is expected to increase when insecurity is heightened or intensified, as in the case of a new global pandemic (Kanol and Michalowski 2023). They answer the question of how long the observed increase in religiosity in Germany might last, by questioning the social sciences analysis by Norris and Inglehart (2004), who maintain that individuals who have grown up in contexts marked by high existential insecurity are inclined to be more religious than individuals who have grown up and lived in a more secure environment. By taking into account the degree of secularisation in Germany, Kanol and Michalowski argue that the changes brought about by the pandemic situation have been temporary, because the COVID-19 pandemic has affected religiosity in a highly secularised country such as Germany, especially in the former GDR, where a large part of the population grew up without religious socialisation. They suggest that the religious increase they observed in Germany during the pandemic

will not be sustained, seeing that many people do not possess religious capital. Another study done during the second wave of infection and lockdown appears to support this conclusion. Based on surveys from 4,693 participants, Büssing, Baumann, and Surzykiewicz find that trust in a higher power, as well as praying and meditation, decreased among both Catholics and Protestants, and among both younger and older persons (Büssing, Baumann, and Surzykiewicz 2022).

From July to December 2020, an extensive non-representative online study was carried out as part of the 'Religion and Politics: Dynamics of Tradition and Innovation' Cluster of Excellence at the University of Münster, involving 2,032 people. Questions were asked about statements such as 'There are evil, hidden forces behind the corona pandemic', 'This pandemic is above all a divine punishment in the face of human sinfulness', and 'Above all, I trust in science and technology to overcome the coronavirus pandemic'. The first question measured conspiracy theories, the second respondents' dualistic-religious attitudes, and the third their secular-optimistic outlooks. The three interpretation patterns were sufficiently different to be able to identify specific patterns. The result indicated an affiliation between conspiracy beliefs and a lower level of formal education and right-leaning political outlook, as well as anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic attitudes. Age and gender did not play a role (Hillenbrand and Pollack 2021).

A study revealed that the former German Democratic Republic and Federal Republic of Germany had great differences in terms of vaccination against COVID-19. It highlighted a 'causal relationship between exposure to past Communist regimes and vaccination decision against COVID-19' and showed that the legacy of communism 'decreased the probability of getting the COVID-19 vaccine by 8 percentage points for those born in East Germany' (Pronkina et al. 2023). Another study associated a growth in conspiracy theories with vaccine hesitancy and a wave of protests against government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, the core of this, the so-called Querdenker Movement, is a highly heterogeneous alliance that, as Hillenbrand and Pollack suggest, includes right-wing extremists but also encompasses 'ordinary citizens, hippies, esotericists [and] opponents of conventional medicine' (Pickel et al. 2022, 177). Religion plays a role in this, but the relation between religion and a conspiracy mentality is both complex and ambivalent. Religiosity thus neither makes people more susceptible nor immunises people against the

conspiracy thinking, but it may become an ally to conspiracy theories if associated with religious bigotry or literalist interpretations (Pickel et al. 2022, 188). Mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches in contrast both warned against fake news and supported health authorities in disseminating the COVID-19 vaccination (Pickel et al. 2022, 177). The Pew Research Center did in fact categorise Germany, along with Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Sweden, as one of the European countries in which the government supported or collaborated with religious groups to promote COVID-19 public health measures among faith communities (Pew Research Center 2022, 104), as well as among the 19 European countries in which religious leaders or groups engaged in efforts to promote COVID-19 public health measures (Pew Research Center 2022, 105). Interestingly, the Pew Research Center also categorised Germany as a country in which the so-called social hostility index declined in the first year of the pandemic, though it must be stressed that it remained in the high category (Pew Research Center 2022, 42).

## Conclusion

COVID-19 and the subsequent government restrictions had a large impact on individual and collective religious practice and religiosity. Online religious services were organised on digital platforms, online memorial pages were created, and live broadcasts of ceremonies and funerals were offered. The pandemic was an analyser of relationships between state and religious communities in the German secular society. It showed the overall trust of religious leaders in the government and revealed the extent to which religion and religious practices were not just an individual matter but also a matter of state. The fruitful institutional historic relationship between state and religious groups facilitated the believers' adherence to governmental COVID-19 measures and ensured a collaboration between religious and political actors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the measures to contain the coronavirus were not set down in a contract that would be legally binding for both parties, they were broadly accepted by the main religious authorities. Most of the time, state and religious communities collaborated and coordinated their measures to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect the population, albeit with a few limitations. Generally speaking,

the state's ability to manage COVID-19 was not challenged by leading religious authorities. The responses of the main religious communities to the restrictions on religion revealed that they were equally supportive of state regulations that limited religious freedom. Most religious authorities helped public authorities with the vaccination campaigns, too.

## Notes

- 1 The remaining 12 per cent of Muslims said they were not affiliated with a Muslim group or were unwilling to disclose an affiliation.
- 2 The Jewish population affiliated to a Jewish community represents 0.1 per cent (94,700) of the population.
- 3 All of REMID's estimates are based on members who had registered with a religious group: <https://www.remid.de/>.
- 4 This status presupposes that the religious group concerned can present guarantees of stability and a lasting grouping, i.e. a certain length of existence, and can in principle attest that the number of its members represents at least one thousandth of the population of the *Land*. Another criterion is loyalty to the law (*Rechtstreue*).
- 5 Regarding the relaxation phase, the German Bishops' Conference noted its position in a document designed as a basis for a discussion with the Federal Ministry of the Interior on 17 April 2020 (German Bishop's Conference 2020).

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