

CHAPTER 8

Impact of COVID-19 on Religions in Spain

Sociological Reflections on Religious Freedom and Practices

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Abstract

On 14 March 2020, the Spanish government declared a ‘state of alarm’ through Royal Decree 463/2020 to manage the health crisis derived from COVID-19. This happened only three days after the World Health Organization rated the public health situation as a pandemic. From that point on, different actions taken by the Spanish authorities directly affected religious freedom and worship activities. This chapter analyses how the legal situation impacted religious communities during the evolution of the pandemic in Spain. Moreover, it offers sociological reflections on the role of religious communities in legal and health care decisions and the specificities of religion–state relations. The absence of close communication between religious communities and the government led to paradoxical situations that impacted

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religious freedom. However, religious institutions had an active role in following measures and collaborated with the health authorities. This chapter also explores the impact that COVID-19 had on religious observation and the new challenges posed in ways of 'lived religion'. Among other things, the new situation raised awareness of issues such as the use of digital platforms and the participation of young people.

Introduction

On 14 March 2020 the Spanish government declared a 'state of alarm' through Royal Decree 463/2020 to manage the health crisis derived from COVID-19. This happened only three days after the World Health Organization rated the public health situation as a pandemic. Initially, the measures taken by the Spanish government were only for 15 days, but they were extended six times. Consequently, the 'state of alarm' status was in force until 21 June 2020. After this, different royal decrees were published that established de-escalation phases until April 2022. From April 2022 the only health restriction in Spain was the use of face masks on public transport and health care buildings such as hospitals. These measures had a direct impact on religious issues due to restrictions in movement, limitations of capacity during worship activities, and the need to adapt places of worship.

This chapter briefly presents the legal situation that impacted religious communities during the evolution of the pandemic. Moreover, it offers sociological reflections on the role of religious communities in legal and health care decisions and the specificities of religion–state relations. One of the main aspects to highlight is that, while religious institutions were not consulted by the government about legal requirements, the congregations became very active in promoting the established regulations. However, the absence of close communication led to paradoxical and ambiguous situations regarding religious activities. This chapter also explores the impact that COVID-19 had on religious observation and the new challenges posed in ways of 'lived religion' (McGuire 2008). Among other things, the new situation raised awareness of issues such as the use of digital platforms and the participation of young people. All of this has become an emerging topic of interest for researchers and agencies, which have published several reports and surveys on the case of Spain (e.g. CIS 2021; Griera et al. 2022; Gutierrez del Moral 2021; ORPS 2022; Rossell 2022). While the existing

results allow us to reflect on the main consequences and challenges that COVID-19 posed at different levels, the complexity of the situation and the constant rapid changes that occurred call for further studies to determine whether the effects of the pandemic have been temporary or will have a long-lasting impact.

Setting the Context

The religious landscape in Spain is characterised by the historical and traditional importance of the Catholic Church. After a long history of Catholicism as the state religion, the church–state relationship changed after the death of General Franco and the start of democracy (Ibán 2019). In 1978, the Spanish Constitution declared the country non-confessional and in 1980 a Religious Freedom Act was passed. After this, religious diversity has grown, with an emerging presence of religious minorities such as evangelicals, Muslims, and Jews (Albert-Blanco and Astor 2022; Astor and Griera 2016). According to the most recent survey data, from November 2023, collected by the Barometer of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), a public opinion research institution, 18.3 per cent of the Spanish population identifies as practising Catholics, 37.3 per cent as non-practising Catholics, 3.4 per cent as believers of other religions, 11.9 per cent as agnostics, 12.5 per cent as non-believers/indifferent and 14.8 per cent as atheists (CIS 2023). The religious diversity in Spain is further illustrated by data from the Observatory of Religious Pluralism in Spain (ORPS), which details the distribution of places of worship for minority religions: 56 per cent are Protestant churches, 22 per cent are Muslim communities, 8 per cent are Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Kingdom Halls, 3 per cent are Buddhist centres, 2 per cent are Adventist churches, and 1 per cent each are for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and Baha’is (ORPS 2022a). From the democratic transition, this growing visibility and presence of religious minorities has challenged the management of religious diversity in Spain (Albert-Blanco and Astor 2022; Astor and Griera 2016).

From a legal perspective, religious diversity in Spain can be explained through the existence of four categories of religious groups (Albert-Blanco and Astor 2022; Ibán 2019). First, the Catholic Church and the state maintain the ‘Agreements of Cooperation’, signed in 1979, which result in benefits and rights for the church. Thus, for instance, as

a result of these bilateral agreements the Catholic Church still has direct financial support from the state. Second, Evangelicals, Jews, and Muslims have some rights recognised after the signing of the 1992 Agreements of Cooperation. These agreements were signed with specific federations that tried to represent the different religious minorities: the Spanish Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities (FEREDE), the Spanish Islamic Commission (CIE), and the Spanish Federation of Jewish Communities. These agreements recognised some rights, such as religious education in public schools, although they have little by way of real implementation in society. Third, other religious groups have the recognition of ‘deep-rootedness’ in Spain, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Buddhists (Griera, Martínez-Ariño, and García-Romeral 2014). This recognition attracts very limited benefits, such as having their marriages recognised by the state. Finally, other religious groups are inscribed in the Register of Religious groups, which has very limited consequences (Albert-Blanco and Astor 2022; Ibán 2019).

This complex sociological and legal context of religious diversity in Spain led to an interesting but also ambiguous situation regarding religion when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Since Spain was one of the countries with the highest mortality rates in Europe, the public debates on COVID-19 were mainly centred around the health care situation. However, debates on religion and COVID-19 restrictions were not totally absent from the media. Delgado-Molina presented the paper ‘Pandemic Restrictions to Worship: Reactions, Discourses and Tensions’ at the 4th International Sociology Association Forum in February 2021. After reviewing digital media including national newspapers, local newspapers, and religious media between March and December 2020, she analysed how national media reported reactions and statements of religious institutions. According to her analysis, these institutions supported the measures and suspended most of their complementary activities. Following this, controversial news was more related to political issues (Delgado-Molina 2021). For instance, VOX, a far-right political party that openly promotes discourses against the presence of Islam in Spain, criticised specific moments of crowded mosques, and this was reported by the national press (Delgado-Molina 2021).

More controversy happened in September 2020, when the mayor of the capital city of Madrid announced that she would employ 73 priests

to provide services in hospitals, while at that time there was a shortage of health professionals employed to meet the health care needs (EARS 2021). The media also focused on the impact of the pandemic on religious holidays, especially Christmas and Easter holidays. As these festivities are still very relevant in the Spanish calendar, in the weeks before these periods there was intense media coverage of the different measures that could affect all these celebrations.¹ Despite the growing religious diversity in Spain, there were fewer reports about the impact of other celebrations of religious minorities such as Ramadan or Pesach. It is true that, given the historical presence of Catholicism in Spain, festivities such as Christmas had also a relevant social and commercial aspect beyond the religious events: shop owners also pressured the government to relax the measures on these days. Consequently, debates on religious freedom and Catholic festivities often intersected with cultural and economic issues, while there was less public debate regarding the festivities of religious minorities.

Regarding academic interest in COVID-19 and religion, many articles and reports were published at the very start of the pandemic. COVID-19 became one of the main research priorities for many academics and survey institutions in Spain, and the study and impact of the pandemic on religion was no exception. The CIS, which is a national autonomous organisation linked to the Spanish government, launched different specific surveys on the 'Effects and consequences of the coronavirus'. As will be further developed in the following section, other agencies also included qualitative techniques to gather similar data on the consequences of the pandemic on religion. Sociologists and legal scholars have also analysed the impact of COVID-19 on religion and religious institutions with both qualitative and quantitative data (Griera et al. 2022; Gutierrez del Moral 2021; Martinez-Cuadros 2022; Panadero, Mañé, and Gorina 2021; Rossell 2022; Simón 2020). Aside from the analysis of mobility restrictions on the population, some research has also focused on the COVID-19 vaccines and cases of rejection or hesitancy.² An interesting piece of data about Spain is that, while the level of vaccine rejection was very low, denialist movements were very present in the public sphere and social media (Griera et al. 2022). Although they are minor cases, researchers have also been interested in analysing the role of religious values and beliefs in COVID-19 theories and even the spread of 'conspirituality' (Griera et al. 2022).

Legal Aspects

The declaration of a 'state of alarm' and the legal procedures during the pandemic were new phenomena in Spain. Existing legislation was adapted to the pandemic situation, and it was constantly revised during the evolution of the virus. In fact, in Spain, the first state of alarm had a validity of only 15 days, but it was extended for three months (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021). Consequently, the 'state of alarm' status was in force until 21 June 2020 and from March to June there were several and constant changes in legislation.

The royal decree published on 14 March 2020 established in Article 11 that religious ceremonies and worships were not cancelled. While other cultural and commercial activities were suspended according to Article 10, Article 11 established the following:

Containment measures in relation with places of worship and with civil and religious ceremonies. Attendance at places of worship and civil and religious ceremonies, including funerals, depend on the adoption of organisational measures consisting of avoiding crowds of people, depending on the dimensions and characteristics of the places, in such a way that attendees are guaranteed the possibility of respecting a social distance of, at least, one meter. (Spanish Royal Decree 463/2020, 14 March, p. 6)

According to this article, ceremonies and worship activities could be carried out under specific circumstances. However, Article 7 of the same law did not include attendance at places of worship as an exception for free circulation on the street. At a time of strict home lockdown, this article only allowed mobility for activities considered 'essential', such as 'acquisition of food', 'attendance at health centres', and 'transport to the workplace' (Spanish Royal Decree 463/2020, 14 March). As a result, there was a paradoxical situation: while religious ceremonies could be held if they followed health care measures, such as keeping a distance of one metre, people could not freely leave their house to go to their religious centres. Consequently, people could be sanctioned during their journey to their places of worship, as this was not considered an essential activity. However, despite not being directly required to do so, most places of worship voluntarily closed and cancelled all their in-person activities.

Owing to the high rate of mortality, regulations concerning funerals and ceremonies also became relevant. On 29 March, the Ministry of Health published a text that regulated vigils and funeral ceremonies in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 (ORDEN SND/298/2020). Religious worship was postponed until the end of the state of alarm, although a funeral could be held with a maximum of three people ‘in addition, where appropriate, to the minister of worship or person from the respective faith for the practice of the funeral rites for the deceased’ (ORDEN SND/298/2020). These legal measures started to become more flexible from 9 May with the publication of some measures that modified the previous circumstances. In this text (ORDEN SND/399/2020) there were new indications for religious communities about capacity, minimum distances, and hygiene measures in places of worship and at funerals. Regarding vigils, the text established a maximum of 15 people in open spaces and ten people in indoor facilities. A maximum of 15 people was also established for burials, as well as the use of hygienic measures (two metres of distance and hand hygiene). Direct contact had to be avoided, as well as the distribution of books or booklets and kissing or touching devotional objects (ORDEN SND/399/2020, Article 9).

Moreover, the legal situation became complex as three different levels of restrictions were defined as part of the de-escalation process that started in May 2020. Each level depended on the impact of the virus in each territory (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021). Furthermore, some autonomous communities or city councils could include additional measures. People had to constantly check the different regulations in relation to the evolution of the health situation. During the following months, these measures were constantly revised, and the capacity limitation for events and ceremonies was extended through the phases of de-escalation. All the measures were only related to practical issues such as: hygienic requirements, use of a face mask, distance, and capacity, which affected commercial places and religious congregations equally. While most of the measures did not address specific circumstances for religious activities, religious congregations, including religious minorities with fewer resources, adapted to all these practical requirements.

Several Spanish legal scholars have analysed the impact of these legal measures on religious freedom in Spain (e.g. Contreras 2022; Parejo Guzmán 2020; Rossell 2022). According to Article 16 of the Spanish Constitution and the Organic Law of ‘Religious Liberty’ of

1980, freedom of religion is a protected and fundamental right in Spain. However, the measures implemented during that period clearly affected the freedom of religious practice, particularly by restricting movement and normal religious events, such as ceremonies and funerals. According to Parejo Guzmán's legal analysis (2020), the exceptional status of the state of alarm declared in 2020 did not justify suspending the fundamental right of religious freedom. Furthermore, the protection of religious freedom was only explicitly addressed in the Royal Decree of 25 October 2020, which stated that limitations on movement could not affect the private and individual exercise of religious freedom (Parejo Guzmán 2020). According to her analysis, this was the only legal document that explicitly referenced the need to safeguard the fundamental right of religious freedom (Parejo Guzmán 2020).

Legal scholars have also highlighted that the state did not utilise the potential assistance of religious communities during the COVID-19 crisis (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021; Martínez-Torrón 2021; Martínez-Torrón and Rodrigo 2021). The Spanish state has a 'Religious Liberty Advisory Commission', a government advisory body on religious freedom, which did not play any role in establishing the measures. Additionally, interreligious bodies and associations were not consulted in that process. Gutiérrez del Moral (2021) argues that freedom of religion and health rights should not be seen as incompatible. Therefore, the advice of religious communities would have been relevant, especially considering the significance of beliefs related to death and mental health (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021). Some authors have noted that religious institutions could have been consulted, particularly after the second phase of de-escalation, to better protect religious freedom rights (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021; Martínez-Torrón and Rodrigo 2021). Other authors claimed that the lack of a religious perspective resulted in disproportionate measures: while going to buy tobacco was allowed as an exception for permitted mobility, attending Mass or other place of worship was not included in the list of essential exceptions (Rossell 2022).

Despite most legal scholars considering that religious freedom was affected during the COVID-19 restrictions, no legal cases were raised against the Spanish state or brought before the Constitutional Court. Far from creating a legal problem, religious congregations collaborated in complying with measures and even helped to promote them. Most religious communities included information on their own websites

about how to implement the legal measures (Rossell 2022). Thus, as discussed in the next section, the relationship between the state and the religious communities can be described as a ‘collaborative one’.

Sociological Aspects

When the number of cases of COVID-19 started to increase in mid-March 2020 and the rates of mortality were rising, the Spanish government introduced some of the tightest restrictions in Europe (EARS 2021). These restrictions mainly affected mobility and the possibility of gathering in big groups without social distancing. As was introduced in the previous section, one of the direct consequences was that churches and places of worship decided to close and cancel their activities. These restrictions had a direct impact on religious people living in Spain, as they clearly affected one of the basic elements of religious observance and practice: worship and activities in religious centres and congregations. This also had a clear impact on religious institutions and their role in society. The Catholic Church, which still has pre-eminent relevance in Spain’s culture and traditions, had to face different challenges throughout the evolution of the pandemic (EARS 2021). Moreover, owing to the growing religious diversity present in Spain in the last decades, other minority religions had to face similar challenges, while having fewer resources and less recognition in the public debate (ORPS 2022b).

In May 2022, the Observatory of Religious Pluralism in Spain published a report entitled ‘The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Religious Minorities in Spain: Challenges for the Future Scenario’. This report was the result of in-depth research led by Dr Mónica Cornejo Valle, which included 40 interviews with people from diverse religious groups (ORPS 2022b). This study shows the main sociological impacts that COVID-19 restrictions and the health situation had on religious communities. Although it focuses on religious minorities, some of the aspects identified can also be relevant for the Catholic Church, which is the main religious faith in Spain.

One of the main aspects identified in the report was the impact on places of worship and their activities (ORPS 2022b). As stated in the previous section, although there was no legal measure obliging places of worship to close, most religious communities decided to close their centres. The restrictions especially affected those small centres

in which it was difficult to adapt the social distancing requirements between members during celebrations. Some places only opened to provide social assistance, which was especially relevant during the pandemic. For instance, Caritas, a Catholic Church charity, had a key role in offering support to the most vulnerable groups in society. In Madrid, while they tripled the demand for food services, their donations to food banks increased by 94 per cent (EARS 2021). Other religious centres such as local mosques in Barcelona, also played a key role in providing food and face masks. When most centres could open again in May as part of the de-escalation process, they all adapted their spaces to the health requirements, such as: limited capacity, provision of hydroalcoholic gel, and the use of face masks (ORPS 2022b).

The prohibition of mobility in the first part of lockdown directly limited the holding of events and other activities related to religious duty, for example preaching activities. Thus, most activities made an attempt to adapt to online formats. However, not all communities expressed this alternative as a successful one (ORPS 2022b). For instance, as the above-cited report states, the practice of collective songs could not be easily adapted to the online format, as there were technical issues that always affected the potential harmony and emotion of the moment (ORPS 2022b). One key strategy undertaken by some religious centres was the use of shifts to control the limited capacity. An additional difficulty was related to the maintenance of some of the premises that are rented by the communities. As most religious centres were receiving less income as a result of events and ceremonies being cancelled, this affected the payment of rents (ORPS 2022b). One of the biggest challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic was the economic crisis that resulted from the suspension of productive activity. This negative impact directly reduced religious communities' incomes. Most of these incomes came from on-site activities and an alternative strategy was to include donations through online payment platforms after holding virtual activities (ORPS 2022b). In this line, the crisis also highlighted the inequality between religious communities, as small communities with fewer resources were affected much more than others.

The use of online formats during COVID-19 became both a challenge and an opportunity for religious congregations. According to the report, it was especially useful for administrative and educational tasks (ORPS 2022). Moreover, it also had a positive impact on increasing the audience and participation, as well as on making their activities

international. In most cases, the use of virtual tools also meant a greater involvement of young people in religious activities. Thus, this new situation forced several people to adapt to new ways of observing and 'living religion' (McGuire 2008). Nevertheless, the use of online platforms also posed several challenges, especially as the pandemic advanced and persisted in time. The changes were implemented gradually and became problematic when users saw that the pandemic was persisting and increasingly spreading. Online participation increased at the beginning but then dropped to below pre-pandemic levels. For young people, this caused greater online fatigue as they soon became tired of virtual activities, probably because schools were also closed for a long period and they had to attend virtual classes. Moreover, the exclusive use of online formats also had some disadvantages for those people who did not have access to internet and digital platforms. Finally, the extensive use of online formats generated an increase in nostalgia for in-person activities and personal contact. As a result, all of this led to a return to in-person interactions as soon as health measures allowed it, and virtual platforms resumed residual use once the pandemic was over (ORPS 2022b).

From a sociological perspective, it is also relevant to analyse the way religious communities have interpreted the crisis and the pandemic. Media and some international studies have often focused on the conspiracy theories and negationist arguments against the vaccines. However, according to this national report (ORPS 2022b), most of the meanings given to the COVID-19 pandemic were related to: historical change, human responsibility towards collective suffering, and the responsibility to nature. The COVID-19 pandemic has often been seen as an opportunity to reflect on the role of humans in the world, especially addressing our relationship with the environment and our interpersonal relationships. Thus, one of the common aspects of people interviewed in the report (ORPS 2022b) is that they saw the crisis as a call for change to embrace consciousness and responsibility. Then, moral and spiritual learning could also be relevant after this crisis.

Focusing on quantitative data, there are some contradictory results about how the pandemic influenced people's religious practice in Spain. On the one hand, the CIS, which is a national autonomous organisation linked to the Spanish government, launched different specific surveys on the 'Effects and consequences of the coronavirus'. In September 2021 the survey included the question: 'During the pandemic, would

you say that you have become more religious or spiritual?’ According to the results, 9.6 per cent of people confirmed that they became more religious or more spiritual during the pandemic. In the same survey, 60.5 per cent of people affirmed that they changed their values and they now attribute more value to things that they did not value before the crisis, such as ‘the family’, ‘life’, and ‘health’ (CIS 2021). Thus, these data seem to suggest that the pandemic had an individual-level impact on religiosity.

Other researchers also tried to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on religious values and discovered similar results. According to the Pew Research Center, in Spain, 16 per cent of people stated that their religious faith had become stronger due to the pandemic, while 78 per cent said that it had ‘not changed much’ and only 5 per cent said that their faith had become weaker (PRC 2021). This situated Spain as second in the list of countries with the most respondents who claimed to be more religious after the pandemic. On the other hand, other research suggests a different trend. The Ferrer i Guàrdia Foundation conducted research on laicity in Spain in recent years, and, according to their analysis, the number of people with no religious consciousness grew significantly in 2021, by a total of eight points (Panadero, Mañé, and Gorina 2021). These data could show that COVID-19 did not have an effect of change on non-religious people: the number has remained the same and has only grown slightly. However, according to its latest report, in 2023, the pandemic accelerated the process of secularisation as the number of non-religious people had grown significantly (Fundació Ferrer i Guàrdia 2023). These different results could suggest the complexity of analysing the issue and that other social and biographical aspects could also influence religious practice during COVID-19. In fact, other studies have shown that beliefs are also modulated by political preferences (Bernacer et al. 2021). This could also explain why COVID-19 reinforced the tendency towards a polarised society in Spain.

Finally, a relevant aspect to highlight is the relationship between religious groups and the government and the pandemic. Although there was no close communication between the state and religious congregations, the relationship can be described as one of collaboration, especially from the side of the religious groups. There was no confrontation and religious institutions played an active role in following the measures and promoting the regulations put in place by the

health authorities. For instance, in March 2020 the Spanish Episcopal Conference published a list of recommendations to take into consideration during the health emergency and assumed the legal measures established by the Spanish government.³ Moreover, it suspended in-person educational activities and religious events. It also encouraged elderly and vulnerable people to avoid attending the Eucharist. Other religious institutions behaved similarly. The Federation of Evangelical Entities of Spain (FEREDE) informed its members about the measures put in place by the Spanish government,⁴ while the Islamic Commission of Spain⁵ and the Federation of Jewish Communities⁶ published information to help their members in the follow-up of restrictions. Moreover, in May 2020, these three institutions organised a World Day of Prayer that gathered Catholics, Jews, and Muslims.⁷

All these supportive messages promoted by the main religious institutions can evidence that there was a consensus of support to measures imposed by the state. This also included support for the vaccination process (ORPS 2022b). For instance, most mosques had a key role in promoting vaccination, as imams could use Friday prayers to explain the protection offered by COVID-19 vaccines (Martinez-Cuadros 20212). Thus, the pandemic did not generate a conflict between religion and science but religious groups wanted to support scientific authority. Despite their not being consulted through the 'Religious Liberty Advisory Commission' (Gutierrez del Moral 2021), no important conflict was raised between religious institutions and the state. Furthermore, national or regional interreligious bodies were not consulted and had no influence on decisions that could affect religious communities. This contrasted with other situations in which the interreligious dialogue became relevant in the political and media agenda, such as after the terrorist attacks in Barcelona in 2017 (Griera 2020).

An interesting issue that also marked the state–religion relationship during the pandemic was the official event that took place in honour of the victims of COVID-19 in July 2020 (Domínguez-García and Pérez 2022). This ceremony was organised by the government in order to promote social cohesion and reinforce the role of institutions in the Spanish state. It took place outdoors, in the square in front of the Palacio Real in Madrid, a place where the most solemn ceremonies are often held with no religious references. A main characteristic of the event is that it was totally secular, avoiding religious symbols but prioritising music, poetry, and flower offerings. Some days prior to the

event, a Catholic funeral had taken place in Almudena Cathedral with the presence of the king and queen of Spain. However, it was organised by the Spanish Episcopal Conference and the government denied that it was an official funeral. This contrasted with other previous state funerals that occurred after big events in Spain such as the terrorist attacks or big catastrophes, which also consisted of Catholic Masses at Almudena Cathedral (Domínguez-García and Pérez 2022). The inclusion of Catholic Masses can be interpreted as a symptom of the greater recognition that the Catholic Church still has in the Spanish state. This time, this preference for a non-religious state event, which did not even include religious diversity, can be interpreted as a new trend towards committing to secularism, which contrasts with the ambiguous relationship between religion and the state that has characterised Spain in the last decades (Domínguez-García and Pérez 2022).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was an exceptional, unprecedented, global event. In Spain, as in many other countries, this entailed legal and sociological challenges that undoubtedly impacted different areas of society, including religions. The governance of religious freedom and practices during the pandemic and the sociological consequences presented in this chapter leads to three main conclusions.

First, while religious freedom was not directly addressed by legal measures, they led to an unintended consequence of limiting religious practices. This mainly happened because the established requirements were imposed without including the adviser of religious institutions. Consequently, paradoxical situations emerged when there were contradictory articles published in the royal decree in March 2020. Thus, most religious centres decided to close from the very start of the ‘state of alarm’ without being specifically required to do so. As some legal scholars have pointed out (Gutiérrez del Moral 2021; Martínez-Torrón 2021; Rossell 2022), there is an existing advisory board that could have been consulted during this period. The absence of direct communication with religious institutions, together with the organisation of an official secular event to honour victims of COVID-19, raises questions about a possible trend to enforce secularisation in Spain. While this contrasts with the presence of religion in other official events, it opens

up a changing scenario in the state–religion relationships, especially with the Catholic Church.

Second, religious congregations have had a collaborative relationship with the government and have played an active role in promoting the required measures to their followers. They also made an additional effort to adapt their worship centres with requirements such as establishing limitation capacities and providing hydroalcoholic gel. This is especially relevant because of the differences that exist between religious centres in terms of resources and infrastructures. While the crisis affected all centres, it also highlighted the vulnerability of smaller communities, which suffered more from the economic crisis. Moreover, all religious communities played a relevant role in social assistance, providing food and health care supplies.

The third and last conclusion is that COVID-19 was both a challenge and an opportunity to adapt religious practices to new online methods. While online platforms existed before the pandemic, the situation called for a quick adaptation in many daily activities, including religious ones. People were exposed to different ways of ‘living religion’ (McGuire 2008) but they also experienced online fatigue and expressed nostalgia for in-person activities. Thus, the impact on online interaction is still being analysed with the rise of digital religions. During the pandemic, people also reflected on their religious practice and most existing studies in Spain seem to suggest that religion had a relevant role when coping with the situation (ORPS 2022). However, because of the complexity of the moment and the rapid changes that we underwent, future research could explain the long-standing impact of COVID-19 on religions in Spain, and worldwide.

Notes

- 1 ‘Restricciones COVID en Navidad: Las restricciones por la COVID-19 en cada comunidad autónoma’, 2021, <https://www.newtral.es/restricciones-medidas-COVID-navidad-comunidades/20211229/>.
- 2 Mar Grier is leading a research and development national project entitled ‘Between Science and Religion. An Empirical Study to Understand the Role of Religious Beliefs in Opposition to Biomedical Technologies (ECIREL)’, and one of the cases of study is COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. The project started in 2022 and was founded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish government.

- 3 'Orientaciones ante la situación actual', 2020, <https://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/orientaciones-ante-la-situacion-actual/>.
- 4 'FEREDE informa a sus iglesias y entidades sobre las condiciones para la asistencia religiosa y la acción social durante el estado de alarma', 2020, https://www.actualidadevangelica.es/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=12224:2020-03-31-19-02-10&catid=42:ferede&fbclid=IwAR1IIRnS1ASuIgrT7eCu-pjSfDP1s4THwStIvQOUWNLuXU6SYi4NxrnuZQ.
- 5 'Recomendaciones generales ante el nuevo coronavirus', <https://comisionislamica.org/2020/03/08/recomendaciones-generales-ante-el-nuevo-coronavirus/>.
- 6 'COVID 19: Prevenir el contagio', 2020, https://www.fcje.org/es/-/COVID-19-prevenir-el-contagio?p1back_url=%2Fsearch%3Fq%3DCOVID.
- 7 'Católicos, judíos y musulmanes se unen hoy para rezar por el fin de la pandemia', <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/internacional/2020/05/14/catolicos-judios-y-musulmanes-se-unen-hoy-para-rezar-por-el-fin-de-la-pandemia-1374800.html>.

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