

Religion & Pandemics, Vaccines, and Public Policy Show Notes

Question 1: Given the work you have done lately and your reading, listening, and working with communities in your experience, what role have religious communities and religious leaders played in responding to the current pandemic?

Ryon Cobb: My focus has been on white evangelical congregations, some we see groups unwilling to believe that COVID-19 is a major threat, as well as those who believe it is a plot by the democratic party to overtake the world. We look at how the congregations are responding, largely by not taking certain safety precautions. Then looking at how it impacts Black religious communities. One is the increase of Black people leaving Black congregations. We have also found that the ideas around COVID are the same or similar whether Black or white. The role religion plays is complex.

Philippa Koch: I live in an area with a lot of Mega-Churches. If the communities and churches work together, we can see a lot of good. We have also seen some very interesting ways that churches have transitioned to being online and done a lot of work to make community accessible. Some are working in responsible ways and some are not.

Question 2: What would an admirable response of religion or faith communities to the pandemic look like?

Philippa Koch: I have read about a community in Huston where the pastor invited a medical professional to give the congregation information and was able to help the community. I think that is helpful, bringing good, safe information to the community. We can't police that so sometimes the information will be irresponsible, but you do see examples of this being a great chance to reach people.

Ryon Cobb: Having more of a dialogue and encouraging congregations to have conversations with public health officials and informing congregants about the outbreaks and what to do.

Question 3: Why is it so important to engage religious communities in this conversation, why not just keep the two sorts of ideas separate?

Philippa Koch: These are both communities with authority. When they are at odds with each other, it can create a sense or lack of trust, which is problematic for people who already feel a sense of anxiety about the world around them.

Ryon Cobb: On small and larger scales, these communities mix. I think it would be hopeful that the engagement is meaningful, but we see both cases. Religious organizations play a critical role, but a role in a way that is informed by science and not speaking against it.

Question from Audience: Do scholars of religion have any responsibility to name or engage with religious communities whose actions are harmful to public health, what if any are the professional and ethical responsibilities for scholars of religion or religious leaders.

Ryon Cobb: I do believe there is, I engage with a number of my colleagues, friends, and more about COVID-19 and try to give information. It's not always appreciated because they believe it will pass, or God will protect them. But I think there should be more push and more journals on COVID-19, the factors and consequences.

Philippa Koch: This can be tricky. For example, in my class when I gave the assignment to visit congregations, I specifically said do not go to any that are not following the public health guidelines. I think on the one hand you must shut some things down, but we also have a responsibility to engage with people and see why they feel the way they do.

Question 4: I don't think that people see religion as dynamic as science, how in a sense it has progressed over time. Is there anything we can do to help people understand how adaptable and dynamic religion and faith communities are?

Philippa Koch: I think this is a big problem. People view religious people as passive, but then there is the side of God motivating people to respond to suffering and that God gives people science and medicine to cultivate ideas and new developments in healing and helping people. Just like science, religion changes and can help people orient themselves to the world, wherever the world is at that time.

Ryon Cobb: My worry also becomes how religion or communities will provide support for older adults. How does religion have to change to be protective of certain groups?

Question from Audience: Thinking about how drastically so many religious congregations have adapted to using zoom and other tech, what changes do we think might be permanent and are there parallel changes you can think of that have changed religious life in other historic pandemics?

Philippa Koch: There have been a lot of churches and groups improving their websites and other platforms. Giving and donating has been up for some as well. It can act as a helpful push into the 21st century for some churches. There are many possibilities for how this is changing congregational life.

Ryon Cobb: What we are seeing is changes in the options that are available, and people have more access to different services or congregations because things being open access online. This forces groups to adapt or suffer the consequences.

Question 5: In 2018 there was a report made on the epidemic of loneliness. That it is very unhealthy for people to experience loneliness. One way to overcome that for churches has been new forms of communication have faith communities stepped up and enhanced delivery channels and the message in ways that are meeting the needs of the epidemic of loneliness?

Ryon Cobb: I see some try to reach out, but how they do it and how effective is a different question. Zooming and things like that are helpful, but people still face zoom fatigue and need some other forms of interaction. How congregations can facilitate that; I am not sure.

Question from audience: though we are talking about religion, in many examples we are focusing on Christian perspectives, how are other communities and traditions thinking about these issues and how have we seen engagement play out in these spaces.

Ryon Cobb: We see some groups like NOI and their leaders recommending people not take the vaccine that it may lead to mass genocide among communities. We also see Jewish communities still having these massive gatherings of people. I think regardless of religious traditions there's still this binary between science and religion.

Philippa Koch: With virtual services, I was surprised by how many students were willing to go outside of their comfort zone and zoom into a new religious world. From what I heard from them, it was very vibrant, and the community looked like it was adapting. I could see how communities that are already anxious about the government and its authority create more resistance to these ideas. The question of regulation comes up and continues to, and it should be.

Question from audience: Many COVID skeptics disagree with the bans on religious services, and people think it shows prejudice against religion and privileges secular life. How realistic is that either or characterization.

Richard Gunderman: The science versus religion is overly simplistic but there are also a lot of scientists who are very cognizant of their religious roots and in fact aren't afraid to introduce faith into a conversation around a public health crisis like this.

Ryon Cobb: People believe that the government is treating religious organizations differently than restaurants. It shows how interactions in restaurants are different than those that happen in churches.

Philippa Koch: The religious and secular divide can get problematic. Churches are major employers and get different loans. Thinking about a church in an economic space is interesting; it is central to a community in a similar way to a restaurant. They both serve people. The divide makes us not pay attention to how they both function similarly.

Richard Gunderman: Are there lessons we can learn from pandemics like the ones in the past, that we have forgotten, like how faith communities can play a role in a crisis like that?

Philippa Koch: I look a lot at providence and how that can help in understanding how to respond to something. It is also important for how people narrate what is going on in their lives. The worst thing about a pandemic is that it takes what you had planned and makes it no longer make sense, so you must tell a new story. So, looking at providence makes us ask what all this means and what I am going to do.

Question from audience: How can scholars of religion address the systematic racism that is inherent in the responses to pandemics? Is the intersection of religion, race, and illness a place where religion scholars can offer a much-needed informed critique?

Ryon Cobb: I think it is something that definitely should be on the table. More and more people know someone who has been hospitalized by COVID-19. I wonder how different the reaction would be if it disproportionately affected non-Black communities. We also see people being turned away from hospitals and facing medical racism. I think congregations should address this, but I don't know if they have the tools.

Philippa Koch: I think historically you see really bad things that happen and experimental care that can happen. There are a lot of examples of Black communities suffering indignities at the hands of the medical world; it is something that must be acknowledged to have a conversation. While people try to do good, there are still systemic inequities.