



RELIGION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

MEDIATING PRESENCE AND DISTANCE

Photo credit: Beverly Anne Devakishen

DATE: 29-30 APRIL 2021

VENUE: ONLINE (via zoom)

LINK: <http://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/rgc19>

This workshop is organised by the Asia Research Institute, NUS, and jointly sponsored with a grant from Yap Kim Hao Memorial Fund for Comparative Religious Studies at Yale-NUS College, Singapore.

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For more on ARI Religion and Globalisation Cluster research blog on religions and COVID-19 in Asia, please visit CoronAsur (<https://ari.nus.edu.sg/coronasur-home/>)

ABOUT

This workshop explores religious responses to COVID-19 and ritual innovations under the lenses of media, senses, and spaces. How are ritual actions, events and performances (re)mediated, navigating the complex balance between transformative “presence” (Engelke 2007) and cautious “distance”? How are “sensational forms” (Meyer 2011) reproduced, (dis)embodied or re-invented? In these pandemic times, social distancing requirements place all realms of sociality under new constraints. We seek to address how new demands for distance are negotiated with communities’ aspirations to establish connection, proximity, and togetherness in order to realize their religious and spiritual goals. Large congregations of practitioners have been blamed as ‘clusters’ of viral contagion. In the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream media perpetuated the imagination of religious communities tending to be intrinsically conservative, non-compliant, irreconcilable with medical science, and fundamentally opposed to technology. This workshop challenges such representations by exploring diverse and innovative responses as they unfold in accordance with underlying onto-cosmologies and pre-existing power relationships. Through disciplinary perspectives in religious studies, anthropology, sociology, history, and geography, this workshop will bring together an array of scholars to examine how the matter of achieving ‘presence’ on the one hand, and anxieties to maintain social and physical ‘distance’ on the other, are negotiated.

The questions we aim to explore include the following:

1. How are religions engaging new technologies of mediation between human, divine, and between community members?
2. How is the body sensorium engaged in pandemic forms of religiosity? How do pandemic transformations and the use of new media affect sensory and bodily engagements in ritual contexts?
3. How are spatial configurations of the sacred shifted to private, domestic, and online spaces? What are the perceptions of presence and absence emerging from such reconfigurations? How are online and domestic modes of worship again cautiously shifted back to communal worship in physical settings?



Photo credit: Beverly Anne Devakishen

29 APRIL 2021

Singapore 1300–1500 HRS
New Delhi 1030–1230 HRS
London 0600–0800 HRS
Texas 0000–0200 HRS

28 APRIL 2021

California 2200–0000 HRS

30MINS

WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

KENNETH DEAN | National University of Singapore

CAROLA LOREA | National University of Singapore

NEENA MAHADEV | Yale-NUS College

NATALIE LANG | National University of Singapore

NINGNING CHEN | National University of Singapore

PANEL 1 KINAESTHETIC TECHNIQUES, SENSUOUS SCREENS AND ONLINE FESTIVALS

CHAIRPERSON **EMILY HERTZMAN** | National University of Singapore

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

SARAH M. PIKE

Zoom-Partation: Benny Hinn's Touch in Zoom Healing

NATHANAEL J. HOMEWOOD | DePauw University

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

NATHANAEL J. HOMEWOOD

Do Avatars Weep? Ritual and Sacred Space at Virtual
Burning Man

SARAH M. PIKE | California State University, Chico

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

UTSA MUKHERJEE

Performing Electronic 'Untouchability' and the Covid 19 Pandemic

ANKANA DAS | Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

ANKANA DAS

Live-Streaming the Goddess and Mediating Diasporic Community
Lives in the Times of COVID-19: A Digital Ethnography of Online
Durga Puja Festivals in the UK

UTSA MUKHERJEE | University of Southampton

20MINS

AUTHORS' RESPONSES

30MINS

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

END OF PANEL 1

29 APRIL 2021

Singapore 1600–1730 HRS

Jerusalem 1100–1230 HRS

London 0900–1030 HRS

**PANEL 2 SOUND IN SPACE:
PANDEMIC ACOUSTEMOLOGY
AND SHIFTING SOUNDSCAPES**

CHAIRPERSON **LIN HONGXUAN** | National University of Singapore

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

RHYS THOMAS SPAREY

Listening as Presence: Technological-Spirituality and a Sufi
Ritual at the Time of COVID-19

MUHAMMAD LUTFI BIN OTHMAN | University of Cambridge

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

MUHAMMAD LUTFI BIN OTHMAN

Pandemic Pieties: Music, Media, and Mourning in the Month
of Muharram

RHYS THOMAS SPAREY | King's College London

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

HANNAH MAYNE

"We Just Want To Sing": How a Small London Evangelical
Church Responded to Covid-19

SIEW-PENG LEE | Brunel University London, & University of Warwick

10MINS

DISCUSSANT

SIEW-PENG LEE

Prayer in the Street: New Configurations of Jewish Worship
Communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

HANNAH MAYNE | University of Toronto

20MINS

AUTHORS' RESPONSES

30MINS

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

END OF DAY 1

30 APRIL 2021

Singapore 1400–1530 HRS
London 0700–0830 HRS

29 APRIL 2021

California 2300–0030 HRS

PANEL 3 CON-TACT AND DIGITAL PRESENCE: RECONFIGURING ISOLATION AND TOGETHERNESS

CHAIRPERSON **ERICA LARSON** | National University of Singapore

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
TERENCE CHONG

‘Being There’ in COVID-19 Times: New Spiritual Support Practices,
Their Meaning and Consequences to our Cultural and Existential Values
**IRENA PAPADOPOULOS, RUNA LAZZARINO, STEVE WRIGHT,
POPPY E. LOGAN & CHRISTINA KOULOUGLIOTI** | Middlesex University

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
RUNA LAZZARINO

Christian Megachurches, Covid-19 and the Channeling of Charisma
in Southeast Asia
DANIEL P.S. GOH | National University of Singapore
TERENCE CHONG | ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
JON BIALECKI

Lemongrass, Lotteries and the Digital: Underworld Gods on a Live Stream
ALVIN ENG HUI LIM | National University of Singapore

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
ALVIN ENG HUI LIM

A Managerial Apocalypse: Mormon Missionaries, Eschatological
Anxieties, and COVID-19
JON BIALECKI | University of California San Diego

20MINS

AUTHORS’ RESPONSES

30MINS

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

END OF PANEL 3

30 APRIL 2021

Singapore 2000-2200 HRS
Bangalore 1730-1930 HRS
Abu Dhabi 1600-1800 HRS
Wisconsin 0700-0900 HRS
Illinois 0700-0900 HRS

PANEL 4 VIRAL, VIRTUAL AND VITAL: POPULAR RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AND PANDEMIC RITUALS

CHAIRPERSON **RANJANA RAGHUNATHAN** | National University of Singapore

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
RAKA BANERJEE

Luang Puu Khem: A Virtual Magical Monk in the Wake of Pandemic
Thailand

NAPAKADOL KITTISENEE | University of Wisconsin-Madison

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
NAPAKADOL KITTISENEE

Remote Religion/Remote Region: Doing Religion Remotely in the
Andaman Islands

RAKA BANERJEE | Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
HEINZ SCHEIFINGER

Buddha Relics, Kali Syrup, and Covid Cures: Resisting Elite Restrictions
with a Popular Goddess

ALEXANDER MCKINLEY | Loyola University Chicago

10MINS
DISCUSSANT
ALEXANDER MCKINLEY

From Virtual Holy Dips to Physical Pilgrimages: Tracing the Impact
of the Coronavirus Pandemic upon Hindu Rituals in India

HEINZ SCHEIFINGER | Zayed University

20MINS

AUTHORS' RESPONSES

30MINS

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

END OF WORKSHOP

30MINS

CLOSED DOOR SESSION ON PUBLICATION PLANS
(For organisers and paper authors only)

Zoom-Partation: Benny Hinn's Touch in Zoom Healing

Nathanael J. Homewood

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Perhaps no televangelist's ministry model was threatened by COVID-19 more than Benny Hinn's. The famous and controversial faith healer, known for his dramatic bodily interventions, would seem hamstrung by the demands of a socially-distanced/remote ministry. With one of his daughters blasting the governor of California's restrictions as "part of the evil left agenda" and another daughter hosting large religious gatherings, it seemed likely that Hinn, too, would demonstrate religious non-compliance toward COVID-19 restrictions.

In his almost 40 years of ministry, Hinn has embodied what Birgit Meyer refers to as the sensational form, which bridges the distance between human materiality and the transcendental through sensory engagement between the two realms. Faith healers such as Hinn demonstrate enchanted materiality primarily through embodiment. Hinn has always privileged the body as a highly valued vessel for feeling the supernatural, good or bad.

All of this made Benny Hinn's transition to Zoom Healing Services an unexpected and, simultaneously, important case study for the study of Pentecostal haptics. In June 2020, Benny Hinn transitioned to semi-regular bi-weekly Zoom Healing Services that allow him to gather diverse audiences of his global adherents in healing services that complicate what it means to touch. With a handful of musicians in a studio, Hinn has three large screens behind him filled with thumbnail videos of those attending. He chooses an attendee for healing and then prays for them, often putting his hands on the screen. Constantly probing the experience of those being healed with questions like, "What are you feeling?" Hinn himself seems to be feeling out the limitations and possibilities of this technology. It is not always smooth as bad WIFI, and choppy audio conspire to leave Hinn with less command than he has of physical spaces. But the experience demands exploration of how impartation works when one cannot lay on hands? Or more accurately, when one (Hinn) lays hands on a large screen thousands of miles away?

Much has been written about Pentecostal haptic innovation. For example, Bruno Reinhardt has written of haptic tapes whereby sensorial conditions are cultivated between addresser and addressee in situations where bodies are not necessarily proximate. But how does this flow work in real-time as Pentecostal faith healers try to touch people throughout the globe? Having attended every Zoom Healing, in this paper, I will explore Hinn's haptic use of Zoom technology. Why does Hinn remain committed to touching the screen? How does this reshape and reimagine touch and impartation? How is the divine imagined in this transaction as it traverses the globe in seconds? Accordingly, I will argue that 'Zoom-partation' allows us to deepen our knowledge of what Pentecostals believe touch is and does.

Nathanael J. Homewood is a faculty member in the Religious Studies Department at DePauw University, the General Secretary of the African Association for the Study of Religions, and the editor for Modern and Global Christianity in the *Religious Studies Review*. A native of Canada, his first book currently under review, is entitled *Sex with Spirits: Sensing the Demonic in Ghanaian Pentecostalism* focuses on extreme forms of charismatic Christianity in Accra and issues of sexuality—in particular, sexualities that engage the spirit world. One of his current projects, from which this paper emerges, is a wide-sweeping exploration of the global influence of popular faith healer Benny Hinn.

Do Avatars Weep? Ritual and Sacred Space at Virtual Burning Man

Sarah M. Pike

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In April 2020, the organizers of Burning Man, a transformational festival that serves for many participants as a spiritual destination, even referred to by some as their “church,” decided to go virtual. A number of Burning Man participants dismissed a virtual festival as a “video game version” of the real event, while programmers and artists quickly developed online venues that would facilitate transformation, a sense of community, and ritual activities, especially those around “The Temple,” the spiritual heart of Burning Man. Participants created and experienced sacred spaces and rituals through avatar bodies while their actual bodies were wearing virtual reality headsets and sitting in front of computers. Based on twenty years of ethnography at Burning Man, including at this year’s virtual event, my paper will compare the event in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert to this year’s virtual version by focusing on central themes that speak to the effectiveness of online rituals in the time of Covid-19: dynamics of intimacy and distance, the meaning of sacred space and ritual, accessibility and inclusion, the tension between materiality and ephemerality. My presentation will draw on theories of ritual effectiveness (Houseman 2006, Grimes 2002) as well as interviews with digital artists and designers of the Temple and participants who visited the Temple in their avatar bodies to mourn their beloved dead by creating virtual altars and posting photographs and letters. Through a variety of embodied practices like making meditating, and dancing that elicited sensual memories and emotions of past experiences at Burning Man, participants transposed the face-to-face event in the distant desert to the intimate spaces of their living rooms and offices.

Sarah M. Pike is Professor of Comparative Religion at California State University, Chico. She has written numerous books, articles, and book chapters on contemporary Paganism, ritual, the New Age movement, Burning Man, festivals, spiritual dance, environmentalism, the ancestral skills movement, climate strikes, and youth culture. Her latest book, *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism*, was published by the University of California Press in October 2017. Her current research focuses on ritual, spirituality, and ecology in several different contexts, including a project on spirituality and ritualized relationships with landscapes after disasters.

Performing Electronic ‘Untouchability’ and the Covid 19 Pandemic

Ankana Das

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As the deadly Coronavirus found hosts in a sizeable human population of the world, countries grappled to establish codes to combat its spread. The social life of humans, as well as the religious and performative aspects of it, has undergone severe changes. But to what extent humans reconfigure religiosity in the 21st century can be understood by their attempts to mediate between the supernatural and the ordinary. From recent news updates, a Hindu temple in Mangalore installed an automatic “holy water dispenser” to help reduce the risk of transmitting germs. It distributes individual doses of water without devotees having to touch any part of it. In another instance, in a temple in South India, devotees can now ring the holy bell without actually making any contact with the bell. Both these technologies use electronic sensors to translate the actions of humans towards the divine and help theorise the present-day religious consciousness of humans, especially in a post- Covid scenario. Victor Turner in his exploration of ritual and ordinary life says that a community is described by the forms of ritual practices it indulges in. In this context, my paper would attempt to theoretically rethink religious performance and ritual life, as is prevalent in the present. It seeks to understand necessary questions such as- (1) when the idea of the divine is embedded with the benevolence of the electronic, how can we fit in the established codes of caste in Hinduism? (2) How can the “touchless temple bell” or the “automatic holy-water dispenser” help conceptualise untouchability in modern societies, where urbane casteism is rampant? My paper draws from telephonic interviews with temple managers, founders of the above mentioned technologies, and devotees to navigate terrain of (3) untouchability and religious consciousness, against the exceptional backdrop of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Ankana Das is currently a PhD student at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, India. She works on religious consciousness, transformation, and transgressions, looking at how caste, class, and right-wing influence permeate through the several layers of religious meaning making. Ankana has a Masters and an MPhil in English Literature and has previously taught at several Literature departments in West Bengal. Her research interests include religion, ecology, fiction, climate change, and the digital humanities to name a few. A part of her PhD work also consists of working with digital tools in mapping shrines in the Sundarban delta in India and Bangladesh.

Live-Streaming the Goddess and Mediating Diasporic Community Lives in the Times of COVID-19: A Digital Ethnography of Online Durga Puja Festivals in the UK

Utsa Mukherjee

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This paper draws on my digital ethnographic study of online Durga Puja festivals that were organised in the autumn of 2020 by diasporic Bengali Hindu communities in the UK amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic. Durga Puja is a Hindu religious festival that lasts for five days in the autumn and is considered to be the biggest festival among Hindu Bengalis in India and Bangladesh. Several Hindu Bengali diasporic groups in the UK, mostly originating from the Indian state of West Bengal, organise these autumnal Durga Pujas every year – where ritual worship of the goddess Durga (the *pujo*) and community-based festivities marked by food, cultural performances and social mingling (the *utsab*) converge. These ethnic-religious festival spaces serve as vehicles through which these racialized diasporic groups direct place-making, build community and reinforce ethnic pride. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has meant that in-person mass gatherings such as those occasioned by Durga Puja festivals could not be held. In response, many of these UK-based Durga Puja organisers adapted to the situation, choosing to stage small-scale indoor religious ceremonies and cultural programmes that comply with governmental guidelines and then livestreaming them to their members through YouTube and Facebook groups. Many organisers also made provisions for devotees to offer live *anjali* (prayer to the Goddess) from their home using Zoom. Based on observations of these livestreams and interviews with twenty-two digital Durga Puja organisers from across the UK, in this paper I reflect on how digital technologies were mobilized by Hindu Bengalis in the UK to enact ritual practices and nurture diasporic social networks amidst the pandemic. The technological innovations and creative approaches to religious rituals witnessed here highlight the agency of these minoritized religious actors as they negotiated an online space for religious observances and community togetherness whilst adhering to physical distancing guidelines.

Utsa Mukherjee is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Southampton and a member of the University of Southampton India Centre for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development. He holds a PhD in Sociology from Royal Holloway, University of London. His research focuses on the leisure lives of Indian diasporic children and families in the UK. He has published widely in international peer-reviewed journals and is currently working on his first monograph *Race, Class, Parenting and Children's Leisure*.

Listening as Presence: Technological-Spirituality and a Sufi Ritual at the Time of COVID-19

Muhammad Lutfi Bin Othman

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This paper looks at Islamic spirituality and how the impossibility of congregating physically is mitigated virtually. The focus is on the Shadhili Sufi order in Singapore and how weekly gatherings are conducted via videoconferencing platforms. A key feature of their gathering is the *hadra* (presence), a ritual of sound, movement and breathing where the goal is to be gathered in one body with one voice to “drown” in the remembrance of God through the chanting of God’s name. In the *hadra*, the presence of others and the sounds of their voices are crucial for the feelings of spiritual renewal, helped on by feelings of unity and solidarity. Typically, the *hadra* takes place in the *zawiya* (lodge) where the initiated can come together to express themselves loudly and energetically, without reservations. Now, with voices that are disconnected and bodies that are dislocated, this paper aims to explore what is at stake when such physical gatherings are forced onto the online realm.

This paper is part of an ongoing ethnomusicological PhD project that looks at the sounds of Sufism and its role in Islamic spirituality. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impeded the original ethnographic plan for this PhD research, it has also provided the opportunity of understanding the workings of Sufi orders and its spiritual tenets through the conditions of the “new normal”. How is this unique moment in modern human history understood and overcome? What are the opportunities or challenges to spiritual wayfaring? Do these new mediated experiences allow for or distract from spiritual aspirations? Based on interviews with members of the Shadhiliyya in Singapore and participant-observations of virtual gatherings captured in two ethnographic snapshots, this paper will try to provide answers to these questions in an exploration of the intersections between Islamic spirituality and media in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic by showing how the seekers engage in strategic listening practices to reignite feelings of unity and presence with their other companions.

Lutfi Othman is a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology and sound studies. His interest in sound lies in the role that sound practices and sonic media play in religion and spirituality in shaping the parameters of religious piety and belief. His thesis focuses on Sufism in Singapore and the links between sonic performances and a form of experiential knowledge that is felt in the heart of the seeker. He is also interested in the transnational solidarity between members of global Sufi Orders and Muslims in Singapore and the role that sonic performances and audio-visual material play in fostering such relationships.

This research will be conducted under the supervision of Dr Peter McMurray at the University of Cambridge.

Pandemic Pieties: Music, Media, and Mourning in the Month of Muharram

Rhys Thomas Sparey

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The surge of scholarship on the recalibration of religious observances to the Covid-19 pandemic has largely focused on practitioners adapting the means of undertaking corporeal practices to constraints on mass gatherings with small media hardware and videoconferencing software. In contrast, this presentation examines the recalibration of the use, function, perception, and significance of a religious practice that, on the surface, changed very little as a result of the coronavirus crisis: Muharram (also known as Ashura and Hosay), by way of a phone-in talk-show called #IAMHUSSEINI, which airs on the television channel, Imam Hussein TV 3. For many Muslims, the Hijri Month of Muharram entails a period of mourning for Hussein ibn Ali (626-680), the third Imam of Shi'a Islam. By analyzing the discourses and cantillations of musicians, callers, hosts, and guests, and locating them within a visual context of the television studio, this presentation endeavors to ascertain participants' motivations for performing and engaging with ritual mourning via television. In so doing, it reinvokes Charles Hirschkind's argument that many religious practices, rather than recalibrating to constrictions on space and time viz-a-viz the current pandemic, have been "recalibrating to a new political and technological order" for decades (2006, 11). The presentation thereby elaborates its own two-fold argument: Firstly, Imam Hussein TV 3 facilitates a mediation of presence and distance that is sequential and personalized and, therefore, fundamentally opposed to the presumptions of community that underpin scholarship on the social structure of the *majlis* (mourning assembly); And, secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic may have been a catalyst, if not a cause, of mainstreaming this subversive form of mediation. Finally, it invites attendees to discuss what is meant by mediation, what is special about digital mediation, and what the popularization of such social, political, and technological innovations will mean for corporeal religious practices following the pandemic.

Rhys Thomas Sparey is a PhD Candidate in the Music Department at King's College London. His research is concerned with online musical interactions in Arabic and Urdu religious and educational contexts. His dissertation discusses the Mourning of Muharram in a variety of forms, such as Imam Hussein TV 3 on YouTube, Imam Hussein Islamic Centre on Facebook, and Mahmudabad Estate on Instagram. He has also published research on music videos based on *nuha* and *marsiya* poetry and second-language acquisition in secondary music classrooms. Rhys teaches music at a primary, secondary, and tertiary level.

“We Just Want To Sing”: How a Small London Evangelical Church Responded to Covid-19

Siew-Peng Lee

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Although the anthropology of Christianity has progressed from being a “nascent field of inquiry” (Bielo, 2007:315) to one that is “burgeoning” (Coleman 2014:S281) the response to the Covid-19 pandemic by a small London evangelical (but non-Pentecostal) church presents another justification to add to this corpus. From an abrupt stop to face-to-face worship services at the first lockdown to the sudden decision to abandon a long-awaited open-air Christmas carol service—which would have allowed congregants to sing—when a mutant strain of the virus was confirmed and “Tier 4” restrictions kicked in overnight, this paper attempts to document the myriad ways in which this church scrambled to adapt, or failed, to mediate presence (here, more so the co-presence with fellow believers) and distance through online activities (compare Thompson 2020). Activities affected include a lunch club for senior citizens, youth and home group meetings, and English lessons for non-native speakers in the community.

Methodologically, this is a mostly “opportunistic” ethnographic study, following Riemer’s (1977) advice to use serendipitous and personal circumstances whenever they do present, and will be supplemented by survey and interview data. Theoretically it aims to contribute to the discussion on the usefulness of “place-making” as a “simultaneous taking apart and bringing together of faith and place” (Hovland 2016:331) when church members were physically scattered *as if* in a “diaspora” but are spiritually/religiously connected through digital and other technological means.

This paper will elucidate the importance of the ritual role of singing and the church as a physical locality, noting briefly the overlap between the digital and age divides. I will also explore the extent to which the traditional practice of “church-making” might change as some church members chose to continue to worship online even when face-to-face services resumed, and how this feeds into Hovland’s (2016) concept of “place-making”.

Siew-Peng Lee is Visiting Research Fellow at Brunel University London and Associate Tutor at the University of Warwick. She conducted research on Protestant Christianity in Singapore as an NUS research scholar some decades ago. While her PhD (London-SOAS) is in social anthropology, she now prefers to apply her anthropological training to teaching, whether this be IT skills to senior citizens, or English to graduate students and new migrants who flock to the UK from around the world. Her most recent engagement with NUS was as academic visitor at the College of Alice and Peter Tan (UTown).

Prayer in the Street: New Configurations of Jewish Worship Communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hannah Mayne

Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto
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This paper documents the emergence of Jewish prayer groups in streets, alleyways, and courtyards in Jerusalem during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In orthodox Jewish law, a quorum of ten adult men constitutes the basic definition of a worship community. Individuals recite much of the daily prayers by themselves, but a quorum is required for the recitation of additional, particularly sacred, responsive segments of the liturgy, and the ritual reading of a Torah scroll. With Israeli government regulations to maintain public health during the pandemic, and legal mandates for strict social distancing, synagogues have been shuttered for various periods. Lay practitioners who want to continue praying collectively are driven to find innovative solutions and to collaborate with their immediate neighbours. While typically, participants in a prayer quorum share a socio-religious experience within a bounded physical space, in the spontaneous groups that have emerged, normative boundaries of prayer community are stretched. Worshippers who hold a wide variety of religious views, who would not otherwise pray in the same synagogue, organize together, and are often spread out behind trees, walls, windows, or parked cars, dozens of meters apart. With such reformulated social, sensory, and material circumstances, these religious practitioners change the meaning of congregation, as well as the definition of public space. Looking at over twenty outdoor groups, I examine the power of social organizing and new configurations of prayer community in the face of crisis, the imposition of synagogue practices and norms onto sidewalks and roads, and the intransigence of gendered difference and segregation in the context of Jewish worship. The research for this paper is based on fieldwork carried out from April to December 2020, including ethnographic observation of outdoor groups, and informal interviews with people who attend—or purposely do not attend—these makeshift services.

Hannah Mayne is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research looks at the performance and politics of Jewish women's prayer practices in Jerusalem. One of her main case studies is the ongoing struggle between feminist, orthodox, and ultra-orthodox activists at the sacred site of the Western Wall. The project documents and examines contrasting notions of female religious power, debates about gendered ritual transformation, and acts of prayer as means to assert legislation and claim contested space in Israel/Palestine.

'Being There' in COVID-19 Times: New Spiritual Support Practices, their Meaning and Consequences to our Cultural and Existential Values

Irena Papadopoulos*, Runa Lazzarino, Steve Wright, Poppy E. Logan, and Christina Koulouglioti

Research Centre for Transcultural Studies in Health, Department of Mental Health and Social Work, Middlesex University

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Spirituality is a broad concept, revolving around the notions of connection, meaning, transcendence and values. Spirituality can encompass religion, or not, yet both appear to increase human wellbeing and health. For this, Spiritual Support (SS) is key to holistic, compassionate care (Papadopoulos, 2018), and its benefits for patients have been demonstrated. This paper discusses the radical changes in the provision of SS to hospitalized patients, and their relatives, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion stems from a scoping review of online sources (mass and social media, and websites of NHS and organizations concerned with spirituality) in relation to spiritual support to hospitalized patients in England during the initial pandemic peak, between March and May 2020. In the current outbreak, SS has drastically diminished, due to the emergency burden of care of frontline healthcare workers, and the infection control precautions hampering the services of pastoral and spiritual care units in hospitals. However, SS has also been transforming in quality, and, from religious collective rituals to non-religious spiritual practices, three fundamental changes have occurred: elimination of body language and contact during in-person SS, including rituals; SS and self-SS, via symbolic and creative actions, often domestic, to establish closeness-in-distance; and the virtualization of SS, using digital technologies, both in real time (e.g., live streamed masses and video calls) and deferred (e.g., recorded guided meditations and uploaded prayers). All these modifications are critically tackled in this paper, against the backdrop of the importance of SS in end-of-life, pivoting around the *inter-personal* encounter between the sick and the SS provider. Dying alone is usually constructed as a form of 'bad death' (Seale, 1998), to the point that cultures and societies have established collective rituals to ensure the smooth passage from the world of the living to that of the dead (Gennep, 2019). The use of digital technology may ultimately innovate our sense of 'being there', including with our avatar bodies, in SS. However, a reflection is needed around the effectiveness of rituals, which traditionally entail the physical presence of a collective (Durkheim, 2008), and of the 'new normal' forms of SS brought about by what is also an existential pandemic.

Professor **Irena Papadopoulos** is the Head of Research Centre for Transcultural Studies in Health, at Middlesex University. She is a qualified nurse and a midwife. Her clinical practice was mainly in community and in intensive care. Irena led several innovations within her workplace, such as the first BSc in Nursing, a Master in Applied Health Research, an online course in cultural competence and the first MOOC featuring culturally competent compassion. In 2007 Irena co-founded the IENE programme (Intercultural Education of Nurses in Europe) and led seven of its ten projects. In 2017-20 she led the cultural competence component of the Caresses project, a European-Japanese collaboration which produced the first artificially intelligent, culturally competent socially assistive robot for older people.

Runa Lazzarino is a socio-cultural anthropologist based at the Research Centre for Transcultural Studies in Health (RCTSH) at Middlesex University. For her PhD (UNIMIB), Runa conducted a multi-country ethnography on the recovery of human trafficking survivors. In her postdoctoral research, at UCL and UoN, her focus was on post-violence support needs in vulnerable migrants. At RCTSH, Runa has been involved in a European project around refugee families parenting skills, took part in two international online surveys about culturally competent and compassionate care, and in two systematic reviews about social robotics. Recently, Runa has participated in a multi-method study on spiritual support during COVID-19 pandemic in England.

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Christian Megachurches, Covid-19 and the Channeling of Charisma in Southeast Asia*

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Pentecostal megachurches in the major cities of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore have been known for their dynamic, concert-like mass worship services as well as intimate and personal mid-week small-group prayer meetings. Some of the more innovative churches have deployed big-screen and video technologies to connect congregations in different places and across countries. These uses of social and media technologies have been calibrated to transmit the charisma of the leading pastors to ensure congregants feel engaged in affective relationships with church leaders and the imagined Christian community. All four countries have been hit hard by the pandemic and the restrictions have severely limited the regular activities of the churches and affected their normal transmission of charisma and imagined communities. Building on two years of fieldwork among churches in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Manila, Penang, Singapore and Surabaya before the pandemic stopped the research, we discuss how the churches we have been studying have adjusted to restrictions by innovating new ways and means to channel charisma and facilitate imaginations of the Christian community both locally and overseas. We hypothesize that churches that have focused on mass worship services for the experience of the presence of the divine have suffered the worst during this period, while churches that have emphasized small-group relationships and used social media to replace or augment group meetings have been able to retain some sense of imagined Christian community. We argue that the post-pandemic landscape will become unfavorable for the on-site physical growth of megachurches, with existing Christians questioning the practices and commitments to their faith and turning to looser forms of Christian living and less intense experiences of divine presence, perhaps even bringing back the house church phenomena, while conventional megachurches will find it difficult to conduct evangelical activities and events to bring in new members.

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Lemongrass, Lotteries and the Digital: Underworld Gods on a Live Stream

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As the COVID-19 situation intensified in Malaysia during the second half of 2020, live-streamed videos of Chinese underworld gods, Dua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek appeared on the Facebook pages of several shrines and temples. Possessing different human vessels each time, the gods eat, drink, smoke, and chat with their devotees online. Through fortune telling, divination, and lottery numbers, the gods re-emerge to provide some semblance of normalcy, or rather, a new normal where they too tap into social media to connect with their devotees during times of necessary physical isolation. They respond to real-time 'comments' of online audiences, improvising and responding to questions from them. During one particular possession, Dua Ya Pek even had a specific remedy for COVID-19: stalks of lemongrass. Consultations with the underworld gods are often private as the gods attend to the devotees' personal life, including health ailments and relationship problems that need divine intervention. The shift to social media subverts this prior understanding, making the possession somewhat public. This is perhaps not at all surprising given the urgency and magnitude of the health crisis that affects all aspects of one's life and livelihood—including loss of income and the looming fear of catching the virus. This paper proposes to examine how divinities now engage with online devotees through live streaming. When the gods are still able to predict the winning lottery numbers, drink and smoke in front of their followers, and use the Internet, the disembodied bodies of spirit mediums now could, as if as one yet multiplied, perform the underworld gods' collective stance that they have always been available and active in a time of crisis. After all, the digits on lottery balls and slips have long been understood as signs of the gods digitally having a hand in the luck of their believers, a phenomenon now extended to the digital sphere.

Alvin Eng Hui Lim is a performance, religion and theatre researcher. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore. His research focusses on the intersections of theatre and religion, popular religious practices, spirit mediums and rituals, with emphasis on digital media. He holds a PhD in Theatre Studies jointly awarded by the National University of Singapore and King's College London. He is also Deputy Director and Technology and Online Editor (Mandarin) of the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A, <http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>). His first monograph, *Digital Spirits in Religion and Media: Possession and Performance*, is published by Routledge in 2018. He has also published on Singapore theatre, translation, digital archiving, and religious performance in Singapore. He is a member of the "After Performance" working group, which explores experimental modes of writing and co-authorship.

A Managerial Apocalypse: Mormon Missionaries, Eschatological Anxieties, and COVID-19

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Covid-19 was a unique challenge for many religious movements. But it is arguably a challenge in kind and scope for the missionary efforts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (an organization often referred to colloquially as the “Mormons”). These young missionaries, most of whom are in their late teens and earlier twenties, experienced a pandemic that was a crisis of both infrastructure, but also of legitimacy, for the Church like no other in perhaps a century. This paper will argue that apocalyptic strains in this “Latter-day” Church counterintuitively assisted in the emergency institutional maintenance that was asked of the Church and of the affective self-management demanded of missionaries. The particularities of Mormon millennialism, rather than being corrosive, rather work to catalyze pragmatic logic even as visions of supernatural destruction were being stoked.

Jon Bialecki is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of California San Diego. His academic interests include the anthropology of religion, anthropology of the subject, ontology and temporality, religious language ideology, and religious transhumanist movements. He received his BA, MA, and PhD from the University of California, San Diego, and his JD from the University of San Diego. He writes on North American neocharismatic Christianity, on global Christianities, on the anthropology of Christianity, on religious transhumanist movements, and on anthropological theory. His first monograph, *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement*, is a study of the miraculous and of modes of differentiation at the individual and institutional level in the Vineyard church-planting movement, with a focus on how these processes are expressed in ethics, politics, language and economic practices. He is currently working on his second manuscript, *A Machine for Making Gods: Mormonism, Transhumanism, and Speculative Thought*. His work has also been published in several edited volumes, as well as in academic journals such as the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *American Ethnologist*, *Anthropological Theory* and *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*; he was also recently a co-editor of a special issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* that focused on Christian Language Ideology and in of a special section of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* entitled “What is an individual? The view from Christianity.”

Luang Puu Khem: A Virtual Magical Monk in the Wake of Pandemic Thailand

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This paper meditates on a Buddhist magical monk icon (Luang Puu Khem) who re-emerged as a meme on the Thai visual culture platforms in the wake of the 2020 pandemic. Accelerated by the dramatic rising rate of online media consumption during the first lockdown in Thailand, Luang Puu Khem went viral, showing a magical Buddhist figure subverting challenges caused by natural and socio-economic forces. Preceded by the Turnerian concept of millenarian monk navigating political upheavals in Thai history (Keyes 1977; Bowie 2014), how can we make sense of this virtual (non-historical-based spiritual) hero in the face of contemporary disruption? As framed by the idea of Buddhist magical monk as a mediator between different classes in the context of socio-economic constraints Thailand facing a decade ago (Kitiarsa 2012), what does this expressive visual icon born out of the unexpected social setting help redefine the meaning of mediator provided by a magical monk? In this research undertaking, I examine the visual materials on social media regarding Luang Puu Khem. Despite the nature of this newly re-fabricated image, I argue that the imagery of Luang Puu Khem mediated Thai popular culture both of the past and the present of Thai society. As opposed to the seemingly superficial reproduction of this image, the evidence further unfolds that Luang Puu Khem evokes certain profound teachings of Buddhism and temporality in this pandemic era.

Napakadol Kittisenee is currently a PhD student in history at University of Wisconsin-Madison. He previously worked as the program coordinator in Cambodia for Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) and later served as the instructor for Minnesota Studies in International Development (MSID) in Chiang Mai from 2015-2020 together with the similar role for Summer training program in 2019 at Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) in Siem Reap. His research mainly focuses on Buddhist response to wars and atrocities in Mainland Southeast Asia. His forth-coming chapter on Buddhist Meditation will be published in Bloomsbury Religion in North America (BRINA) series (March 2021).

Remote Religion/Remote Region: Doing Religion Remotely in the Andaman Islands

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Remoteness is an attribute that has often been negatively attached to island-spaces like the Andaman Islands, separated from the Indian mainland by the vast Bay of Bengal, at the periphery of South Asia. The Covid-19 pandemic, on the other hand, has popularised the use of 'remote' methods of enabling social interaction. The islanders of these geographically 'remote' locations use these 'remote' ways of connecting to perform their religious practices and maintain their faith networks, which is otherwise compromised due to the pandemic-induced restrictions on social gatherings. For the Andaman Islands, where the lesser-known Matua religion has been a thread of connection—to the Indian mainland and Bangladesh—has now gone 'remote' to connect devotees beyond these circuits, and well into a global network of devotees. Further, the 'remoteness' of religion has also altered its form, as devotees use technology—often constrained by technical and logistical aspects, as much as social location and identities—to creatively practice their religious lives. This gives way to two questions that the proposed paper will explore: first, how do individuals play out their identities, both as islander and as devotee, 'online'; second, what are the corresponding technological and logistical conditions that enable their 'presence' and who are the 'absent' actors. The proposed paper draws from experience of conducting remote data collection, particularly online ethnography and telephonic interviews, for the research project 'Religion Going Viral: Pandemic Transformations of Religious Lives and Ritual Performances in Asia', as well as, ongoing doctoral research, to understand the mediating role of technology in destabilizing (and solidifying) concepts of remoteness and isolation, particularly in the peripheries of nation, during times of restricted mobility.

Raka Banerjee is a PhD research scholar at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India. Her doctoral research explores the agential role of lower-caste Bengali refugee women in a system of rehabilitation heavily influenced by patriarchal bias, and explicates the formation of their 'settler woman' identity in the Andaman Islands. She is engaged as Overseas Research Assistant for the project 'Religion Going Viral: Pandemic Transformations of Religious Lives and Ritual Performances in Asia' at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Her research interests include gender, migration and oral history with a specific regional focus on South Asia.

Buddha Relics, Kali Syrup, and Covid Cures: Resisting Elite Restrictions with a Popular Goddess

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The coronavirus pandemic has altered the usual movements of Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Seasonal pilgrimages were cancelled, separating devotees from important relics that perpetuate the Buddha's presence and have the power to heal, including the Sri Pada footprint, the Temple of the Tooth, and the Maha Bodhi tree. Distanced rituals continue at these sites, conducted by resident monks and select devotees, but without the larger public joining in the generation of merit. While such major sites, backed by the government, mostly prevented mass gatherings, the conditions of the pandemic also created space for new religious actors to fill the vacuum. Enter Dhammika Bandara, a priest of a small Kali shrine, who learned in a dream from the goddess how to make a syrup that gives immunity from Covid. Public interest was immense, generating crowds of people eager to receive free samples. The syrup was then taken on its own pilgrimage to the major Buddha relics until Bandara was refused entry to the Maha Bodhi tree by the chief prelate of Anuradhapura's eight sacred sites. Kali then spoke through the priest and challenged the monk in a dramatic confrontation. Some opined that Bandara had revealed a madness that would trigger his downfall, but the popularity of his syrup only grew, granted approval by Ayurvedic boards and cleared for clinical trials, with the goddess herself on the label. I argue that Kali's pandemic presence fits a pattern of this goddess appearing in new religious movements over the past several decades in Sri Lanka, often used to challenge conventional hierarchies and power structures. As the pandemic makes the old Buddhist guard bar its gates, allowing only conventional elites access to relics, the goddess mediates the distance between religious power and the public, presenting desperately sought cures for medical and social ills.

Alexander McKinley has studied the religious traditions of Sri Lanka for the past fifteen years. He earned a BA in Religious Studies from Grinnell College, a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, and a PhD in Religion and Modernity from Duke University. He teaches at Loyola University Chicago, and is working on a book about Adam's Peak. His research has been published in several academic journals and edited volumes, and he has designed a teaching module about Adam's Peak for the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies, where he serves as a board member.

From Virtual Holy Dips to Physical Pilgrimages: Tracing the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic upon Hindu Rituals in India

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In December 2020, India's West Bengal Government announced the launch of the smartphone app *Atithi Path* to facilitate holy 'e-*snan* [bath]' at the confluence of the River Ganga and the Bay of Bengal at the *Ganga Sagar Mela* [festival] in January 2021. This e-*snan*—which involves a devotee bathing with pre-ordered Ganga water while watching a live stream of the confluence—is one of numerous examples of the online mediation of Hindu rituals to have arisen since evolving coronavirus pandemic restrictions in India came into effect on March 24, 2020. While it is undeniable that online Hindu rituals have become more ubiquitous since then, this paper which traces modifications of Hindu practices during the different phases of India's lockdown, will challenge the claim that such rituals are indicative of the emergence of a particular pandemic form of Hindu religiosity. In making this argument, I will first highlight that online rituals did not initially arise in tandem with the new circumstances engendered by the pandemic and, instead, have been around—crucially, in forms not substantially different to their current iterations—since 1998. In addition, I will argue that the later prevalence of pre-pandemic online forms of Hindu religiosity meant that online rituals had, to some extent, already become an indivisible part of contemporary Hinduism. Furthermore, my discussion of the curtailed 2020 *Char Dham Yatra* [pilgrimage] will demonstrate that, despite these points, and the further impetus given to the desire for online rituals during the pandemic, online worship at the *Char Dham* was vehemently resisted. This further challenges the notion that online rituals are inextricably linked to the pandemic—as does my identification of several additional technological, religious, social and economic factors that should be taken into account in a fruitful consideration of online Hindu rituals during the coronavirus pandemic in India.

Heinz Scheifinger is currently Assistant Professor of Sociology at Zayed University, UAE. Formerly a Post-doctoral Fellow at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (Religion and Globalisation Cluster), he has also been Visiting Scholar at Singapore Internet Research Centre (SiRC), Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University. In addition, he has taught at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh, and has held faculty positions at universities in Brunei, Saudi Arabia and South Korea. He has published over a dozen journal articles and book chapters regarding various aspects of the intersection of Hinduism and digital media.

About the Organisers and Chairpersons

Ningning Chen is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Religion and Globalization Cluster, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS). She obtained her PhD from the Department of Geography, NUS. Her research interests include the fields of religion and sacred space, rurality and rural landscapes, and Chinese lineage culture. She has publications in *China Quarterly*, *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Population, Space and Place*, *Social and Cultural Geography*, and *Mobilities*. She is currently (co-) developing two projects: one is about Chinese clan associations (Huiguan) and their transnational networks between China and Southeast Asia, and the other is about pandemic transformations of religions in Asia.
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