**Religion and Health. Aspects of a Study-of- Religion(s) Perspective. With Special Regard to Covid-19.**

**A First (and Very Raw) Draft. References to Follow Also. Not for Circulation outside the Circle of Participants to the Online Meeting.**

From the point of view of the scientific study of religion, the general phenomenon and the various historical 'instances' thereof, i.e. religions (religious traditions past and present, majority or minority religious traditions), and religious phenomena (e.g. religious rituals, religious ideas, religious experts, religious places and religious organisations) is a human, natural, social and cultural phenomenon, - to be studied, interpreted and explained as such and with the theories and methods pertaining to the sciences, the natural, social and human sciences.

From this point of view, to put it in a nutshell, it is not gods who create the world, societies and human beings. It is but societies and human beings that create gods. In most classical as well as contemporary theories and definitions of religion (and of 'the religious' in rituals, buildings, persons, places, beliefs etc.) (notions of and references to) postulated super-human and super-natural (divine) beings are central.

A building is always a building, whether religious or not, but a religious building has something added to it by the religious people using it and also by those studying it, namely some kind of reference to a religious tradition that operates with postulates about something more than human, more than historical, more than natural. Something superhuman, transhistorical, supernatural.

A beard likewise is a beard, but a religious beard is a beard grown and worn with reference to something in the religious tradition, e.g. Muhammad or some other exemplary figure. Eating is eating and bread is bread but when partaking in the Christian mass eating bread and drinking wine is partaking in something considered a sacred ritual as well as instituted by a supreme divine being and the eating is thus not just like any other eating and the bread is not just bread and the wine not just wine. The notion of something sacred (to somebody at a certain time in history) is linked to this and equally important.

Likewise, a tempest may very well be nothing but a tempest, just like a beard may be nothing but a beard, bread just bread, and wine just wine. But a tempest at times may be more than 'just' a tempest, maybe if it comes unexpected, if it has disastrous consequences, if it hits me exactly when I hapen to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time. In those cases it may, just like a tsunami, an earthquake, a plague, a devastating virus, be suppposed to be more than just normal, namely something given, created, caused by the divine beings, the ancestors, fate, the unfolding of the universe and time. It could be seen as a 'sign' of the wrath of the gods or ancestors, in response to human beings being unfaithful, humans who have not sacrificed as they were supposed to, who have conducted in a way that might be called asocial or immoral, etc. etc.

A well-known idea is that the moral (good or bad) of the people and their leaders can be 'read' in the in the fields, in the women, in the cattle and amongst the people. Moral or ritual transgressions are punished by a failure of crops, by infertility among women, by illness, disease, plague, hunger, by poverty, by war and defeat etc. Or, in good health, crops, fertility, peace and well-being.

What to do? behave! Make sacrifice, pray, repent, change your way of life, be loyal to the god, have faith in the god, follow his commandments etc.

What is said above to a large degree corresponds to one of the first natural explanations of religion given by David Hume (but in line with some ancient ones and to a large degree also with modern cognitvist explanations for religion): it is fear (not least of natural powers) that creates gods, and it is, to refer to a famous modern scholar linked to cognitivist aproaches, human and natural to 'see human faces in the clouds'. Only by peopling nature with human like beings can you try to protect yourself and remedy matters, only so can you communicate and negotiate with nature and try to make deals with nature. It provides you with a means for action as well as it 'makes sense'. It is a way of 'coping' with e.g. disaster and disease.

All this, of course, does not mean that the religious adherers of today and of the past do not and did not know about some of the natural causes for e.g. a disease, a death, a disaster etc. Modern day adherers may very well know about bacteria and viruses and the spread thereof. But this, then, the virus, the epidemic, the spread, is then maybe seen as an instrument of the god(s), and the god(s) can protect (or could have protected) people from the disease if he/she so will, save them from dying from it, etc. And why is it them and not I who die from it, why this and not that person who suffers?

This, in its own way, is equal to making sense of a disaster, be it Covid-19 or a tsunami or an earthquake, and ascribing a supernatural cause and/or human moral cause makes, as said, action possible: you can pray, you can atone ritually for your sin, you can give money to the temple, you can buy amulets, you can sacrifice.

You can also hope that the ('truly') faithful will be healed, will be spared,- or if not spared, will find some kind of good afterlife. Contrary to the crooks, maybe even those who survive, who will then be punished as deserved in the afterlife.

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For the study of religion, some of the big questions are: why do humans, as natural, social, and cultural beings create religion? What's the use of it? What's it good for, in terms of making sense of the world, in terms of well-being, in terms of evolution and survival, in terms of making culture and civilisation, in terms of social formation, and identity construction?

Have humans always 'made' religion, or does it start at a specific time in the history of what has come to be humankind, and if so then why at that time in history and not at another time? Does religion have something that 'non-religion' does not have in terms of social cohesion, identity-construction, social and individual 'coping' with world (the natural world included), social and life crises, individual and collective diseases and disorders, moral (social) and (asocial) immoral acts, meaninglessness, death, etc. ?

This study-of-religion approach to a certain extent is always fundamentally critical and reductionistic as regards religion. It is not, however, fundamentally critical in an ideological way, e.g. working to prove that religion is a man-made *mistake* that ought be done away with. It does not have the emancipatory aim of getting rid of religion seen as a (dangerous) illusion, a disease. It's a critical and reductionistic approach, explaining religion and religious phenomena, including religious experiences, with reference to something human, natural, social, psychologial and non-religious. It is primarily a theoretical and methodological stance, and scholars often name it 'methodological agnosticism' (often scared of even calling it 'methodological atheism' for fear of being accused of having a normative, non-neutral or ideologically atheist position and agenda).

A few scholars, however, openly admit that they do not think that a scientific approach can be separated from a 'belief' that the world of science is superior to the world of religion and that - in the world of science and in the world as seen by science – there simply is no room for supernatural, superhuman beings, monsters, flying blue elephants, effective healing and curing by way of prayer and laying on of hands, shamanistic rituals and healing by way of amulettes, etc. '

This does not mean, though, that a scholar of religion cannot try to study the degree to which praying may give hope, - and hope (and thus praying) may be of help in a healing process. Alone or in combination with medicine produced according to the recipe of medical science and prescribed by a doctor educated at a university, - in contrast to 'medicine' provided by the 'medicine-man' in line with certain religious ideas about the supernatural and healing power of some herbs or some parts of some animal.

Religion and religious practices and institutions can 'make sense' of things and happenings otherwise 'meaning-less', and meaning making may prove healthy.

Religious ways of living may also be more healthy than non-religious ways of living, but some may also have the opposite effect: fasting may be good and healthy for some but ruining for others in terms of bodily health.

Praying without also consulting a licensed doctor within the majority health system supported by the modern state may prove fatal. Trusting in God to help save you or trusting that you are invulnerable because you have smeared yourself with some blood or drunk cow-urine likewiuse may prove fatal.

Religious community creation and social gatheringe and identity construction may be morally and spiritually and politically 'healthy' (and intimately tied to the progress of humankind and civilisation) but it may also lead to mass infection.

A normal study-of-religion(s) approach can deal with and study such issues with no problems.

It can very well have, as one of its topics, the study of religion, religious traditions, religious beliefs, religious rituals and other practices vis á vis health (and healing), including the very notion of health as seen from a religious perspective.

It deals with various kinds of religious notions also notions of the body, of diseases and illness, of death, of the end of the world, of natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis, epidemics), and it deals with religious ways of healing or curing (as well as caring), including efforts to cure or handle pain, bereavement etc. Rituals linked to giving birth, rituals linked to dying, including funeral rites, also loom large.

All this can be studied one way or the other also with regard to religious ideas of sin, divine punishment, divine trials, miracles, religious healers, religious supposedly healing diets and food items, and it can thus also be studied in regard to medicine, the history of medicine, alternative medicine, folk medicine etc. - and all of this can be studied with an eye for not just conflict between science and medical science, on the one hand, and religion and religious medicine and notions of disease and healing practices on the other.

It can also be studied with a special interest in intersections of medicine and religion, of religious 'forerunners' for medical science, healing and care-taking (monasteries and hospitals, nuns and nurses, medicinemen and doctors). Today, likewise the interplay and cooperation of medical science and religion and religious ideas and practices is an obvious target for studies, also with special regard to Covid-19.

The study of religion thus may contribute in a way similar to anthropology to what has been called 'medical religion' understood as an interdiciplinary area as well as field, similar to the study of religion and medicine. It may well include studies of bioethics, and studies of care-taking within religious traditions including e.g. new age spiritualities.

But it is rarely if ever 'applied' or having practical aims of e.g. helping to cure the sick, helping the world to get cured from a disease or epidemic, helping the dying or even the healthy and luckily alive people coping with the uncertainty and anguish caused by the epidemic. It normally is non-normative, descriptive and explanatory.

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While I shall elaborate on some aspects of the draft above in the talk planned for the actual conference in Taipeh in June (or August) this year, the bullit-points ahead serve as a starting point for a more 'matter-of-factual' or 'sporadic' way of saying a few words about religion and Covid-19. It is but a first and fast overview of a few of the ways (typical and within the general patterns indicated above) in which religion has come into play during the Covid-19 (Corono-virus) pandemic as it seems to have spread from China to most of the world. At the end I indicate how the Covid-19 may lead to some changes within religions.

*The cause of the factual break out of Covid-19:*

Wild-animal markets supposed to be the point of departure: It *may* have had something to do with traditional-cultural and religious (supernatural, superstitious) beliefs and practices linked to ideas of specific animals/foodstuff supposed to have specific (healing), purifying, revitalizing effects in regard to e.g. health, potency, fertility etc.

*Causes for the disease Covid-19, the Corona virus epidemic as given by various religious people, communities and traditions:*

*- The Will of God/Caused by God/God-given (monotheistic traditions)*

- *Reasons why given by or caused by God, gods, ancestors, rule of heaven, cosmic law etc.*

*- Punishment for religious/moral transgressions*: homosexuality (e.g. ultraorthodox Jew with reference to gay prides), lack of faith, whatever

- *Punishment as a 'trial'*:

the god is trying the people/adherers. they have to prove they know he/she is superior, the one and only saviour, master of life and death. They have to accept the fate, the fate given by the god, they have to accept their inferiority etc.

This can lead to passivity and even going agiants health authorities but it can also be combined with more rational and science based ways of thinking and acting: You can pray *and* wash your hands, you can pray *while* you wash hands, you can tell your congregation that the best way of worshipping god for the time being is to not go to mass, to wash hands, - and that love of your neigbour is staying away from your neighbour.

*- Assemblies, community, religious gatherings: a core element in what constitute religion and key to religious life and transmission of the religion*:

Religion seen as worship and construction and consolidation of the common morals, of the community, the group, the 'we', the 'nation', is central to key theories of the rise and function of religion.

- *Consequently lots of examples of how various religious groups and traditions and leaders discuss whether to meet or not:*

- for Easter, the central Christian festival, the death and resurrection of their god, the death and resurrection of the community and the world

- for the Friday prayer

- Ramadan coming up

- Pilgrimages

Thus also many examples of leaders (e.g. Muslim and christian) refusing to honor the rules issued by heath authorities, and other leaders urging their followers to heed the orders.

Thus also examples (e.g. in a South Korean Christian minority religious group called Shincheonji) of religous assemblies/gatherings/mass meetings where religious people come/came together (to pray, perform rituals) confirm and (re-establish) their collective identity. NB: Be aware here of prejudice, stereotypes, marginalization and scapegoat mechanism on the side of the majority (religion) and the state too. E.g. in South Korea.

- *Religious and* *theological notions, beliefs countering the scientifically based medical guidelines* on how to contain the contagious disease, the infection, the epidemic, but also the opposite: Muslims, e.g. in Iran and Pakistan, often in conflict with each other, in regard to the 'right' interpretation of e.g. the Quran or the ahadith.

Let me quote from a website reefrred to (

<https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-challenges-muslims-faith-and-changes-their-lives-133925> ) on the sociology of islam mailinglist recently because it so clearly show what is at stake also in other religions, namely a conflict of interpretations:

"An early debate in Muslim circles around coronavirus has been a theological one. Muslims believe God created the universe and continues to actively govern its affairs. This would mean the emergence of the virus is an active creation of God.

So like some [other religious groups](https://www.keepthefaith.co.uk/2020/03/17/disease-outbreak-is-punishment-from-god/), some Muslims argue that coronavirus was created by God to [warn and punish humanity](https://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/1254962/coronavirus-claim-latest-god-religion-covid-19-update-news) for consumerism, destruction of the environment and personal excesses. This means fighting the pandemic is futile and people should rely (tawakkul) on God to [protect the righteous](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-mosques/muslims-in-indonesia-divided-over-friday-prayers-amid-coronavirus-fears-idUSKBN2170ZF).

Such thinking may help in reducing the sense of fear and panic such a large-scale pandemic poses, but it can also make people unnecessarily complacent.

The vast majority of Muslims counter this fatalistic approach by arguing that while the emergence of the virus was not in human control, the spread of disease certainly is. They [remind us](https://www.thesciencefaith.com/prophet-muhammad-pbuh-on-epidemics-and-quarantine/) that Prophet Muhammad advised a man who did not tie his camel because he trusted in God: “tie the camel first and then trust in God”.

Prophet Muhammad sought medical treatment and encouraged his followers to seek medical treatment, saying “God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease—old age”."

*- Comforting the worried, troubles adherers*

- *Humanitarian aid*

Let us not forget that today as with the tsunami etc many religious groups react with provding humanitarian help. Sometime but not also mission is linked to it. But still.

*- How Covid-19 may help change religions*:

- today many more people also religious have been told about the non-religious causes of the disease and about the non-religious ways of avoiding the spread of it (and later medicine and vaccination): this will most likely make even more religious people think of disease in non-religious terms or at least in both religious and non-religious terms: pray while washing your hands! Or wash your ands and pray, alone.

- online religion and religion online, as well as drive in services in countries not used to it, e.g. Denmark.

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*Freedom of religion*

What does this mean to Human Rights on Freedom of Religion and Belief, the ideas and the practices, of religions and states ?