Modules for Teaching Pandemic Response and Religion in the USA

Pandemic Response and Religion in the USA

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Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Religious Holidays in the U.S.

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Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Religious Holidays in the U.S.

THIS MODULE INCLUDES:

- A summary of the issues that various religions have had to address in their celebration of holidays due to COVID-19.
- Articles that discuss at least 3 holidays each from a separate religious tradition. Each holiday will also have additional articles should a different case study be preferred.
- Links to more readings about holidays during COVID-19. More resources can be found here: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/.

A celebration at New Mosque on the first day of Ramadan located in Istanbul, Turkey. "Istanbul, Ramadan" by *VasenkaPhotography* is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Definition of "Holiday"

What is a holiday? Holiday can be broken up into two words "Holy" and "Day." Most people will recognize a religious ritual, but they would have a hard time defining what rituals are. Neither Ramadan nor Passover are days, they are sacred events that last over a period of *multiple* days. While Labor Day is certainly a holiday, calling it "Holy" or "Sacred" would be a strange thing to do. Holidays vary from culture to culture, religious tradition to religious tradition. Some holidays are vastly different even within the same religious group.

It is important to distinguish the diversity of what constitutes a holiday, rather than creating a single static definition of what a holiday can or cannot look like. For example, although Easter is celebrated on a single Sunday, it is not the only holiday celebrated in, nor is it the only holiday celebrated as part of the Easter narrative. Christianity. For instance, there could be no Easter Sunday without Good Friday, however, both of these holidays are celebrated very differently. The goal is to get students to think critically about the purpose and potential consequences of giving restrictive definitions to certain terms such as "holidays."

For the purpose of this module then, we will use a working definition of Holidays as: **A period of time where religious traditions hold special celebrations, rituals, or events that encompass a community.** The Coronavirus has had strong effects on communities and holidays during the pandemic. This can be most clearly seen by the isolating effect it has had on Religious communities. The authenticity of some rituals has been called into question because they cannot happen in a certain place or with a certain group of people.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES:

Issue 1: In the Spring of 2020, during quarantine, many major religious traditions faced restrictions to their celebration of some of their most important religious holidays. How have these restrictions affected communities?

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Issue 2: Some traditions require pilgrimage, fasting, communion, or rituals that require social interaction. How has this changed due to social distancing requirements?

Issue 3: Religious holidays have a doctrinal purpose. Do the changes in ritual affect the communities understanding of doctrine?

Classroom Implementation

This teaching module can be presented in two lectures/classes:

1. First Class: Present the background information and the main issues based on the provided case studies and links. The instructor will divide the class into groups (Number per group dependent on class size and instructor's preference).
   a. Homework: Each group will select a case study and come prepared to present on selected case study. Each group will be tasked with providing their own solution to the presented issues (See Summary of Issues). Please see below for presentation instructions. If class is in an online format, please see below for alternative assignment.
2. Second Class: Group Presentations on selected case study. If class is online, student led discussions on each issue will take place. See below for alternative assignment.
   a. Homework: Response Paper

Presentation Instructions:

Groups of students will select a case study based on the issues/articles provided and will present on their selected case study related to mikvah/mikveh use during the pandemic. Students will also be charged with forming a solution to the presented issues. by answering the following questions:

Other case studies/articles outside of the selected study may be used when forming a solution to presented issues. The duration of each presentation will be determined by the instructor. If the instructor chooses, a response paper can be assigned requiring students to critically engage with one of the case studies. The response papers can be submitted to a dropbox provided by the instructor.

*Alternative Assignment for Online Classes: For online classes, presentations may be switched to individual student papers around the topic. Additionally online student discussions may be used in an asynchronous setting to allow for students to share ideas with one another.

HOMEWORK SUGGESTIONS:

Research Paper/Case Study Paper prompt: Groups of students will select a case study based on the issues/articles provided and will present on their selected case study related to religious holidays during the pandemic. Students will also be charged with forming a solution to Issues # 1-3 by answering the following questions:
1. What adaptations have religious communities enacted under COVID-19 restrictions?
2. Do people view the alternative celebrations as authentic?
3. How has continuity of the holiday been affected by COVID-19?
The duration of each presentation will be determined by the instructor. If the instructor chooses, a response paper can be assigned requiring students to critically engage with one of the case studies. The response papers can be submitted to a dropbox provided by the instructor.

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Case Studies:

The following case studies/articles can be found on Western Michigan University's Scholarworks database found at link: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/

Judaism: Passover-

https://abc7ny.com/passover-seder-digital-coronavirus-covid-19/6081202/

This article describes how Jewish families have adapted the Passover tradition known as the *seder* meal due to the social distancing restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article features a video showing how Jewish groups have reached out to individuals and families facing isolation and loneliness during the pandemic.

https://time.com/5814851/passover-coronavirus/

This article features a Jewish family from New York and the halt to their roughly 50 year *seder* meal tradition. The article describes the changes and adaptations the family has made in order to keep their elderly family members safe from the Coronavirus.

Christianity: Easter-

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/04/03/easter-coronavirus-world-restrictions/

This article compares Easter celebrations around the world in the first and the second years of the COVID-19 pandemic. A brief discussion on government policies and social distancing restrictions is featured in the article.

https://www.businessinsider.com/photos-easter-and-passover-celebrations-during-covid-19-outbreak-2020-4#if-a-gathering-is-planned-consider-holding-it-outdoors-the-who-said-4

This article features several images and descriptions of Easter celebrations around the world during the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Islam: Ramadan-

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGVfshPzJ84

This YouTube video features Rami Ismail, an independent game developer and Muslim, who found a way to celebrate Ramadan digitally through video games. Ismail was able to celebrate

Ramadan with Muslims around the world though Animal Crossing, a popular community building simulation game created by Nintendo.

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/may/12/its-a-very-different-ramadan-how-coronavirus-has-upended-ancient-rituals

Thus article features Islamic scholar Mufti Zeeyad Ravat and the changes he has observed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The article details the alternative celebrations Ravat and others have engaged in during Ramadan.
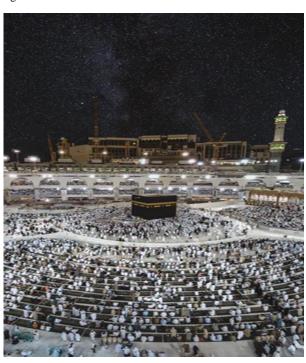

Photo taken of the Kaaba during an Umrah pilgrimage right after the Subuh prayer. Phot0 is by *Izuddin Helmi Adnan* and is free to use under the UnSplash License.

A Jewish community gathers before the Passover Seder.
" Passover Seder 009" by *Roger Mommaerts* is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Further Reading:

https://nationalactionnetwork.net/newnews/amid-the-coronavirus-pandemic-rev-sharpton-calls-upon-faith-leaders-to-discontinue-services-leading-into-easter/

This article discusses Christian and civil rights leader Al Sharpton's call for other religious leaders to cancel their Easter celebrations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

https://www.christianpost.com/news/texas-church-to-host-easter-egg-hunt-minecraft-game.html

This article discusses a small Christian community hosting an Easter egg hunt virtually through the video game Minecraft.

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53140914

This article discusses the Saudi Arabian government barring international pilgrims from attending the *Hajj* during the first year of the Coronavirus pandemic.