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Ritual During Covid-19

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Ritual During Covid-19

This teaching module includes:

- A background "Fact Page" for students.
- Short video clips to illustrate the content from the "Fact Page."
- A proposal for implementing this module in the classroom.
- Relevant case studies along with a homework prompt for students.
- Additional resources for instructors.



This photo was taken during the Mayan ceremony of *balche* in Punta Laguna, Tulum, México. Photo by *Jimmy Salazar* on Unsplash. Free to use under the [Unsplash License](#).

Fact Page and Resources for Students

Introduction to Ritual:

Defining Ritual

Ritual is typically viewed as complex and formal religious actions, such as prayers, ceremonies, and offerings. But a ritual encompasses much more than that. The simplest action can be considered a ritual action. For example, closing one's eyes before praying. Ritual includes outer actions and inner intentions. It is one's inner intentions that provide experiential meaning to the ritual action.¹ Some of the most influential scholars of religion have weighed in on this issue. Emile Durkheim, regarded as the founder of Sociology, theorized that the function of ritual was to bring individuals together and provide cohesion and unification in a "collective effervescence" within the religious community. Bronislaw Malinowski expanded the functional aspect of ritual to include solutions to anxiety and uncertainty. Other scholars of religion have taken a different approach to religion. Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz emphasized that ritual is both performance and communication.



The 2019 Winter Solstice celebration before sunrise. Photo by *Dyana Wing So* on Unsplash. Free to use under the [Unsplash License](#).

¹ Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

Ritual in Different Traditions:

In the United States of America, it is often the case that when people think about ritual, they think about prayer, baptism, and other rituals associated with Christianity. Christianity is widely practiced in this country and many American cultural practices are indirectly linked to Christianity. However, ritual activity extends beyond Christianity and is present in all the world's religions. For example, initiations in Buddhism, the worship (*puja*) in Hindu Traditions, prayer (*salah*) in Islam, festivals (*matsuri*) in Shinto, these all represent forms of ritual.



Ganesh Puja 2012 by *Sadasiv Swain* is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Digital Rituals

Ritual is one aspect of religion that has been influenced by technology. Religions continue to evolve as people, societies, and cultures change. This can be seen in the increased use of virtual platforms such as Zoom and social media to participate in communal rituals. It will be important to have students think critically about the way COVID-19 has influenced the ability to perform rituals.

VIDEO CLIPS: EXAMPLES OF RITUALS

Religion for Breakfast:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_URgZf01hU
This video analyzes the term “ritual” and shows that defining ritual is complex. It identifies many strategies that one can use to think meaningfully about ritual. For example, thinking about rituals from the perspective of what rituals do instead of what ritual is.

Dimitris Xygalatas on PBS:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbxZUO4d_XQ
This video shows Sufi's engaged in a ritual and how some scholars of religion are studying this ritual activity. This video also brings in technical terminology in ritual studies.

A priest uses a squirt gun to administer holy water:
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic-ritual/26/>
Marking the forehead with ashes on Ash Wednesday and taking Communion are two Christian rituals that involve material culture. The impact of Covid-19 has caused many Christian churches to alter the way these two rituals are performed. This article asks the question: Should Christian churches tweak their rituals?

The power of ritual | Dimitris Xygalatas | TEDxAthens:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrljCLvSQ_cw&t=30s
This video describes, in detail, a Hindu festival that takes place in Thailand.



Photo by *Dan Keck*. Free to use under CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.

Case Studies:

Sample Case Study: Islam-COVID-19, Ramadan, and Video Games

Covid-19 and Islam

The pandemic greatly affected how Muslim religious leaders practiced Friday prayer (*Jum'ah*) and other community gatherings, especially during the first months of the pandemic. Umar A Farooq, journalist for *Middle East Eye*, explores how technology is being used to meet the spiritual needs of the Muslim community. Farooq discovers that Mosques across the world were closing their doors to worshippers and the call to prayer (*adhan*) changed from “come to prayer” to “pray in your homes.” Despite these changes in worship, some Muslim religious leaders (*imams*) in the U.S. have become innovative in meeting the needs of their communities. Imam Omar Suleiman, a prominent religious leader in the U.S., uses webinars to conduct virtual sermons every week. The Muslim American Society (MAS) has also switched to web-based lectures to provide Qur'anic recitations, communal supplications, and general spiritual advice. However, leaders of the Muslim community were concerned with how practices would be conducted during the holy month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is a holy month (from April 23rd to May 23rd in 2020) in the Muslim community that is primarily focused on fasting, prayer, and community gatherings. The holy month commemorates the prophet Muhammad’s first divine revelation and is celebrated by Muslims worldwide. Fasting from dawn to sunset is viewed as obligatory for all adult Muslims, and the daily fast is broken with a nightly feast often celebrated with the larger community (*iftar*). However, the pandemic put a halt to these community gatherings, and some Muslims found new ways to celebrate Ramadan digitally.



Rami Ismail, an independent game developer and Muslim, is one such innovator who found a way to celebrate Ramadan digitally through video games. Ismail was able to celebrate Ramadan with Muslims around the world through Animal Crossing, a popular community building simulation game created by *Nintendo*, and a *Twitter* post. Ismail's post received a large influx of responses, and he created an open area in game for Animal Crossing players to talk with each other, break daily fast, and have an overall sense of community.

See website/links discussing the above case studies:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGVfshPzJ84>
- <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-muslims-islam-mosques-virtual-spiritual-practices>
- <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/24/843521371/muslims-around-the-world-face-a-different-kind-of-ramadan-amid-coronavirus>

Sample Case Study: Native American Traditions-The Social Distance Powwow

Spring is the time of year in which several Native American and First Nation groups gather to participate in powwows. A powwow is a sacred gathering in which Native Americans or First Nation individuals and groups observe and participate in their culture. Powwows include prayers, singing, dancing, and other rituals, all of which are intended to heal and uplift people during hardships. Powwows are meant as a way for individuals and groups to express their culture. During Spring 2020, many powwows across the United States and Canada were either postponed or canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements (See Teaching Module: *Law and Public Policy*). This left many Native American and First Nation people isolated from their communities as they were unable to gather in-person to celebrate their powwows.

To solve this crisis, three individuals, Stephanie Hebert of the *Mi'kmaq* Nation, Dan Simonds of the *Pequot* Tribe, and Whitney Recountre of the Crow Creek *Sioux* Tribe, founded the Social Distance Powwow on March 16, 2020. The Social Distance Powwow is a Facebook group whose goal is to bring powwows to individuals and families impacted and isolated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first major virtual powwow took place on March 21, 2020, and the group gained around 58,000 followers during the event. The Social Distance Powwow currently has around 308,661 followers. The creators of the Social Distance Powwow host a powwow once a week in which dancers, singers, and drummers gather in-person, but observers must watch virtually. However, other groups and individuals are able to post their own powwow dances, songs, and other performances to the Facebook page.

Some individuals believe virtual powwows are not ideal. However, the Social Distance Powwow has allowed several Native American and First Nation people to remain connected and

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involved in their culture. The purpose of the powwow is to participate in one's culture, and the Social Distance powwow allows for an alternative participation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the Social Distance Facebook group has received positive feedback from non-Native Americans and First Nation people. The Facebook group has allowed Native American and First Nation people to share their culture and tradition with those who are unfamiliar with powwows.

See website/links discussing the above case studies:

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/socialdistancepowwow>
- <https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-wa-state-wire-ca-state-wire-virus-outbreak-554c19361024c974252f5034af9061eb>
- <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2020/03/27/indigenous-arizonans-join-dancers-across-country-online-powwow-during-coronavirus-outbreak/2918984001/>
- <https://www.indianz.com/News/2020/03/30/were-building-faith-indian-country-share.asp>

Classroom Implementation/ Activities for Students

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

1. **First class:** Begin presenting the Fact Page and ask students what they think rituals are and if they can name any rituals and its associated religion. This can be done in small groups or as an entire class.
 - Lecture on rituals using the material from section "Introduction to Rituals."
2. Watch video clips. These short clips demonstrate the content in the "Introduction to Rituals" section.
 - **Homework:** See Below.
3. **Second class:** Break the class into small groups. Have each student share their homework assignment. This exposes students to different religious traditions and responses to covid-19.
 - Conduct a general discussion with the class. Have one or two students from each group share some of the main points discussed in their small group.



RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

Student Homework Assignment:

Present both case studies to students. Split class into an equal number of groups. Assign each group one of the case studies.

1. What happened? Summarize one of the case studies in your own words. Specifically, what ritual(s) are present in the article?

2. Covid-19 Response. Did rituals change during the pandemic? If yes, identify the ways in which they changed. Think about the ways in which religions adapted to the pandemic. If religious practices did not change, identify the reasons why the practices did not alter.

Further Reading:

<https://news.osu.edu/praying-together-over-zoom-how-religion-sounds-during-a-pandemic/>

This article discusses the American Religious Sounds Project and their collection of religious sounds from during the Coronavirus pandemic. Religious sounds can include prayers, singing, among other rituals from various traditions.

<https://voxeu.org/article/rising-religiosity-global-response-covid-19-fear>

This article details the increasing religiosity of humans around the world during the COVID-9 pandemic as well as the potential impact increased religiosity can have on the world.

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic-ritual/5/>

This article draws out the purpose of rituals and connects well with the above section “Defining Ritual.” There are glimpses of Durkheim’s approach with social cohesion, but also shows how ritual is a response to the uncertainty caused by Covid-19. An example of this would be religious groups praying for a vaccine. Finally, it provides some research showing religious membership in the Covid-19 era that can be used to think broadly about rituals and the healing aspect that is understood as an effect (or correlation) with performing rituals.

<https://theconversation.com/different-faiths-same-pain-how-to-grieve-a-death-in-the-coronavirus-pandemic-138185>

This article details how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted death and funerals for Jews and Christians.



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