Postnormal Religiosity in Pandemic Times: A Polylogue

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Abstract
What constitutes a polylogue? What, in our pandemic times, makes for a meaningful gathering? Of the many and varied things affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, religiosity is one that has certainly garnered attention. How are individuals and communities adapting spiritual practice amidst our truly postnormal times? What challenges and opportunities face spiritual sojourners during a time of global upheaval? Bringing together a diverse array of voices to reflect on some of the many issues related to “postnormal religiosity,” this is not an article or essay but rather a polylogue in both approach and form. Authors, some of whom are unknown to the conveners, were asked to answer some questions and reflect on postnormal religiosity. The product, as such, is as much process as it is polylogue, which offers some insights on this under-theorized concept within postnormal times theory.

Keywords
postnormal times, religion, spirituality, polylogues, COVID-19

Introduction: Why Postnormal Religiosity?
If 2020 has taught us anything it is that it is hard to keep faith or trust in what we previously considered to be normal, conventional, or orthodox. The simultaneity¹ of the pandemic and the lockdown showed complex globalized fragility never experienced before. The effects of the COVID-19 lockdown shows us that we are in postnormal times where the “conventions about how society is supposed to function have been undermined. The assumptions that served as the bedrock of the global order have also evaporated. We find ourselves face to face with new and emerging realities that we have yet to grasp” (Sardar 2010, 10). Thus, the conventional and the orthodox do not work anymore, and we enter the domain of the postnormal.

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Nothing describes the postnormal reality of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown than what has happened within the space of faith and religiosity. When the global lockdown took place last year in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic breakout, few would have imagined the systemic disruptions to our manufactured normalcy. Even fewer forecasted a transformational change in faith practices and approaches to spirituality and by extension a change in the religiosity of people. The lockdown threatened existing business models for many faith institutions that had hitherto relied on face-to-face engagement to conduct religious worship but more importantly had also democratized the space for spiritual practice. For the first time at a global scale, faith congregations and faith leaders would be challenged to take their practices online and now not only would they be serving their immediate congregations but they would also be at the beck and call of a global audience. Suddenly agency was gained by those who were previously cut off from the places and leaders of worship but equally agency was lost due to the digital divide and the inability to connect online. Postnormal religiosity is an attempt to sense-make the contours of expressing one’s religiosity and spirituality during times of radical uncertainty, various states of lockdown, and amidst societies requiring distancing.

We use the concept of postnormal religiosity in an attempt to interrogate the ethical (and spiritual) implications of perpetual technological advancement amidst enforced lockdowns. In order for the article to deal with the diversity of approaches, to listen to multiple voices, and to accommodate a plethora of perspectives, to develop an inclusive way forward, the article deploys the concept of a polylogue. Envisaged as spaces that provide for “multiple logics, perspectives, voices, and existences,” polylogues bring people together to generate critical insights (Kristeva 1977; Sardar and Sweeney 2016). In a polylogue, questions are more important than answers. In utilizing the concept of the polylogue, we postulate that it is only through a diverse exchange of ideas that a shared understanding of the impacts of the pandemic, and its related crises, on religion and spirituality might arise. In designing our polylogue, we reached out to a range of contacts, who were all asked the same four questions:

1. What was the key thing that struck you as different in terms of religious practice and thought during this crisis?
2. How have “postnormal times” shaped and reshaped religious and spiritual thought and practice?
3. What was the most challenging part of religious and spiritual experiences during the pandemic?
4. What would you do differently in hindsight?

The replies received were quite varied, although some common themes are apparent. This itself is quite interesting particularly given the “random” selection of the contributors. Thus, the commonality amidst the diversity points to some interesting lessons from the pandemic.

In addition to our primary aim, it is our hope that this experiment contributes toward a more robust theoretical and methodological foundation for the polylogue concept within the broader context of postnormal times theory. Although Sardar notes that polylogues are “the essential tool for navigating our way out of the pileup that is building on the highway to the future,” the concept has not been developed beyond its initial invocation within postnormal times theory (Sardar 2010; Sardar and Sweeney 2016). One aspect that is essential to the topic under investigation as well as polylogues as constructs is trust: how might individuals feel comfortable and confident sharing deeply personal experiences?

To this effect, we are thankful to those individuals who “trusted” us with their personal stories. These views paint a challenge for future expressions of faith and religiosity.

Who Motivates the Motivator?

Amjad Saleem

Who motivates the motivator? Ever since the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, I have struggled as a leader of a team, with trying to
keep my team motivated, whilst seeking ways to motivate and inspire me. So I turned to what normally motivates me during times of stress and that is my spirituality. Yet I found a challenge, where I was unable to practice elements of spirituality as I had done before: as a Muslim, going to the mosque for Friday prayers played a huge role in my spiritual motivation. For the first time that I could remember, I would not be able to go to the mosque as usual. Though I had missed Friday prayers before due to travel and illness, this time around, it felt strange, that I had the ability to go but I could not. And when it did start for a bit in between the first and second lockdowns, it was not the same, with the physical distancing and the wearing of masks, making the whole experience very lonesome and not in keeping with the spirit of community.

As the lockdown stretched beyond a couple of weeks, the challenge became very real as the prospect of a Ramadan in lockdown loomed. I did not relish the fact that this would be a difficult Ramadan making it a challenge beyond the usual challenges from an intellectual and spiritual capital perspective. Not only would I be unable to go to the mosque for prayers but I would not be able to engage with others as the spirit and cultures of Ramadan had taught us. So I turned to a friend and a mentor, an Anglican Priest, who in previous years had kept me physical company during Ramadan, choosing to fast in solidarity with me and meeting me to break the fast. Those times that had passed, we had shared some of the ideas of fellowship, understood the commonalities of each other’s faith and shared spiritual engagement. This time round, we were reflecting on trying to capture that whilst being physically distant and trying to buck the norm which is in itself a teaching of Ramadan, settling on using Google Meet as a way to connect.

So in an initial way, I wanted to create a virtual space with him primarily to act as a spiritual catalyst and a way to retain some sanity amidst the chaos of not being able to function normally. However, as we discussed with each other, we realized the need to expand our conversations to consider a wider virtual interfaith space. For me, interfaith engagement remains a true space for dialog, respect, and understanding around the common human concepts of compassion. These values in the face of the lockdown and physical distancing are at risk of declining. So the challenge became how do we maintain this spirit whilst going virtual?

As I embarked on these conversations with other faith leaders, I realized that the question of “who motivates the motivators?” becomes more valid for faith leaders. With the services going online, and places of worship becoming virtual, faith leaders were having to not only adapt but to take on more roles and responsibilities. Mainly because as leaders and spiritual guides of their congregation, in a virtual space, they would now have to be “on call” providing solace more than ever, for longer periods than ever. Having to lead congregations on Zoom, taking into account the technical and logistical matters whilst ensuring spiritual solace could take its toll. I had faith leaders telling me that whilst they were conducting sessions of worship, they could not take spiritual relief from it as they were worried about ensuring that congregation members switched their mics and videos off. In addition, with accessibility going virtual, faith leaders were now reaching out to more and different constituents from diverse demographics, geographies, and time zones than ever before, which has tested them in unforeseen ways. So I realized that more than my spiritual sustenance, in fact a space for faith leaders to reflect and be vulnerable was needed as a way to motivate them. This was entirely interesting for me and really unforeseen in terms of realizing the needs for faith leaders during these times of lockdown.

So what are some of the lessons learned over the past 9 months of engagement with these faith leaders? Firstly, there needs to be a recognition that faith and worship has become virtual and so it is not really business as usual or normal. We have to contextualize and think differently of how we engage and who engages. There has been a flattening of the hierarchy of worship. Previously one would have to go to the mosque or the temple or the church to meet the religious leader and this could be inaccessible for certain genders and age. Yet with services going on line, you now
had the faith leader appearing in your front room but more importantly, if you did not like your local faith leader you could pick and choose to attend other services given virtually by other faith leaders. So the “urbanization” of faith services has become the norm and now faith leaders are no longer just for their local community but have become global. As communities increasingly face extended lockdowns, the pastoral and spiritual care afforded by faith leaders has been extended now to mental and psychosocial support alongside tech support. With all the different requirements placed on faith leaders, there is now no space and time for their reflections and downloading. This needs to be considered for their own mental health.

So where does this lead to any consideration regarding the future of faith and the future of faith leaders? Simply now more than ever, it is not simply about leading in worship or services but to have more pastoral care along with mental health support. Faith leaders will need to be more flexible in this virtual age which also includes a need for peer engagement.

What needs to be done differently? We need to recognize that faith practices are now easily followed through online and what is needed is for people to have a space to decompress and share their fears and anxieties. Faith leaders need to evolve in how and what services they can provide and also what support they need to be able to do this properly. As people need to decompress so do faith leaders. We also need to understand that how we look at congregational prayers and community gatherings has to change as does some of the delivery of religious practices which become virtual. As such faith institutions need to adopt and the flexibility of the use of places of worship will need to be reconsidered. A post normal religiosity has to take into account the future of congregational worship services and in very real terms the future of religion.

God’s (Wi-Fi) Signal
Wei Ling Low

How would our relationship with the divine be different with virtual churches, temples, and other places of worship? Would our prayers still mean the same when conveyed through bad Wi-Fi and broken microphones? Can our sense of belonging to a religious community stay the same? And how about with our experience of religion itself?

The outbreak of COVID-19 has left us stranded at home, testing our religious self-discipline. With the observation of social distancing (Shukman 2020), for the first time we are forced to pray, fast, and worship without the physical presence of our fellow believers. It has even sparked off a new research topic where researchers are studying whether this physical distancing could impact the audio aspect of spiritual ritual (The Ohio State University 2020).

Religious institutions have been quick to deploy technology in order to engage their followers. Pastors are turning to preach on YouTube (The Vine Church 2020); Imams are conducting live “Ask Me Anything” question-and-answers on Facebook (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020); Monks are now savvy as the new Instagram spiritual influencers (buddhistinsights 2020); and Zoom is now the byword for young and old alike for hosting religious meetings (Bishop 2020). COVID-19 will be history’s greatest and most influential actor in creating the postnormal spiritual marketplace (Whitelaw et al. 2020). Believers are now spoiled for choice and no longer limited by geographical proximity, specific service timeslots, or even particular religious personalities.

In addition, talks and seminars that used to take months to organize can now be easily set up within a week (Bigmarker 2017). We have livestreamed webinars to thank for the elimination of obstacles around venue booking, for instance security clearance required for high profile speakers, or upfront financial outlay to host a physical event. Virtual meetings have also integrated tools so sophisticated, that virtual meetings may even be more effective in engaging their audience (Nanos and James 2013). Instant file sharing, poll systems create a more dynamic two-way environment, even on religious grounds.

In 2020, a new world order is emerging—one that integrates technology with religious
participation, transcending geographic boundaries and even language, given voice recognition and simultaneous machine translation (Subotovsky 2020). Now with a higher level of technological adoption by religious institutions, it is possible that post-COVID, dial-in options may become more the norm rather than the exception for attendees with time or geographical constraints.

Back in 2000, Putnam assessed how virtual engagements can lead to the creation of tangible virtual communities with spillover effects in real life (Putnam 2000). This was further explored by McClure (2017) who concluded that “Internet use may fill in the gaps between previously scheduled events.” This pandemic may just be the golden ticket for religious institutions to court dispassionate bystanders.

Virtual platforms can be highly efficient engines for the busy follower (Globalia Logistics Network 2020; Nanos and James 2013). For someone with a hectic schedule, taking half the day off may prove impossible (taking into account commuting time and post-event socializing). The embarrassment of walking in late or leaving early may be enough to make some avoid participating altogether. In other instances, if a follower is even slightly unwell, he may decide to err on the side of safety and give religious attendance a miss. People who travel often can now dial in anytime even while abroad. The global deployment of technology also benefits followers with limited religious representations where they live. For example, Shinto followers around the world may now be able to tune in to webinars about Shinto from a university in the United States (CJBS News 2020).

Interestingly, McClure (2017) research has indicated that “Internet use lowers the likelihood of exclusive commitments to any one religious institution.” He touted this as an opportunity for “spiritual tinkering,” or to put it simply, an exploration of foreign religious landscapes. The current spurt of online resources encourages us to learn more about other religions as well as question and deepen the understanding of our own. All this can be done at a self-determined level of visibility or anonymity, providing a safe space for curiosity (Edmondson and Daley 2020). This psychological safety encourages the merciful display of vulnerability while participants delve into a higher level of spiritual and emotional connection.

Digital platforms provide low barriers to entry with many companies offering a free-mium model to attract early users (Pelter 2020). As the world has gradually got used to a second life on the internet, this is a blue moon season for religious institutions to re-strategize their engagement and evangelism activities. In the past, religious leaders struggled to find ways to engage their younger followers (Dallas 2016), with changes in lifestyle brought by modernization, traditional means of preaching, and worship (Vitisia 2016). However, with this unprecedented pandemic, it is a time for experimentation on how to foster greater engagement and communication with their congregations.

In reality, technology cannot entirely replace the bodily presence that the architecture of physical space and the interaction of living communities provide. However, the integration of technology allows for different opportunities that would not be possible if confined within the walls of traditional religious structures. Centuries of civilization and a myriad of factors have allowed traditions of religious preaching and teaching to evolve. As we now experience this jolt to our traditional evolution processes, perhaps we could leverage on it to consciously explore newer helpful forms of religious belonging and worship.

Experiences from Malaysia

Zarina Nalla

I speak purely from a personal perspective of how the ban of all public congregations during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Muslim religious community in Malaysia.

This was how it all began: from 27 February to 1 March 2019, close to 16,000 Muslims attended a 4-day gathering at the Sri Petaling Mosque, Negri Sembilan, Malaysia. 14,500 of the attendees were Malaysians, while others came from Singapore and Brunei. The gathering
accounted for 36% of the total number of cases several weeks later.

On the 18th of March 2020, the Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that Malaysia would be under the Movement Control Order (MCO). Much economic activity would come to a standstill and public gatherings would not be allowed.

However, the announcement that Friday congregational salat or prayers will no longer be held did evoke much emotion and reaction, a difficult decision which was handled delicately by the Malaysian authorities. This tough policy directive needed the Mufti himself to make a public announcement on national television to appease the religious community who were in disbelief that for the first time, known to the author, they would be deprived from weekly gatherings of Friday prayers (Salat Jumaat). “All activities at mosques and suraus (prayer houses) including Friday prayers and congregational prayers will be postponed beginning from 17 to 26 March 2020,” Datuk Seri Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri said in a statement.

The Friday prayer ban was a game-changer. It paved the way for what was awaiting us. We sat and watched in horror as the MCO got extended from one public announcement to another, robbing us of so many aspects of our religious life. Precious practices that we took for granted were put on hold.

Besides congregational Friday prayers, Muslims gather at mosques or homes for other occasions such as during funeral prayers and burial rites, weddings, talks, the Eid (festive) prayers, and Terawih prayers which take place every evening for the entire month of the Fasting month of Ramadhan.

As a result, many classes are currently being organized via virtual platforms now. Other religious events like Quran recitation or the Maulid when we celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is being conducted in different ways, such as a live telecast of a few members singing poetry and salutations, while keeping strictly to Standard Operating Principles.

We miss the face-to-face interaction and the whole experience that stimulates the senses, the smell of lamb *beryanis* (rice cooked with spicy lamb) served at almost all weddings, agarwood incense, sweet jasmine, and oud perfume.

I noticed that as the months of lockdown continued and became long drawn, the religious community became more desperate to replace the face-to-face gatherings that they were accustomed to. They were bent to replace as best as possible, the yearned lessons by their teachers. The camaraderie and rapport must not be lost. There was once during the fasting month, when the late night prayers (Tahajjud), as in before sunrise, were organized over a Zoom link. Those who joined in were able to hear voices only and see some faces only. Also, background noises can be very interruptive and most members would have to mute or be muted for the sake of the majority.

Another interesting development that ensued was that the proliferation of virtual platforms also meant that we could enjoy online gatherings at a global level, which was not possible before. No travel is required, no travel, and the cost is also much cheaper. However, I am convinced that the physical presence would have been very different.

Most cameras would be switched off for obvious reasons as everyone is at home where switching the video function would be an infringement of privacy.

In a nutshell, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing MCO are galvanizing the religious community to use virtual platforms as creatively as possible. The list of activities has been quite impressive and many have embraced this new behavior.

**A Time to Change**

*Saeed A. Khan*

Timing is everything. In the midst of the early conversations emerging in early February about a strange virus discovered in Wuhan, China, I continued what was then my usual frenetic pace of academic teaching punctuated by air travel. It was yet another serendipitous trip that took me to Saudi Arabia, where I had the blessing to be able to perform Umrah. Upon
my return home to Detroit in the United States, and an immediate turnaround involving a 1 day trip to New York City, I endured a “48 h” flu-like occurrence unlike any previously experienced. Looking back on that now, I realize it was a very mild case of COVID-19.

A month later, the virus from Wuhan had made its way to the West Coast of America and before long, I, along with so many others in Detroit and elsewhere, was plunged into a new reality: a near complete lockdown. We were now in quarantine, from friends, from family, from work, from the rhythm of life that we had taken for granted just days earlier. As days turned into weeks, I adapted to life “online,” as the means to continue my teaching responsibilities and also the mode of communication to the world outside my home that seemed to have lurched to a halt. That Ramadan began 2 months after the initial lockdown was no mere coincidence; it came with not only its usual blessings but an opportunity to take stock of the elemental aspects of life and one’s needs.

Ramadan 2020 will be remembered for its constriction from the usual social aspects that form its own, unique pace. Gone were the iftar invitations; gone was Taraweeh at the mosque; gone was the prospect of Eid with friends and family; gone was the anticipation—and anxiety for some—of new outfits, cooking, even appearances. But what was lost gained a new and amplified appreciation. Missing those familiar trappings of Ramadan helped evoke the memories of Ramadans past and the longing for the restoration of those wonderful practices. At the same time, Ramadan under COVID-19 was akin to a month-long itikaf (spiritual retreat), where being sequestered at home allowed one to conserve energy and rechannel it toward the spiritual. Islam compels us to avoid the trite question “Why Me?” to instead accept that life under COVID is yet another test and that we are being tested as those before us were as well. This continuity and connectivity with humanity, both present and past, merges faith and hope in an organic, seamless way. Occurring in the midst of Ramadan allowed for the perfect opportunity to apply the spiritual discipline of the month in real time to cope with this challenge individually and collectively to help friends and family know we are there for one another, even if separated through sequestration.

While some might contend that we are now living in a “postnormal” time, it is unlikely that we will or should return to a completely identical pre-COVID way of life. Just as Ramadan teaches and encourages us to take the lessons and greater spiritual discipline of the month and apply them throughout the year, life under COVID will have a clarifying and cleansing effect. I have found that life under COVID has helped to enhance creativity in “connecting” with the Ummah. “Zoom Islam” has allowed for maintaining existing relationships and even developing new ones. With the entire world coping with this pandemic, I have noticed an unprecedented increase in empathy, which is so essential for our own well-being as well as others known to us or not. As quarantines are lifted, and there are restorations of “normal” interactions, patience (Sabr) is rewarded more vibrantly; gratitude (shukr) is felt more deeply and appreciation for what before seemed ordinary, even tedious, takes on new and fuller meaning.

While life under COVID quarantine certainly allowed for greater self-reflection and focus on the spiritual, it also brought with it spiritual challenges. With the uncertainty of when the lockdown would be lifted, I was struck with the anxiety that I might not be able to be available for my friends and family, especially my parents, in case they were in need or worse, were stricken by the virus. It was a constant, agonizing debate with the self as to making the attempt to visit them, while also realizing that doing so might inadvertently expose them to COVID, and perhaps the best course of action was staying away. Feelings of guilt and helplessness are inevitable, but they become tempered with faith in Allah’s mercy that He alone has the power to protect whom He wants, and our role of reliance on his beneficence is perhaps the highest expression of faith we can perform.

I know many people who were looking forward to the end of 2020 as they found it to be a difficult, if not cursed, time. I beg to differ.
The pandemic, though not welcomed, certainly served its role as being one of those tests to gauge one’s ability to adapt, to cope, and to apply one’s own religious and spiritual training. If there is one thing I would have done differently, it would be to show people how to jettison those aspects of their lives they thought were indispensable and irreplaceable. COVID has served as a wonderful moment to pause, assess, and dispose of the baggage we carry in terms of material excess as well as the baggage we allow to be imposed upon our souls.

Changing Our Approaches

Jean Hon

Navigating post-normative times during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Asian American Buddhists showcases the need for temples to change their administrative approaches to how they treat youth and is highlighting many government policy changes necessary to support our citizens. Asian American Buddhists are a minority group that is rarely remembered or even thought of. COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing social problems while fueling an unprecedented rate of anti-Asian racism and hate. These intensified struggles push many Asian American Buddhists to dig deeper into their faith and is leading some youth to question their temple’s social structures. I recommend Asian American Buddhist temples to reevaluate what their purpose is for youth groups and for local and federal government to implement policy changes to curb the negative impacts of the pandemic.

If you are unfamiliar with Asian American Buddhist demographics, here is a quick snapshot: Most Buddhists in America are of the “Baby Boomer” generation (Pew Research Center 2020). Additionally, Asian Americans and Asian American Buddhists encounter challenges like poverty (Tran 2018), language barriers (Luthra 2014), and large cultural gaps (Thao 2018) when engaging with others outside their immediate social and religious circles. Asian Americans and Asian American Buddhists primarily live in large urban cities like New York City and Los Angeles (Hernández 2016). Unfortunately, at this moment, additional or more in depth information is not available on Asian American and Asian American Buddhist communities because we lack fully disaggregated data collection (Ahmad and Weller 2014).

From what we do know, here are some statistics:

1. In 2018, in New York City*, the Asian American poverty rate was quite high at 21.7% (when compared to the non-Hispanic white rate of 13.2% and the non-Hispanic Black rate of 19.2%) (NYC Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity 2020).
2. 60% of New York Asian Americans are Limited English Proficient (Asian Americans for Equality, Inc. 2011).

These barriers combine to ultimately limit access to job opportunities, quality health care, education, and more (and remember, these problems existed pre-COVID-19).

Asian American Buddhism, like every part of our world, is changing in our post-normative times. Venerables are building their own Instagram profiles (I “heart” posts that unwittingly reveal their own personal likes and preferences, something that Venerables strive to shed themselves of). Larger nationwide Asian American Buddhist temples are restructuring and funding programs to attract more youth, such as building youth groups, creating Buddhist Girl/Boy Scouts of America troops, and making social media platforms. There is now a quiet acceptance of non cis-gendered identities. Premarital sex is no longer shamed, and non-hetero relationships are quietly accepted.

At this moment, Asian American Buddhist temple’s changes may seem progressive, but the changes are not meeting the needs of the practitioners and the youth they serve. COVID-19 is drastically impacting everyone’s lives through increased rates of sickness and death, straining government and non-government sources of culturally and linguistically competent resources (resources that are also being eliminated due to a lack of funding), increasing
joblessness, and increased at-home tensions leading to a rise in domestic violence. Additionally, there is a rise of COVID-19–related anti-Asian racism. Racists utilize COVID-19 as a “legitimate” reason to engage in slurs, hate, and violence against Asian Americans (Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tamir 2020), including Asian American Buddhists. United States President Trump’s racially charged words, like “Kung-flu” or “Chinese virus” used to refer to COVID-19, enable racists to legitimize anti-Asian racism and emboldened racists to act out, speak out, and violently harm Asian Americans (Davis 2020). Asian American Buddhists have experienced COVID-19–related anti-Asian racism, but these data are not readily available. Hate crime reports do not disaggregate data to include religion.

Buddhist practitioners are feeling at a loss. The COVID-19 pandemic forced Buddhist temples to close and critical services have halted, like funeral services, wedding ceremonies, baby blessings, and more. During difficult and emotional times, like experiencing the loss of a loved one, many turn to religion. However, with temples physically closed, many Buddhists are without support. Only the most well-funded and technologically advanced temples transitioned online with a limited array of services, Zoom chanting sessions, virtual meditation programs, and online spaces to provide emotional and mental outlets for sharing and support. The vast majority of Buddhist temples were unable to transition online. Furthermore, practitioners who lack internet access, experience language barriers, or cannot afford online devices are unable to access these few online resources.

Through informal anecdotes, Asian American Buddhist youth who can go online have been sharing their COVID-19–related racism, emotional pain, and need for connection online. They often feel they have nowhere to go and have inadequate outlets to release their hurt and frustration. Many have turned to Buddhist scriptures, meditation, and chanting to help alleviate their anger and frustration; however, many still feel deep emotional pain. Some youth try to use their temples and religious youth groups as a space for organizing, speaking out against racism, standing in solidarity with other minority groups, and more. Unfortunately, they were deterred from doing so by temple staff, Venerables, and Monks. Most temples steer away from government politics and policy; Venerable administrators who are “in charge” typically do not see temples as the “proper” place to mix with organizing for social change or justice, even if that change would be in line with Buddha’s teachings. This has led many Asian American Buddhist youth to question the role temples play in our communities. Many wondered, “Why are we together as a youth group under the teachings of Buddha, but can’t actively work on making the world a better place?”

Across the United States, we are seeing the incredible power youth possess through organizing and building calls for change; if temples wish to remain relevant to youth, they may need to change their policy of non-participation and inaction.

Government has an important and large role to play in alleviating the impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic onto Asian American Buddhists and temples. These policy changes would benefit all Americans and enable temples and practitioners to better weather the negative impacts of COVID-19. Allies, Asian Americans, and Asian American Buddhists must voice their needs to local and federal governments to

1. push for data disaggregation to properly identify the specific needs and communities within the extremely diverse Asian American and Buddhist communities;
2. fight for greater funding in culturally and linguistically competent resources to adequately reach those with Limited English Proficiency and understand cultural differences; and
3. demand the Federal Communications Commission to view the internet as a public utility, so all support systems can be provided and accessed online.

All three policy changes, if implemented, will ultimately benefit all Americans. Better data disaggregation allows for more accurately
and efficiently distributed resources and aid, thus eliminating waste and time loss. Providing culturally and linguistically competent resources in all major languages leads to lower strain on the healthcare system (Saha, Beach, and Cooper 2008), crime (Vergara et al. 2016), and more. Finally, treating the internet and internet accessibility as a public utility will enable all Americans to get online and during this pandemic enable them to see doctors, apply for jobs, increase productivity, visit their temples, and more (Reglitz 2020).

These policy actions can serve as a template for other countries. In Western countries, people of Asian descent are often treated with xenophobia, regardless of their actual citizenship. They are racially profiled to be “outsiders,” and oftentimes their unique needs are not fully accessed. These policy changes can better gauge the needs of minority groups, support them in ways that can be most accessible, and connect them to our growing online world.

A (Spiritually) Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Belarus, or (Religious) Fear and Loathing on the Flight out of Kazakhstan

John A. Sweeney

On 17 March 2020, I left Kazakhstan. As was customary, this entailed scurrying out of my apartment at 3:30 a.m. to catch the red eye back to Belarus. Calling it “the” red eye is perhaps disingenuous as there is no other flight at any other time—as such, “the” red eye is simply “the” flight from Almaty to Minsk. I cannot remember exactly when the first prayer crossed my lips. Perhaps it was when the taxi driver was turned around at the first roadblock? Perhaps it was when we hastily pulled up to the airport with minutes to spare before the cutoff to check-in? Perhaps it was when I was safely in my seat on the last flight out (for months)? I honestly cannot recall, but I vividly remember a prayer crossing my lips at some point, and I am pretty sure that there was more than one.

While I have a strong recollection of praying sometime during this sojourn, I have no memory of the content of what I imagine was a request for divine intervention or safe passage or some combination of the two. I certainly do not remember reciting a Hail Mary, although my trip to India the week before should have prepared me for much lengthier prayers. A work trip to Delhi ended up being an 18-hour “turn around” as the event at which I was supposed to present was canceled the day before (and after the entire team had arrived on site). As it turned out, some Italian expats, who were thought to be responsible for spreading the virus, had stayed at the event hotel. I do not recall praying during my flight back from Delhi, and I typically do not even make the “sign of the cross” before takeoff, which makes my strong memory of prayer on my trip out of Kazakhstan unique, if not memorable.

Why did I feel the need to pray at this moment? As a lapsed Catholic, I suppose that I have perfected the art of “need-based” prayer, which speaks more to my own privilege than anything else. In my own defense, I typically save such incantations for existential events (family illness, humanitarian crises, etc.) and not mundane things, such as parking spaces and sports team victories, but I digress. That I chose to pray or felt a tinge of religiosity in this moment has stuck with me. Since arriving back in Belarus, I have not visited one of the country’s many Catholic churches, which—like many other things here—have remained fully open and operational during the pandemic. My wife and I pray rather sporadically, primarily an “Our Father,” which is absolutely baked into my consciousness. I suppose I can say now that this moment of needs-based prayer bothers me. Is my faith merely relative to the degree of inconvenience that I feel? Was it merely my own privilege, or rather the potentiality of its loss, that sparked my spiritual awakening on the plane?

Reflecting on my own experience has led me back to postnormal times, specifically the constitutive nature of contradictions to my own personal faith, postnormal religiosity, and our historical moment. As Sardar notes in his original treatise, there are two primary contradictions that require careful consideration:
(1) contradictions emanating from the rapid pace of change and (2) contradictions relative to the vast increase in knowledge but also ignorance. Indeed, the many and varied conspiracy-theory-fueled events of late (from the anti-vaccine crowd to the mob-driven attack on the US Capital) not only validates Sardar’s acute awareness of the dynamics driving life within our all-too-postnormal age but also, in my view, a dynamic that speaks to my own experience of postnormal religiosity.

While many have noted the unsurprising increase in spiritual practices across many faiths and traditions brought about by the pandemic, something about this revival, as with my needs-based prayer on the flight out of Kazakhstan, has stuck with me. Might this moment lead to genuine spiritual awakening? Or, as is the case with my experience, could such moments ignite a deep and existential questioning about the ethical contradictions inherent to life in our all-too-postnormal world or my own, self-described, “withered” faith? Perhaps withered is a bit too strong, but, like many other Catholics, my ritual practice could certainly be described as derelict. Interestingly, it has been through travel that I have “recovered” aspects of my personal faith. The opportunity to travel across Europe has brought many a venturing into churches of various scale and grandeur, which always sparks a feeling of connection to larger forces. But, without this or the comfort of feeling like a church is a safe place to go, what becomes of my faith? What becomes of faith when commensality is not possible?

I certainly only feel comfortable speaking about, and criticizing, myself, but I cannot help but feel like there is a gaping aporia in turning to faith in such moments, which, I truly hope, says more about the nature of my Catholic upbringing as it does about my Master’s Degree in Religion, which provides some insight as to the range of reasons and rationales for why faith, and its related ritual practices, can and might wax and wane. And, my faith has certainly come and gone over the years. Situating my own experience within the context of the postnormal, I have rediscovered a passage in Sardar (2010) article: Welcome to Postnormal Times. Although lengthy, it is worth quoting in full as it gives a glimpse into the gravity of my internal “inquisition.” Sardar observes:

Every social, cultural, political, philosophical and religious outlook known to humanity needs to relearn how to engage with its own ethical precepts. And this brings us to the other elephant in the room, in fact more of a monstrous woolly mammoth. Value neutral universals embedded in systems of knowledge, progress, modernisation and bureaucratisation were supposed to enable us to transcend the intractable problems of the diversity of belief. The different formulations of belief, each with their particularities and constraints, each making exclusive claims to possess the only right answers, were seen as barriers to expansive critical inquiry and therefore restraints on human advancement. In one sense the nexus of secular modernity has done its job—it has landed the entire globe in the same dilemma: the postnormal dispensation (Sardar 2010, 443).

Sardar has a notorious way with words, and there is something tragically beautiful about the very concept of “the postnormal dispensation.” While typically framed within the context of Christian historical ages, the specific Catholic canonical concept of a dispensation is far more acute, although this is perhaps not what Sardar had in mind.

In short, dispensations within Catholicism refer to an exemption, usually from having to adhere to a certain law or observance. As such, the concept of “the postnormal dispensation” strikes me as precisely what my needs-based prayer was likely aiming to capture: a fleeting sense of privilege brought about by a rupture of contradictions inherent to our all-too-postnormal age. It would be foolhardy to diminish the problems espoused by anyone anywhere during a global pandemic, but my own struggles are certainly trite in comparison with the millions of displaced peoples around the world or those who had their entire world turned upside down by the many and varied lockdowns initiated last year or those who lost loved ones while maskless masses took to the streets proclaiming freedom. Am I being too
hard on myself? If the cathedrals and ritual practice is taken away, what becomes of my faith? How can I reconcile the privilege that now seems inherent to my faith? Can the contradictions of my faith be transcended? Answers seem impossible, at least for now, and I suppose that I should take solace in the questioning itself.

Concluding Reflections: Polylogue in Practice

Amjad Saleem and John A. Sweeney

This was an experiment. Rather, this is an experiment. Polylogues have to be experimental, right? Our intended aim was to bring together a collection of voices to reflect on postnormal times and religion, and it has been a journey. In that journey, it was interesting to get some initial reactions from people that we had reached out to contribute. What is a polylogue? And as we explained, it was clear that this was a new concept even in terms of cocreating a paper. However, those that agreed to contribute are contributing authors we know quite well, and others are new friends. Now that we are reaching the end of this journey, we want to reflect not only on content (what came out of this polylogue) but also process (what we learned from taking this journey together).

What has this polylogue told us about postnormal religiosity? Certainly, it has raised more questions than answers, but we believe that this is precisely what polylogues should do. Reflecting on the collective insights raised by all of the contributors, start to emerge:

1. Internet-enabled “spiritual tinkering” (McClure 2017) is now a, if not the, norm. McClure effectively argues that the internet and online connectivity enables a more fluid engagement with religious practice and belief. While the nearly all-encompassing digitalization accelerated by the pandemic crisis left many with time and tools to tinker, it remains unclear as to what effects this can and might have on aspects of “belonging” as a critical dimension of religiosity. Will belonging to and with online communities emerge as a dominant form of practice? Are more solitary modes of faith and practice enabled by moments such as ours? Will “tinkers” always continue to do so? What about the role of faith leaders, the space they occupy and the space they will be expected to occupy in the future? Religions have always been “early adopters” with regard to various communication technologies, but the particularities of our present moment should not be underestimated. Ours is truly a postnormal time, which brings with it a host of challenges unlike those before. In addressing such challenges, could there be a “postnormal dispensation” which will signify an evolution and a transformation of how faith and religiosity can and might be approached?

2. One key aspect of life in postnormal times is the inherently “promiscuous” nature of trends, which connect, collide, and conspire leading to new drivers of change and emerging issues en masse. Critical questions remain as to how postnormal religiosity will continue to encounter and react with a range of other effects of the pandemic, including widening economic inequality, gender-based violence, and mental health challenges, on top of the usual, “You are on Mute” or “Please keep your mic on mute.” Given that the virus is affecting communities in vastly different ways and exposing intersectional inequalities, it seems likely to expect that the lasting effects upon postnormal religiosity will also be highly contextual. How will some traditions mutate and/or evolve in response to the pressures of postnormal religiosity? What aspects of faith and practice can and might be transformed through postnormal religiosity? How can faith, religiosity, and practice rise to the challenge of postnormal times?

3. As a crisis further complicated, if not accelerated, by and perversely affecting
climate change and other dynamics related to our collective ethical choices and the systems underlying and sustaining them, the pandemic has laid bare the contradictions inherent in our all-too-modern lives. How can and might religious traditions and spiritual practices “meet the moment” on the critical ethical issues of our time and those to come? What opportunities exist for postnormal religiosity to embrace the “age-old virtues: humility, modesty and accountability” (Sardar 2010, 443). How might postnormal religiosity support ongoing calls to confront institutionalized racism, entrenched inequality, and the legacies of colonialism? In an age of “vaccine nationalism” or “vaccine patriotism,” what can postnormal religiosity contribute toward greater vaccine equity both within countries and between countries?

4. Our polylogue was intended to be a space where different people could share insights and experiences. While the pandemic has created too many online spaces where people can congregate and gather, few, if any, have an explicit intention to facilitate critical engagement on postnormal religiosity. How might such spaces be hosted and facilitated? What expectations should be set for future polylogues? What affect might further polylogues have on postnormal religiosity? If the real “product is the process,” how can and might such spaces of engagement be driven by a “participatory futures” ethos? (Ramos et al. 2019).

As with spiritual practice, the borders and boundaries of polylogues are elastic, if not entirely plastic, which is to say that who defines what is and is not a polylogue is an open-ended question. As a concept within the lexicon of postnormal times theory, polylogues hold a unique space. Polylogues imply both a theoretical (encompassing premises and principles for how people might engage with one another) and methodological (meant as a replicable framework of practice) comportment that is clearly pre-designed but also emergent. With that said, it is unclear how polylogues differ from more traditional workshop approaches. The initial incredulity that many people that we originally approached to contribute suggests a healthy skepticism of the concept. However, a paradoxical challenge has arisen not only from the pandemic but also from the conversations about decolonization that took agency over the last year. The online space has led to a democratization of the voices providing better diversity and inclusivity (albeit to those who have a solid internet connection). Yet there have been calls to decolonize the thinking away from a “Western” centric model. This in particular has been leveled at the academic space which draws its inspiration from the traditional Western Centric knowledge process where traditional evidence-based papers are written in a certain language to be reviewed by “peers” who are also often from a Western Institute.

The concept of a “polylogue” in that effect changes the dynamics of such contributions, crowdsourcing thought leadership in a way perhaps not fully understood or appreciated. So “polylogues” emerge as an “answer” to needing a more inclusive decolonized process to access thought leadership. However, that itself poses a number of questions. Is a difference in process (specific method, presumably one embedded within postnormal times theory) enough to substantiate or designate something as a polylogue? In short, what constitutes a polylogue? As with the defining of “belief” across religious traditions, perhaps the most important and useful dimension lies with the question rather than any answer.

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Notes

1. Simultaneity is referred to by Sardar (2010) as things moving at great speed, acquiring global scale, and scope but happening simultaneously.

2. Even Google Meet represented a buck of the trend of using Zoom calls. Engaging on a different platform from the norm during a period which is supposed to help you reflect differently.

3. Adherents of the Islamic faith are required to perform Salat or prayers five times each day. It is the second Pillar of Islam. God ordered Muslims to pray at five set times of day: Salat al-fajr: dawn, before sunrise; Salat al-zuhr: midday, after the sun passes its highest; Salat al-’asr: the late part of the afternoon; Salat al-maghrib: just after sunset; Salat al-’isha: between sunset and midnight.

4. The latter is certainly linked to the former as I felt inclined to seek out learnings from other traditions at a young age but never felt satiated in understanding other traditions. As the Religion department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa has an explicit non-Western religions focus, it certainly felt like a place to indulge my wanton spiritual interests.

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