



# Religious minorities and the loss of their 'collective effervescence' in rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract:** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, religious minorities suffered limitations on their religious rights. Due to such limitations, religious minorities lost what is called the 'collective effervescence' of their rituals and started transitioning to a new religious digitalization.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization raised the public health emergency caused by COVID-19 to the category of a global [pandemic](#). Contrary to other emergencies such as military conflicts, natural disasters, or economic crises prevalent in this contemporary age, the right to life and the right to health became immediate priorities that needed to prevail over other fundamental human rights

One of the rights that was severely affected by the quarantines and lockdowns, was the right to [freedom of religion or belief](#). There is no doubt that this right can be derogated for emergency health measures and public safety. These decisions made by the national governments [led](#) to the closure of churches, limitations on the right to association, and the digitalization of religions. This changed drastically

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the perception of religious activities and the way they affected the mind of individuals

For the first time, religious rituals were not performed in sacred union, with people valuing the liturgy of their respective religions. Rituals were performed by congregants, and not clergy, alone in their own homes, looking at a screen and without their religious guides. During the lockdown, children coming from families with fewer resources suffered from a lack of equipment for the realisation of educational activities. On the same note, religious minority communities suffered from a lack of resources, a lack of government subsidies in confessional states, and stigmatisation

In some [countries](#), COVID-19 exacerbated existing religious inequalities resulting in different rates of adaptability to the pandemic restrictions for religious minority groups. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief [warned](#) that the pandemic led to what he defines as an 'upsurge in incitement to hatred, scapegoating religious or belief communities'. Moreover, [other organisations](#) reported that health measures against COVID-19 harmed religious minorities through [oppressive restrictions](#), long-standing campaigns involving the destruction and desecration of places of worship, and the closure of religious buildings as part of public health measures. Although religious minorities have been suffering from discrimination permanently, the way the pandemic affected the ritualization of religious practices represented a groundbreaking change in these communities.

### **The 'collective effervescence' of the ritual during the pandemic**

Each religion determines its structure and makes its regulations sacred. Over time, most of the dogmatic and state religions have adapted to [modernity](#) by focusing more on the people rather than the state. However, religious minorities always need to adapt to survive changes. COVID-19 represented a new challenge for survival for these communities and how they manifest their religious rituals.

All of the traditions or religions depend on methodological and metaphysical aspects and contradictions that determine their structure. They need the sacred in contradiction to the profane. They need followers and sacred buildings or places to pursue their rituals. These rituals are a particular religious union, with specific directives regarding the sacred. Some religions need sacred spaces, a specific number of people, materials, weather conditions, or a specific time of the year. Being in lockdown, all these norms could not be followed, and even less by the religious minorities. Most of these communities do not possess the means, visualisation, or state supervision that was required to claim their [religious rights](#). They faced the pandemic by being forced to digitalise their rituals.

With the limitations to the right to [freedom of movement](#) and the right to [freedom of assembly and of association](#) during the lockdown, these communities lost their privilege to be reunited. Furthermore, they lost contact with people

representing the 'climax' of the ritual. Aspects that we all experienced that we could not do during the lockdown such as hugging people, dancing, holding hands, or being reunited in the same place affected, even more, the rituals of these communities.

They lost what the French sociologist [Emile Durkheim](#) coined long ago as the 'collective effervescence' of the ritual. This concept, even though it is considerably old, can still be applied in modern society. Durkheim describes it as an almost electric, ecstatic involvement of a group around a ritual. The possibility of dancing and singing and the quorum of people reunited could not be achieved similarly through a screen. In anthropological terms, religious minorities, without the necessary means, have an enthusiastic attunement of emotional frequencies during the ritual. A connection feeding with each person creates a strong bond among the participants of the ritual. Even on some occasions, the trance of the ritual evokes an extreme unification as the group becomes a single identity during the ritual

Therefore, they lost one of the most substantive aspects of the rituals, which represents a structural practice in all religions. Their lack of contact with people, not being able to meet with massive groups, and the inaccessibility to their sacred places, completely changed how these communities understood their religion.

### **The future of religious minorities after COVID-19**

The pandemic has left a context in which religion needs to heal its wounds and adapt to the new reality. Religious minority groups have regained the rights that were restricted during the pandemic and have started again to enjoy their rituals in a sacred union. The 'collective effervescence' can now be experienced again. Nevertheless, some minority groups have remained with the online rituals that they were practising during the pandemic and have lost followers due to this reason. Conversely, some minority religious groups have decided to keep their rituals online.

The digital world opened the doors for religious minority groups to access a wider spectrum of possible new followers that could join their cult. Although this decision has had a positive outcome in many cases, there is another tragic reality. Minority groups lost their ritual exaltation doing rituals online, but they gained a safe space, free of direct discrimination and hateful eyes. These are the experiences that a lot of religious minority groups suffer daily when they practice rituals in public spaces

The pandemic demonstrated, once again, the inequalities between religious minority groups and state religions. Even though the digitalization of religious practices has been going on even before COVID-19, this abrupt digitalization can be the starting point of transforming minority religions by bringing them into the digital world to never go back to their roots.

It is time for human rights institutions and non-profit organisations such as [Minority Rights Group International](#) or [KAICIID](#), to increase the visibility of the existing inequalities between religions by monitoring the influence of religion in the political realm and to advocate that states comply and report hatred and discriminatory acts against religious minorities