


BOOK REVIEWS

## ***An Epidemic among My People: Religion, Politics, and COVID-19 in the United States***

**By Paul A. Djupe and Amanda Friesen. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023. 322 pp. \$115.50 hardcover, \$39.95 paperback.**

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There is a clear need for more high-quality data regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on American politics and society. While pundits and scholars alike have grappled with the pandemic in countless ways, up until now there existed no systematic, data-driven account for how religion shaped Americans' responses to the onset of the pandemic. Nor did we have an accounting for how religion was affected *by* the pandemic and its resultant public health measures, namely social distancing requirements and temporary prohibitions on in-person worship. This new edited volume by Paul Djupe and Amanda Friesen brings together a broad and diverse group of scholars who marshal extensive data to address these questions, examining the ways religion intersects with identity, beliefs, group dynamics, and elite cues to affect pandemic politics.

Why study the role of religion during the pandemic? As the editors argue, “The pandemic clearly could not be handled by disconnected individuals. It calls for a collective, institutional response” (p. 4). While undoubtedly affecting *individuals'* political beliefs and behavior, religion in America is also a singular force in creating community, defining group boundaries, transmitting information, and linking individuals to larger socio-political activity. The Covid-19 pandemic, perhaps as never before, challenged the ability of American society to mount a collective response for mutual benefit. Will religion promote unity and help coordinate individuals with disparate beliefs and interests? How will religion interact with other social and political factors to drive pandemic responses? As the researchers in this important book show, *context is key*. There is no singular role of religion, and there exists no “sacred canopy” of shared religious values to unite all Americans in the face of a public health crisis. Further, the book provides more evidence that “religion” is not a general phenomenon to be measured abstractly. As the editors conclude: “(T)his evidence is a strike against capturing general measures of religiosity...It seems problematic to make blanket assumptions about what the religiously involved experienced or thought” (p. 242). Political and religious entrepreneurs used the pandemic to advance a variety of political causes and interests—often as part of long-term agendas—leading to diverse responses to a common threat.

There is much that we simply do not know about how religious individuals and religious groups reacted to the onset of the pandemic, and how the pandemic in turn affected religious behavior. The book seeks to fill this gap primarily through two unique national surveys of Americans gathered during key moments in the first year of the pandemic, supplemented by data from national organizations or the authors. The first survey was put in the field during late March 2020, just as the virus first caused a major disruption in American life. The second comes from October of that year during another devastating wave of illness and death. These data therefore represent a unique and vital snapshot into how religious Americans responded to this unprecedented crisis as the pandemic was unfolding.

One tradeoff with relying on national survey data, however, is that there is a limit to the number of groups, beliefs, and contexts that can be effectively analyzed. For instance, the book is unable to shed much light on religious minorities and other groups who make up small portions of the sample. A consistent thread throughout the book is the focus on mainstream religious individuals and groups—especially Christians who had traditionally worshipped at brick-and-mortar church buildings. What were they hearing in the pews by religious leaders? How did their beliefs guide their pandemic politics? How did their behavior change?

Further, as each chapter takes on a new analysis linking certain aspects of religion with other key variables, the book largely cannot do deep dives into particular religious settings or closely examine causal mechanisms. In fact, all but two chapters center on quantitative analyses of cross-sectional survey data, the exceptions being chapter 8 which traces how the pandemic affected legal and constitutional questions surrounding the Free Exercise Clause, and chapter 9 on how Christian Right groups such as the Family Research Council politicized the pandemic response to advance their long-standing political goals. Similarly, only two chapters (chapters 7 and 14) include experiments to examine particular causal processes. As a result, the book's contribution primarily lies in uncovering and describing the contexts in which religion interacts with other factors such as race to affect pandemic attitudes and behavior, leaving plenty of room for future scholars to experiment with elite messages, group cues, and determining which aspects of religion matter most.

The book covers a lot of territory, with unexpected findings throughout. For instance, Beyerlein and Klocek find that, contrary to conventional wisdom, pandemic anxieties did *not* lead to an upsurge in private prayer, even as in-person worship cratered. Another stereotype regards how white evangelical Christians vehemently opposed forced church closures. Indeed, anecdotes abound of individual conservative evangelical leaders making highly political statements minimizing the threat of the virus while asserting their constitutional right to worship in person, regardless of public health orders. However, in one fascinating chapter, Olson finds that white Christians, evangelical and non-evangelical alike, were actually *more* likely to cancel in-person worship than non-whites, with non-white Christians more likely to agree that “Hysteria over the coronavirus is politically motivated” (p. 179).

Throughout the book, three key mechanisms emerge for how religion affects pandemic politics: group identity, religious beliefs, and elite communication. Regarding identity, the book shows that you cannot understand the effects of religion without accounting for race, as most of the chapters engage with race at least tangentially. The scholars admirably engage with how race and racial history divide religious

communities and affect attitudes on issues ranging from church closures, trust in clergy and public health officials, as well as a variety of religious practices. Other identities, especially partisanship, also profoundly shape how religion affects pandemic responses, though again specific context matters.

Religious beliefs also strongly affect responses to the pandemic. For example, Orces, Huff, and Jackson show how magical and Manichean religious thinking drive conspiracy theories concerning Covid's origins. The book also highlights two sets of beliefs that the discipline has increasingly shown to be central to American politics: the Prosperity Gospel and Christian Nationalism. Djupe and Burge show that belief in the Prosperity Gospel pushes people away from collective responses to the pandemic in favor of the power of individual faith. Whitehead, Perry, and Grubbs demonstrate that Christian Nationalism emerges as the single strongest explanatory factor in a variety of racist and xenophobic attitudes regarding the pandemic's origins. Further, they also show that once Christian Nationalism is accounted for, other aspects of religiosity (such as prayer and worship attendance) are actually associated with *lower* levels of racism and xenophobia and increased support for protective policies against the virus's spread.

Finally, religious elite leadership and communication shapes how individuals understood this unprecedented crisis. Religious cues affect trust in scientific experts, political elites, and the news media. Believers encounter wildly differing messages from religious and political leaders about what precautions to take, and whether the government's pandemic response was affected by partisan hysteria or even more nefarious motives. Knoll argues that when religious leaders took measures to limit in-person worship, this potentially had dramatic effects on the spread of the virus and the toll on overall health and mortality rates. The gender of religious elites matters: Bolin and Rolfes-Haase show that having women in church leadership increased cancellation of in-person worship.

As the editors remind us, the coronavirus was "novel" in many ways, and we are still grappling with the pandemic's ongoing relationship with religion and politics. Will already weakening ties to organized religion become severed? Will the pandemic exacerbate the partisan polarization already taking place between religious groups and between religious and secular Americans? The outcomes are certainly complicated; the editors state that "Religion promotes defiance and cooperation; it is weakened and strengthened; it is responsive and quiescent" (p. 10). The book demonstrates that religion may promote or inhibit trust, it can increase Americans' feelings of threat and their desire to buy guns, it can bring people together in community or make them focus on individual self-preservation. Context is key, as "religion" can do all of these things yet does not exist in a vacuum. Race, partisanship, community, theology, and leadership all help shape religious Americans' attitudes and behavior. Through its remarkable collection of new research and data analysis, this book provides a broad foundation for scholars to build on to better understand the complex, multifaceted relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and American religion and politics.

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