Introduction

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Abstract

The contributions of this issue show an understanding of disease(s) and religion in a multifaceted way. Covering traditions of Christianity, Islam, Taoism, indigenous Indonesian people, fundamentalism, and secularism discourses allow for an approach to liminal situations related to diseases and healing and resilience towards the challenges these situations mean. Philosophical reflections, empirical research, theological discussions, studying ideas on sciences, and theoretical reflections on practical dimensions of resilience contribute to a stimulating mosaic of ideas.

Keywords

disease – religion – healing – resilience

In times of Covid-19, the issue of religion and disease may be appropriate to be discussed. Leaving aside the pressing needs of a pandemic situation, the articles of this special issue of JRAT do have an additional impact on the field of the study of religion:

Liminal situations like death are of utmost importance for the religious sphere as are diseases that may lead to death or make humans suffer from illness, another liminal situation. The study of religion from a religious and non-religious perspective has to reflect on the challenges of these situations. The contributions of this issue cover several aspects of the relation of religious traditions and the attempt of these traditions to navigate these liminal situations. This attempt allows for a comparative view across religious traditions.

A central factor in times of disease is the need for healing. Putting the role of empathy on the agenda in the context of medicine and healthcare, this chapter (Breyer/Storms) contributes to a better understanding of these aspects of the liminal situation of healing from diseases for doctors and other medical professions and patients. This core element of health-related interactions is well analysed and the models presented are helpful for a better understanding of these interactions. The need for an ethical foundation of empathic care and possible approaches to it open perspectives also for religious reflections on the processes described in the chapter.

Another chapter (Costa) starts with the assumption of some participants of public discussion in the time of Covid-19 that the process of disenchantment of the world makes progress towards a situation when the transcendental is not needed anymore. The chapter inserts its thought in the wider context of the recent secularism debate and refers – on the other hand – to religious disorientation. An important part of this chapter is dedicated to Peter Sloterdijk. Summoning the inherent dynamism of modernity – even the spiritual one – the chapter opens new perspectives to act and think in times of pandemics.

A tradition – some may call it religious, some not – often ignored when disease and its treatment are discussed, is the Taoist tradition. The contribution (Dong/Ping) in this volume gives an excellent idea of the huge potential of this worldview for the human ideas on healing.

How do fundamentalist actors of the three Abrahamic religions cope with the Covid-19 pandemic? This question is answered in a chapter (Käsehage) that analyses the diverse reactions of fundamentalist groups: some groups – understanding the pandemic as a divine punishment – mobilized the followers of the groups; other groups focus on resilience and the capability to heal of their members. This leads to further considerations on the character of the agency of fundamentalist groups.

The chapter on Nidhal Guessoum introduces a less known modern Islamic thinker who teaches in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (Lohlker/Wetchy). He is a renowned astronomer and astrophysicist and a staunch supporter of the idea that modern sciences and Islamic religion are compatible if both elements are well understood. His videos on Covid-19 are an application of this idea making a scientific understanding of the pandemic and the virus accessible to viewers who are usually not reached. This chapter introduces the need to establish an understanding of religion being compatible with state-of-the-art knowledge of the sciences.

Another less known tradition is presented in the chapter on the role and reactions of the indigenous people of Indonesia (Maarif). The action of two

main important organizations is a focus of this chapter. The chapter also gives a good introduction to the situation of the indigenous people, esp., the repercussions of some policies. When the pandemic hit Indonesia, the organizations adapted to the new situation by taking to the Internet. The main focus of this chapter is the religious reaction to the pandemic interpreting it in a way to integrate it in the history of the people with diseases and adopting a paradigm of being fearless towards this threat. For some, e.g., Covid-19 was understood as a disruption of cosmic balance. Another aspect of the reaction to the pandemic was ritual sacrifice. All these elements contributed to the idea of re-establishing the cosmic balance and to the empowerment of the indigenous people in public discourse.

An explicitly theological issue is addressed in the chapter on Paul Tillich's "On Healing" and its contribution to current research on resilience (Opalka). Healing for Tillich is closely connected to becoming whole. In his sermon, he reflects, esp., on the role of caretaking personnel, the healer, and their capabilities. A very precise analysis of the thought of Tillich allows for a precise understanding of the relation of healer, sickness, and resilience. This relation is – in the case of Covid-19 – reflected in the mirror of the ideas of Tillich as expounded in this chapter, even allowing for negativity and despair that occur in the processes of healthcare.

The complex concept of resilience is discussed in a contribution referring to the research group *Resilience in Religion and Spirituality* (Richter). The challenges of the ongoing pandemics are analyzed according to several dimensions. The contribution starts with a discussion of the concepts of resilience used by the research group and the problems occurring. Resilience is understood as related to the experience of crisis. In this context, resilience is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon of resilience, working with precise definition of it turned out to be increasingly difficult. The very complex presentation of research on resilience is mirrored by the need to integrate intercultural and transcultural dynamics – including symbolic, religious, and spiritual dimensions – of answers to the pandemic crisis.

The issue presents a variety of approaches to problems related to the Covid-19 pandemic, healing, resilience, and opens new vistas to rethink the role of religions in coping with disease and pandemics beyond the Abrahamic traditions. Thus, the contributions to this volume may be regarded as attempts to help to live through liminal situations like diseases.

Biography

Since 2003 Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Vienna, formerly teaching at the Universities of Giessen, Göttingen, and Kiel and working in a database project in Rabat (Morocco); guest professor at the Northwest University, Xi'an, China. Member of the Research Centre Religion and Transformation; numerous memberships in academic institutions. Research areas are history of Islamic ideas, modern Islam, Islam and Arab world online, jihadism, and contemporary Arab world.