

Hey COVID, I've Got Religion

For better or worse, my brain is wired to doubt. Even when I'm feeling all gooey and spiritual and thinking that *maybe* there's a prime mover in charge of things, my skeptical synapses swoop in and spoil the fun, insisting my thoughts are just a trick of human biology. But the pandemic—or rather, the pandemic response—has given me a new appreciation for the religious perspective.

In the early months, while secular folks were exhorting everyone to stay home, stay safe, mask up, and all the rest, religious leaders began pushing back against what they saw as encroachments on freedom of worship. It wasn't just church closures or bans on choral singing they opposed. They cried out against the whole worldview underpinning the rules, a mindset that reduces people to their health and risk status.

It's what UK psychiatrist Robert Freudenthal describes as the "[medical objectification](#) of the human person" and Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls "[bare life](#)."

Haredi resistance

In October 2020, the media began reporting on the pandemic pushback from the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community in New York. Community members argued that COVID restrictions were depriving them of the social functions that define their culture: prayer, study, weddings, funerals, dinners, celebrations. In COVID lingo, super-spreader events. A [placard](#) inscribed with "WE WILL NOT COMPLY" made the rounds of social media.

For most of my life I looked upon the Haredim as an alien species, despite my mother's Orthodox roots, but an unexpected empathy now stirred in me. I understood, with crystal clarity, why lockdowns had no place in their world. Their identity

rested on relatedness—"I connect, therefore I am"—and the "stay home" measures left them without any bearings, like a compass without a magnetic pole. My own recoil against the lockdowns came from a similar place: under the veneer of "caring" and "staying safe," the strategy betrayed a stunning disregard for the web of connection, culture, and creation that gives meaning to life on earth.

In Jerusalem, meanwhile, the ultra-Orthodox continued to [defy COVID restrictions](#) into 2021. They attended large weddings, sent their children to school, and even held large funerals for rabbis who died of COVID-19. One evening, hundreds of Haredi demonstrators set dumpsters on fire and faced off with police officers in Jerusalem.

This behavior left many Israelis exasperated and angry, but Mendy Moskowitz, a member of the Belz Hassidic sect in Jerusalem, argued that mainstream Israelis just didn't understand the Haredi way of life. "We can't have a generation go bust," he [said to the Associated Press](#) in Jerusalem. "We are still sending our boys to school because we have rabbis who say Torah study saves and protects."

Ah, yes. The next generation. I didn't want them to go to bust, either. "Biology flows downwards," my mother used to tell me. "It is normal and natural for parents to sacrifice for their children—not the other way around." She told the story of a Jewish man who planted a carob tree, which bears fruit only after 70 years. When asked why he would plant a tree that would never be of use to him, the man replied: "Just as my ancestors planted a carob tree for their children, I am planting for my sons."

I got the message. Even before I had my own kids, I felt driven to put children first. It's why I balked at a pandemic strategy that put young people's needs and desires on the back burner. "I can't think of another event in history where we offered up our youngest members as sacrificial lambs for

the *potential* to protect our oldest ones,” novelist and essayist Ann Bauer (no relation to me) recently told me. “I’m still gobsmacked that we let it happen.” (As an aside, [Bauer’s essay](#) on the hubris underlying “the science,” published by *Tablet* magazine, is essential reading for any lockdown critic.)

Protestant protest

While the Haredim were making noise in their New York and Jerusalem enclaves, a protestant preacher named Artur Pawlowski was protesting lockdowns, masks, and church restrictions in Western Canada. On Easter weekend 2021, reports that Pawlowski was not adhering to the public health orders [brought the police](#) to his church. Months later, he was arrested and sentenced.

In addition to a \$23,000 fine and 18 months of probation, the judge who sentenced Pawlowski gave him a [script](#) about “expert opinion” to read before discussing COVID with his congregants. “Forcing people to say what they do not wish to say—and do not believe—violates all the fundamental freedoms of the Charter,” Father Raymond de Souza, an Ontario Catholic priest and university professor, wrote in [an article](#) for the *National Post*. “It’s what tyrants do.”

As a religious leader, de Souza has an obvious stake in the question: Does the state have the right to interfere in freedom of religious expression? And if so, to what extent? His verdict, delivered in another [National Post article](#): The Canadian government crossed the line. Under the guise of containing a pandemic, politicians and their advisors displayed a “naked urge to extend the reach of the state.”

As Exhibit A, he presented the six-month ban on in-person worship in British Columbia, orchestrated by provincial health officer Bonnie Henry. “Her edict permitted people to meet for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in the church basement, but

that same number of people could not meet in the much larger church to pray,” he noted. “It wasn’t about regulating meetings, but banning worship”—a power play masquerading as public health.

He [returned to the theme](#) a couple of months later, after learning that vaccination would henceforth be required to attend a place of worship in Quebec, a ruling he called “new territory” for the government. Not content to limit the number and configuration (six feet!) of people attending a service, government officials were now deciding “who can enter the house of God at all.”

Churches were supposed to welcome everyone, but Quebec wanted pastors “to become a vaccine gendarmerie, demanding not a public confession of sins, but rather a display of vaccinated virtue.” To de Souza, this represented an “intolerable affront to religious freedom.”

I don’t share de Souza’s religious impulses, but clerics like him have helped me understand that some people *need* religious communion. To his flock, there’s nothing “nonessential” about his services: it’s basically IV therapy. And nobody should be refused an infusion.

A fork in the road

Canadian courts ruled that the COVID restrictions did not violate the country’s religious freedom guarantee, but lawmakers in Ohio have taken de Souza’s side. In June 2022, they [passed a resolution](#) urging the U.S. government to put Canada on a religious-freedom watchlist, which includes Azerbaijan and Cuba, judged guilty of severe violations of religious liberties.¹⁴ (At press time, Canada is not on the list.)

So which is it? Violation or no violation? After all sides have spoken their piece, we find ourselves at a familiar fork

in the road, with irreconcilable values on either side. Take the left path if you believe we must shield as many people as possible from a troublesome virus, full stop. Take the right path if you see people as hurting souls and places of worship as welcoming arms that heal them—even in a pandemic.

While I lack the religion gene, I instinctively vibe with a worldview that looks beyond the need for protection from a virus. I also understand, more than ever, why people of faith sometimes get frustrated with doubters like me. The writer Robertson Davies once stated that he doesn't understand atheists. I can't locate the source of the statement (even Google ain't God, sad to say), but I remember he used the word "numinous." He said, more or less, that life has a numinous quality that atheists just don't see.

We back-to-normal folks keep telling the forever-restrictionists the same thing: "Your focus on bare life is preventing you from seeing something important about the experience of living—something capacious and numinous and vital. Look here. Look over there. Can you see it, off in the distance?" They tell us there's nothing to see.

I'm left with a statement from Luke 12:23: "For life is more than food and the body more than clothes." OK, this is getting weird: me, quoting the Bible. But sometimes the shoe just fits.

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