**Pandemic & Beyond Podcast 6: Ritual and Religion through the Pandemic with Dr Joshua Edelman and Revd Dr Nathan Eddy**

*Pascale Aebischer:* Hello I’m Pascal Aebischer and welcome to the seventh in a series of podcasts from the Pandemic and Beyond, a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Exeter to show how researching the arts and humanities is helping us to live through, make sense of and recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

That pandemic has now cost nearly 120 9000 lives in the UK, a grim statistic that risks flattening out the individual experiences of the people who've had to face dying alone or in the presence of strangers wrapped in PPE from head to foot and also the suffering of the families who lost a loved one. At a time when we most needed to be held either physically or emotionally, religious ritual was one of the things that was able to sustain people, but it was also something that was extremely challenging because of regulations regarding touching the dead, social distancing and the maximum number of mourners allowed at a funeral. Those regulations were interpreted in different ways by funeral directors and religious practitioners, leading to additional stresses for the bereaved. My own experience of funerals during this period includes being completely unable to attend a large family funeral abroad, a live stream service from a chapel, an interactive memorial service on Zoom and also, sadly, self-isolating at home and being unable to participate in any way in the burial of a close family member, with only four people by the graveside because everybody else had to self-isolate. What this experience has shown me is just how important ritual is and how tough it is to grieve if there is no structure for that grief and no - for want of a better word - closure that involves a community of mourners.

To explore this problem my guests today are Dr Joshua Edelman and the Reverend Dr Nathan Eddy, two people who've worked together on Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual under Covid-19, which is an action-oriented research project that has looked at how the vital work of live communal ritual has adapted to lockdown conditions and how ritual specialists from religious leaders to funeral directors have improvised means of rituals online during this period. They’ve studied the distinct ways in which rituals have been affected in different faith communities in the UK and they've supported the work of religious professionals and leaders, as they continue to serve their communities during lockdowns and while restrictions were eased.

Joshua, who is senior lecturer at the Manchester School of Theatre, Manchester Metropolitan University brings to this work his background as a Theatre Director and his original training in the anthropology of religion. His research has for many years looked at both theatre and religion as fields of social performance.

Nathan is Interim Director of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) and is a member of the project’s action research group of religious practitioners who reflect on how Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst for ritual innovation. So can I perhaps start with you Nathan: could you tell us about your work with the Council of Christians and Jews and about the challenges that you faced when the Covid-19 pandemic began to impact on your community?

*Nathan Eddy:* Sure, um thanks for inviting me here Pascal. Like all charities, we were profoundly impacted by the pandemic and in particular we have a network of around 30 branches across the nation, and these were immediately, like every local group were shut down and at least couldn't meet in person, and they were able to adapt, to life online to zoom and other digital forms of meeting, but in other ways, they just sort of went into abeyance for about a year. So that was the first challenge. The second challenge was how to support our network of rabbis and clergy members, we have a network, they've listened to lectures and they have social events and do dialogue between Judaism and Christianity and this group obviously was on the front line doing funerals, struggling with funerals the way you share that you were Pascale. So that was that was the other real challenge, how do we support the people on the front line? the people who are there in the community, you know, offering pastoral support to the grieving, doing funerals, putting their own families, putting themselves at risk. We had an event which Josh came to and Alanna from this, from their research project. So we discussed actually ritual adaptation in Judaism and Christianity and there's lots of diversity within those communities as well, so we discussed that, as a group, and we also had another discussion around trauma and just understanding, trying to get some perspective on what we are going through. So I hope that we were able to help in both those ways, but it's been hugely challenging, especially for faith leaders and we tried to do our bit and others did too, but it was it still is… my wife is a vicar, I’m also a minister and it's tough times for faith communities.

*Pascale Aebischer:* I agree. sounds like it and, and I do feel for people who were on the front line during the entire period and who had to sort of deal with all the fluctuations, also in the guidance that you were getting and so many changes and so many people who needed you in different ways. Joshua as a project lead for British Ritual Innovation Under Covid-19, can you tell us a little bit about what drove you to undertake this work in the first place, and why you thought it was important to not focus on just one religious group but to try and capture the whole breadth and diversity of ritual practices and the kind of innovation that was taking place throughout the UK?

*Joshua Edelman:* Thank you Pascale for having me. Yes, of course, I think one of the things that struck me very quickly is that, it is classic anthropological theory, that religious ritual functions in times of crisis. And whether that crisis is a social crisis like we're going through or an individual crisis, such as a person, a death or birth, what it happy crisis to times of transition. And that that work became more important in the time of crisis and yet, all of a sudden, the main means of doing that face to face gathering were taken away. And I think it struck me, both from what I’ve studied of the way religions work in the field and, from my own personal experience - my wife is a rabbi I see her doing this all the time - different people were coming up with different solutions, based on the resources they had, based on the traditions that they worked in, based on the needs of their communities, based on the situation they were confronted with. And some of them were doing great and some of them were not doing great and there was a lot that people could learn from one another, but there wasn't a lot of dialogue between them because frankly they were busy getting on with it, as you put it, they are frontline workers trying to meet the needs of their communities. So it's important, I think, to bring in a wide variety of people responding to different , different people from different faith traditions, from different parts of the country, of large communities, small communities, immigrant communities, rural largely white communities, all these things, not just because I think, academia and I think research has an obligation to serve all of society, not just a slice of it, but because there is wisdom to be found in these different responses to the same phenomenon, the same broad phenomenon. And that, the more people, we can bring in the more voices we could bring in the better we would be at trying to find the techniques and patterns that worked.

I’m really glad we did that, you know we did a survey, which had about 700 respondents. We've done far more case studies - we ended up with about 14 of them, and we have this action research group which has people from a number of different traditions and people who are kind of the tech guys clergy members and old folks care homes. And what's useful is when you see patterns that cross all of these diversity or when you see patterns that split based on one or two things, and you just wouldn't be able to do that if you didn't see, if you didn't bring in different voices. For instance, one of the things we found clearly both in observing what's going on the ground in our surveys and in our discussion with the action research group, is how important that sense of community is for rituals to do the important job that they have to do. You have to feel like you're doing together. And actually for some people being in a room socially distanced six feet from each other with masks unable to sing is worse than doing it at home over Zoom not that Zoom is perfect, but maybe you get more of a sense of community that way, than you would in the social distancing, for instance. And the other thing is – of course you've talked a lot about funerals and funerals are obviously the tip of the knife as it were, the most painful most sharp thing, where people I think feel the greatest loss when they can't mourn with others. But we're spending a lot of time looking at regular weekly worship. We’re looking at holiday worship, that sort of thing across you know across communities and the patterns are still there for them too. Having a regular community or that gathers every week or that gathers at appropriate times of the year to live the tradition is a huge part of a lot of people's senses of self-identity, of self-worth, how time is measured, how reality is maintained really. And that is a need too, that is a really strong need too. It's not just at the individual moments of crisis like a funeral, there is a huge need for ritual to be a force of maintaining calm and continuity and community, even despite what's going on.

*Pascale Aebischer:* That's fascinating and I’m just thinking back to my own experience of attending religious services during the pandemic over Zoom and finding that the person who was officiating

the service that I was attending was such a fish out of water and completely out of his depth because he had a lifetime of doing live community and he's excellent at building a real sense of togetherness and sort of warmth in a congregation. But on Facebook live stream, frankly, it was a little bit rubbish and I felt very sorry for him, and you could see how many people were attending and you could see that week after week it was fewer. As the faithful started to no longer be so faithful and that must have been such a difficult time for religious leaders, as they were grappling themselves with the technology and with a medium that they had absolutely no training, so how were you able to work with people and help them become better at this new thing that they had to do? and to what extent was conversation with people part of part of the work that you did?

*Joshua Edelman:* It’s a good question. People who run rituals are performers, they're not actors but they are performers. They are masters of their medium and throwing them into a different medium is exactly taking the fish out of water, and some people took to it, some people didn’t, and I mean you can say it's a bit like a performer on stage or a performer on screen. But it's even bigger than that. My experience is that clergy members who are really good are experts at building community and trying to do that through digital means is extremely hard. We had hoped to kind of have a kind of tips and tricks list and the action research group has done a lot of that, as a lot of the folks there are clergy. And so things like sound quality, things like thinking about camera angles - there's more technical things that might seem a bit boring but frankly it's quite important. We've also learned that there is too much the other way, there are some churches and synagogues that are putting on a really beautiful, produced show, something that looks like a TV show. And that also, to some extent turns people off. There's a need for human connection, that's the point, and so, if something looks too polished people don't engage with it the same way, they might enjoy it but you're not necessarily building that sense of community which religious or spiritual is supposed to in a way that say a television show does, so a few mistakes a few errors reminding yourself that the person behind the camera is human, these are all relevant sorts of things. We’re talking about those techniques, but I think also they are very specific to traditions you know what should expect from your mom is very different to what you expect from an orthodox rabbi is very different than what you expect from a Catholic priest. And one of the issues that that to kind of add to the pressure of what you're talking about it's not just that suddenly people's medium has been taken away from them. There's the problem of church shopping. Traditionally, speaking, you would go to your local community, and you chose it because you lived closer to it now, maybe you go to the next one over, but there was a limit to how far you travel. But once I’m online it's as easy for me to go to the house of worship down the road as it is to go to the one at the other end of the country and, frankly, if, as you put it the one down the road is a little bit rubbish maybe I do move to the one at the other end of the country or a different country. And I think a lot of clergy are very worried about this that those who win, win big and those who lose will lose. But our surveys seem to show that that is not entirely the case because it's a sense of community that people are looking for, the bigger something gets the more impersonal it gets. So there's that, and I have to say just from watching a lot of stuff over the year, like all of us clergy have gotten better over zoom you know we've all learned, there's definitely been a trial by fire here. So the difficulty that was the case last spring, a lot of people have gotten a lot better and they've learned how to work this medium, this is also part of why we want to do this is the idea that the nature of what religious community could be online. That's new that's really exciting, that opens up a lot of possibilities, there's been some really good worked on digital religion over the last few decades there, which is an important precedent for our work, but most of it has been about people who choose to go to digital communities because they wanted to. Now this is based on people going, because for a while, anyway, they had no choice. So it's an order of magnitude bigger, it's an order of magnitude more inclusive, and once you open up that door it's going to be very hard to close it again so I think actually these skills are something that most religious leaders are going to have to deal with, are going to have to engage for the rest of our careers, I would expect them to start teaching them in seminars yeah.

*Pascale Aebischer:* You know what you're saying resonates so much with my own experience that with the slightly rubbish services which I continue to attend because they were a bit rubbish. Because this is my faith leader who is a little bit rubbish at this, and that makes him so real you know and I like that and I’d rather have the slightly rubbish experience that I can laugh at, but in a kind way, in a sort of loving way, because that is somebody I recognize as belonging to me, than the fully polished sort of song and dance and wonderful production values thing that that doesn't speak to me and that doesn't bring the people together that I know. But it's also really interesting what you say about access and about the way that we are now able to access things that are far away from our own geographical location. And the way that we can create new communities, because that is something that we also see in a lot of the research that has been done on theatre communities and audiences throughout the UK and worldwide actually congregating to do something together so that sort of community building that we see in religion is also something that we can see elsewhere. Nathan, I wonder whether you have any thoughts about these issues.

*Nathan Eddy:* I certainly resonate with the being a little bit rubbish, both as a practitioner, and as an attender. And it's true, I think faith leaders certainly the Christian leaders have had to spend a lot of time over the pandemic doing things they weren't very good at necessarily or certainly weren't the things that got them into ordained ministry. I think there's a bigger question as well, perhaps a well a theological question, and this was our chair Bishop Michael Lipgrave spoke at a conference with a rabbi counterpart a colleague and our chair Bishop Michael reflected on the ways that Christians have had to think about the particular aspects of their faith and often Christians think in universal terms. But we've had to think of our church our particular faith leader who's a little bit rubbish at this or that and the rabbi spoke of from his point of view, the universal horizons that had been opened, because of the pandemic for him and his context the pandemic is if it's anything it's universal. And it's true for well it's certainly true for Christians, we are both confronted by both the nitty gritty of the particularities of our faith communities as well as this horror of a universal pandemic and in different ways, Jews and Christians and other faiths are grappling with both these at the same time.

*Pascale Aebischer:* I’m just wondering because you're talking there about Christians and Jews and also Josh, you mentioned imams earlier, were there things that you found sort of had a faith barrier, where one community was able to do something that another community simply couldn't do because of their faith? or was there a way in which you could take the learning from what you found out from one group into helping other groups do similar things, perhaps in a slightly different way.

*Nathan Eddy:* Yeah, if I understand your question correctly absolutely. The Church must suddenly think of the home as the primary context for ritual and worship and that hasn't been the case maybe, an early Christian history with house groups and I guess more recently there have been house group movements, but in general it's very much been in Great Britain church in the public square a real model for Christianity and suddenly were thrust into the home. And we've looked to our Jewish sisters and brothers and maybe a little enviously and seen a tradition that has adapted to home ritual long ago, and perhaps was always had elements of that, so I mean that's just one example of what, and there's been some interesting articles and reflection on that. So that's, the first thing that comes to mind, I’d be curious to hear from a Jewish perspective, what a rabbi might say about the church, I’m not I’m not sure, but certainly from a Christian perspective.

*Pascale Aebischer:* How about you Joshua, have you found things in one faith community that that were really enviable and that everybody else should be learning from?

*Joshua Edelman:* Enviable is maybe not quite the right word. I think different faiths have different challenges that are unique to them, but there are some so, for instance, jummah prayers Friday afternoon prayers for Muslims simply are not things that can be recreated online. It just is not possible.

For orthodox Jews there is prohibition on the use of any electric technology, including computers and zooms on the Sabbath, so there are folks for whom you know, let's talk about how to do the best zoom service is to simply not a discussion. It's just out. That doesn't mean you do nothing, though, that means that there is still a need for religious engagement, there's still a need for this community, and what moves in to fill that gap. And a lot of times, it is very local home communities based on the homestead family people who are allowed to gather so that's very small and sometimes it's doing for re-finding kind of some older rituals or forms, that are not a replacement for the thing that you can’t do, but kind of stand in that location. So, for instance, I remember talking to a rabbi about looking to a medieval source about what the Rabbis did during the Black Plague. Well, usually you need 10 men to have a quorum for Orthodox Jewish service, but they said during the plague you could do this and this and this instead. You had to modify this and that was all right, but why not, why not why not bring that up again and that was for the useful. But I think that the need to have a community gathering religiously was common. The religious differences were in how you understood that gathering. Because worship sometimes, ritual sometimes has to as a certain authorization, has a certain form and some traditions allow that form to be more allow that form to be more adapted to digital means than others. This has been a huge debate in the Church of England and in many parts, the Church about, for instance, the Eucharist, can you do online, what does it mean to do the Eucharist online? these are really important theological questions we are the Brick 19 project our project is a secular project looking at religious practice. It's trying not to engage in those theological questions, not because they're not important, but because that's not our expertise um, but we do want to reflect them, I think the other thing, though, that I would say, and this is important. So it's coming up this there's always some structure to these gatherings right, there's something that structures, the gatherings. And traditionally this was the building for almost all religions in Britain and the States, since there was a meeting house where people came together in the church or a mosques. In some cases, that was someone's home, but in most cases it's a bit of a square as it gets replaced with the domestic or with an online community, the person in charge of that who it is who convenes that, and so the rules for it can also change so in a sense, you can say this is an empowerment of the laity, but people didn't think they were in charge before have now been able to set up ways in which people can have religiously significant gatherings. In particular I’m thinking about women who have historically been excluded from a lot of positions of leadership in many religious faiths. I’m thinking about folks who have otherwise been marginalises so LGBTQ folks, immigrant folks or people with different language experience and certainly thinking about folks who have mobility issues and haven't been able to physically travel to church or mosque or synagogue before. So there's been a shifting in power relationships and sometimes it's just been oh that guy's good at computer stuff all of a sudden he's the one who's deciding how these things work. That's interesting from a religious anthropology point of view it's interesting to see this challenge to the structure of religious calling, because once that challenge has made in this kind of emergency situation it's hard to see how it gets completely undone.

*Pascale Aebischer:* I totally love that. So there's a there's a sense that there's a more in a way for want of a better word a democratic takeover of religious ritual by individual communities and by individuals who suddenly feel empowered by the crisis situation, to do something that before then perhaps they could have done, but they weren't doing and I’m just picking up a quote here from one of the people you interviewed which was a woman in an Orthodox Jewish community who’d used zoom as a means of creating some new female prayer communities. And she was saying that the pandemic has acted as a catalyst to get people doing things that we could have been doing before. And those things seem to empower these, you know, previously slightly disadvantaged groups of worshippers and community members to come together and do something that stays within the limits of what the religion requires, but that also gives them new freedoms like to sing. And to sing beautifully. So can you speak to that a little bit and to what sorts of things, do you think were discovered in this crisis that might remain beyond the crisis?

*Nathan Eddy:* I was wondering that as Josh was speaking - is this genie going to go back into the bottle, as it were? and I don't think it will I don't think it will, I certainly don't think when normality returns, whatever it looks like is going to be, as it was. And I think a part of that is going to be that people who've been excluded, the groups that Josh mentioned, I think they're going to want to keep their place at the table and want to keep their voice heard and want to keep on leading the way they have been leading and joining in as equally, as others have been. So I don't know exactly what that looks like. But I guess, I wonder, I wonder about the leadership of young people as well who've been like my teenage kids stuck at home are ready and as curious as we all are about what the world will look like. So that's perhaps another group that I feel for and that perhaps will rise up and and show us how we can move forward, but I don't know, I’d be curious to hear what Josh thinks on this as well.

*Joshua Edelman:* I definitely young people are embracing this, though I do want to counter the idea that online communities have been primarily for young people, I mean our survey definitely shows that those under 40 have had a much worse experience of online worship than those over 40. I hear your optimism and I share it, but I think I need to add in a caveat. When you say something like structures are being undermined and reconfigured. Well, they're still fluid, you know lots of things could happen, we could wind up with something much more democratic or not, and both are possibilities. This church shopping is picking the community that you feel most suits your needs, because now suddenly you have everything available when you didn't before, is a real thing and that is both a positive in the sense that a lot of people are engaging with religious ideas, with religious traditions that they never had the opportunity before they're trying out new things and they're learning more about what's out there and what serves their own spiritual and personal needs. I can't say that's a bad thing I think that's a good thing But there is the possibility for a winner takes all situation. So that I think, especially in smaller communities, this is what people have asked me about what they sometimes called the Amazonification - of the idea that there will be a single central provider that puts all the small mom and pop churches out of business. And I don't think that's going to happen because of people's desire for community, but it is a danger and it does mean that there is increasing pressure on local communities, which are now in a sense competing with a bigger market, but I do think that once you expose people to a broader array of ideas, to more possibilities, more possibilities is not the word because in a sense these were always possible right, we just didn't do them. And it's always been the case that the people who are homebound because of mobility in this have always said, I really want to be part of this community, I want you to include me, and they've gotten the answer not yet well and its difficult we don't know how. And now they're saying hey you did it you did it when you had to so you can do it for me all the time. We're not going to shut those people back in again and good we shouldn't, but the pressures on churches on mosques and synagogues - financial, social, political, are not going away, they're not getting smaller, so how they're going to shake out I don't know. But just making everything digital can lead to a winner take all situation which I think people are afraid of that.

*Pascale Aebischer:* That sounds fascinating and it sounds like such an important caveat to our perhaps excessive optimism about the way forward so I’m just wondering as a sort of concluding question - what is the way forward that you see for the future as we enter a supposedly post-pandemic phase one of freedom in inverted commas, which is hugely anxiety provoking for many people who don't feel free to go back into crowded rooms with lots of other people who aren't wearing masks? What, what is the future of ritual in a hybrid world in which we will have to continue to do some of the online things, but we'll also have people returning into local communities?

*Nathan Eddy:* Sure, I guess, all I can think of, is my own local church where I help out sometimes which has just half a dozen people on a Sunday and how, if that were to disappear, it would they would be lost, not only that that that that group, but also a community space that's rented out that's used locally. And in the same breath, I think of local independent shops local the just the fabric of our shared local culture is something precious and I hope is something that we, that we fight for and think about when we shop and when we worship. So I suppose I suppose I just hope that I’m sure there's an interfaith wrinkle to that to that issue as well, it doesn't occur to me at the minute, but I just hope that we that we that we don't lose some of that that diversity that we have locally in our if we are rushing online or to all the offerings that we have at our fingertips now. So yeah that that slightly rubbish local context that is worth preserving and it's lasted, you know, we care about it in England in particular.

*Pascale Aebischer:* Important point isn't it that you're making there because it's about physical spaces but it's also about mental spaces and about that the types of work that that you are doing, which is social work, just a religiously oriented social work that keeps a community together and that that keeps different vulnerable parts of our community interacting with each other and having a focal point for their for their weekly structure, Joshua do you have any sort of thoughts about things that we might take forward into the hybrid world?

*Joshua Edelman:* I think, hybrid is the key. I think everything that I’ve seen suggests that those who are going to be able to integrate that local grounded community even a very small level with all the resources that online world can provide are going to be the ones that are successful. So, for instance, things like education, you can bring in speakers via zoom or where you never put in person from all around. Especially from minority traditions that might be quite isolated very small communities being able to have those links with larger communities, even if they’re faraway is a lifeline. But if you can bring those in in a way that supports that the grounded face to face space and community that is the core of what most people get out of ritual. That I think is the sweet spot, I’d put money on that that's the sweet spot how you do that it's a big challenge, but that would be the goal that I’d look for.

*Pascale Aebischer:* Great thanks and you told me before that you are publishing a report soon, would you like to just plug your work at this point?

*Joshua Edelman:* Of course I would. So our project officially ends at the end of September, and our final report will be out the last week of September, you can find it, you will be able to find it on the website, which is [www.bric19.mmu.ac.uk](http://www.bric19.mmu.ac.uk) and we're going to be having a final event to present that report to the general public to discuss it with members of our action research group to have some debate and reflection on some of the issues we've talked about today. That'll be live in Manchester and also online yes, we're going hybrid so check out the website for more details that everyone's welcome.

*Pascale Aebischer:* Happiness well, thank you very much to my guests Joshua Edelman and Nathan Eddie and the Pandemic and Beyond team are Sarah Hartley, Victoria Tischler, Des Fitzgerald, Rachel Nicholas, Benedict Morrison, Garth Davies and me, Pascal Aebischer.

To get updates on our project find out more about the latest Arts and Humanities Covid-19 research and to access other episodes of the series, you can find everything you need on our website www.pandemicandbeyond.exeter.co.uk or you can follow us on Twitter @PandemicBeyond

Thank you very much for today, bye.