



Policy Brief

British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19

Social distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19.

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KEY INFO

Research question: What evidence is there of ritual change, innovation, or adaptation and what does that tell us about how society coped, or was challenged by, the pandemic?

Policy area or themes

Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change
 Places and Communities
 Creative Industries
 Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
 Skills and Training
 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: online survey (n=604) case study analysis (15); long form semi-structured interviews (200+), action research.

Geographical area: UK-wide

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

Ritual does necessary social work in binding communities and creating trust and cohesion. These functions are particularly important during a time of mass social upheaval, yet the pandemic both disturbed normal ritual practices and heightened social and psychological needs. BRIC-19 multidisciplinary team studied the creative adaptations made by diverse religious communities across the UK. We aimed to harness and share this learning to identify and understand the social benefits of ritual in the pandemic and nurture the work of ritual in British society moving forward. From October 2020 to September 2021, we studied how British ritual practitioners and communities, from a wide range of faith and belief backgrounds, adapted rituals/gatherings, and analysed the effects of these adaptations. We worked with our partners - Interfaith Scotland, Council of Christians and Jews, Faith & Belief Forum - to include voices from the UK’s diverse religious landscapes and engaged a multi-faith team of ritual practitioners to inform insights through action research methodologies.



Policy recommendations

- The UK Government (DCMA, DLHC, local authorities) should recognise the vital work of a greater range of ritual leaders and collaborate with them in developing policies that affect communal life. For example, communities and faith organisations who can create multicultural, communal, and participatory rituals of collective memory and mourning.
- The Faith Covenant has heightened people's awareness, even expectations, of the social purpose of faith and belief communities. This was exacerbated by the pandemic. We found some ritual leaders felt uneasy about intervening in areas they felt were better left to public authorities. The pandemic necessitates a further public dialogue over the Faith Covenant and its impacts to better understand views in the event of future emergencies.
- Any future UK Commission for Commemoration of COVID-19 should recognise the need for devolved, community-based memorialisation, which empowers people to respond to local needs. It should be inclusive of perspectives of a wide range of religious and ritual leaders, recognising that they have helped manage individual and communal grief in their communities.
- Our study points to the continued importance of physical spaces for ritual and people's experience of connection, and local authorities should ensure these spaces are accessible. Digital or hybrid practices, despite their utility, should not be used by organisations, local governments, or health authorities, to justify closure, or as substantial replacements for ritual life (for instance, not supporting local multifaith festivals).

Key findings

Ritual adaptation

- Our research recognises the scale and vitality of online adoption within a vast array of ritual contexts, but acknowledges concerns about, and evidence of, digital exclusion, which occurred across demographic groups (age, ethnic minorities) and for different reasons (lack of skills, expertise, resources). Limiting ritual audiences was necessary to protect some communities.
- Many communities preferred socially distanced rather than digital adaptations and access to spaces of ritual life mattered even more to people. That said, digital adaptations were widely used, and in these cases technical quality was generally less valued than a sense of community and connection.
- Moving online demanded considerable resources in terms of time and labour, which communities often sought from existing volunteer networks and wider community. Sometimes this created new partnerships, possibilities for inclusion, and change. However, this also contributed to burn-out among professionals and the volunteer networks to which they turned for support.

Religion, belief, society.

- Adapted rituals presented opportunities to rethink, restructure or upend hierarchies in ritual, which were empowering for some groups or communities even if not formally authorised. It also created means for faith communities to forge meaningful relationships with others, whether local or geographically distant.
- Ritual became a touchstone to explore the effects of the pandemic, and to navigate and express anxieties about social restrictions. Increased coverage about the ritual practice of minority religious groups has at times been detrimental for those communities, but it can play a positive role in faith literacy if grounded in community relationships.



Further information

The full report can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/bric19>

BRIC-19 website: <https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk>

An audio documentary that draws on research from the project can be found here:

<https://www.socialbroadcasts.co.uk/broadcastoverview/bric19>

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