

WORLD INTERFAITH



HARMONY WEEK



INTERFAITH
CENTER OF NEW YORK



WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK 2021

The Future of Religion: How has the Pandemic Changed the Ways we Practise?

An intercontinental collaborative event by Interfaith Glasgow, Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, and the Interfaith Center of New York

Delivered online via Zoom

Tuesday 2nd February

5-7pm GMT | 12-2pm EST | 7-9pm SAST

To mark World Interfaith Harmony Week 2021, Interfaith Glasgow worked in partnership with the Interfaith Center of New York and Cape Town Interfaith Initiative and to deliver an intercontinental interfaith dialogue exploring the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the community and ritual life of our diverse faith communities.

Over 80 participants from diverse backgrounds and from across the UK, the USA, South Africa and beyond, came together to discuss a key issue of our time, to learn from each other's insights and experience, and to build bonds of friendship. An expert and diverse speaker panel, featuring religious leaders and academics from the UK, United States and South Africa, raised issues of access, inclusion, equality, financial security, outreach and more – all issues that faith communities have had to grapple with whilst dealing with the restrictions necessitated by COVID-19. Their concise and compelling contributions were followed by a lively panel Q&A session. All participants were then invited to join one of nine 'breakout rooms', to engage in facilitated dialogue with new friends from across the world.

An engaging [three minute film](#) and [a recording of the whole event](#) are available now, and will be released by Interfaith Glasgow to the public in mid-March, to mark the anniversary of the first coronavirus lockdown in the UK.

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION
 HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC CHANGED THE WAYS WE PRACTISE?

A Trans-Atlantic Interfaith Dialogue
Tuesday 2nd Feb 2021
 New York 12pm | Glasgow 5pm | Cape Town 7pm

World Interfaith Harmony Week
 Cape Town Interfaith Initiative
 Interfaith Center of New York
 Interfaith Glasgow

Online Via Zoom
 Registration via Eventbrite
 The final event in
 Interfaith Glasgow's series

VOICES FROM THE PORTAL
 RE-IMAGINING OUR POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Background

This was the final event in a series delivered by Interfaith Glasgow entitled 'Voices from the Portal: Re-Imagining our Post-Pandemic World'. This monthly dialogue series began in September 2020 and culminated during World Interfaith Harmony Week 2021. People of all backgrounds were invited to come together to reflect on some of the key issues that have been highlighted by the pandemic, to consider what we've learned, and what opportunities have emerged. It was also an opportunity to look to the future, to ask what changes we want to see in relation to: poverty; racism; the cultivation of kindness; the climate crisis; mental health; and religious practise.

"Prior to the pandemic, our work was mostly within Glasgow. But it's been a huge silver lining of having to work online, and a perfect way to mark World Interfaith Harmony Week, to be able to connect with people all over the world and to learn from a variety of different local contexts."

Dr Rose Drew, Interfaith Glasgow

The series title was inspired by the words of Indian writer Arundhati Roy:

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, ... and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

The series has invited participants to imagine our world anew and World Interfaith Harmony Week provided the perfect context for the concluding event, which considered the future of religious practise with people from diverse religious traditions from across the world.

Event Partners

Interfaith Glasgow (IG) is a Scottish charity specialising in promoting and facilitating constructive engagement between different faith and belief communities in Glasgow, so as to help create a better-connected, safer, and more harmonious city for all. We aim to deliver innovative programmes of activities aimed, firstly, at increasing friendships and societal interaction between people of diverse faiths and beliefs; secondly, at fostering greater mutual understanding and challenging prejudices and misconceptions; and, thirdly, at increasing opportunities for people from different faith communities to work cooperatively to address issues of common concern.

The Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY) is non-profit organisation that works to overcome prejudice, violence, and misunderstanding through engagement with New York City's grassroots religious and civic leaders and their communities. Founded in 1997, ICNY encourages collaboration amongst New York's diverse communities in addressing the city's pressing social problems, and promotes mutual understanding and grassroots cooperation.

Cape Town Interfaith Initiative (CTII) – also a non-profit organization – was established in 2000 and is the coordinating body for the interfaith movement in the Western Cape. Its motivating vision is of a South Africa unified by interreligious and spiritual understanding and respect. And its mission is to celebrate and share the

richness of the religious and spiritual diversity in the Western Cape, and to promote community interfaith understanding, harmony and co-operation, through both an awareness of universal spirituality and an honouring of the dignity of difference.

“The global interreligious webinar on “The Future of Religion” is emblematic of how faith communities are turning the challenges of the pandemic into positive opportunities. The collaboration of three interfaith bodies from cities located in three different continents in co-convening the event is commendable and should be strengthened in the post pandemic era.”

*Imam Dr Rashied Omar,
Claremont Main Road Mosque, Cape Town*

“[This was] a most meaningful conversation. We are at our best when we listen and learn from one another.”

*Rabbi Joseph Potasnik,
New York Board of Rabbis*

Speaker Contributions



Event speakers pictured (left to right):

- **Dr. Joshua Edelman**, Principal Investigator for the "British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19" research project, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
- **Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara**, Abbot of the Village Zendo, New York
- **Imam Dr. A. Rashied Omar**, Research Scholar at the University of Notre Dame, and Imam of Claremont Main Road Mosque, Cape Town
- **Dr. Nontando Hadebe**, Senior Lecturer, St. Augustine College, Johannesburg
- **Rabbi Joseph Potasnik**, Executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis

To the speakers and participants, we asked the questions:

Discussion Questions:

- *What has been learned during the pandemic that might help us once social distancing is no longer necessary?*
- *What have we most missed about the ability to practise our religions in each other's physical presence?*
- *Are there any gaps we didn't know existed until recent innovations filled them?*
- *Will some new practices stand the test of time?*
- *What will the new normal look like?*

To help frame our discussions, [Dr. Joshua Edelman](#) presented the preliminary findings of the [British Ritual Innovation Under COVID-19 \(BRIC-19\)](#) research project, based at Manchester Metropolitan University. BRIC-19 aims to document, analyse, and understand the new ways that religious communities are coming together during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to use those findings to help make religious communities stronger and more resilient for the future.



UK Faith leaders surveyed described significant changes in the way standard rituals – including services, prayer meetings, meditation classes, etc – are held. Yet the majority reported a sense of continuity which has helped the transition from in-person ritual to adapted and innovative online versions. Dr. Edelman highlighted some key challenges with regards to these adaptations:

digital inclusion and exclusion, the shift from participation to spectatorship, making of ritual spaces in domestic contexts, and the need for tech training. While there has been an increase in reach (higher numbers attending), some have reported an emotional disconnect, while others are excluded by digital poverty. More positively, many lay people have been empowered by ritual innovations, taking on more roles in organising, aiding leaders, and taking responsibility for their own practice in domestic spaces. These points were reflected in the following speakers' talks, as they spoke from within their particular contexts.

[Dr. Nontando Hadebe](#), senior lecturer at St Augustine College, Johannesburg, addressed the shock which faith communities experienced when informed by governments that what they provided was a 'non-essential service'. After the central role that faith and interfaith communities had played in the movement for justice in South Africa, to be judged as 'non-essential' was felt to be a wakeup call. We need, Hadebe argued, to work to redefine the place of religion in society, so that it is engaged in all spheres. Prior to the pandemic, religious communities have, in her estimation, been too caught up in internal debates and must now shift their focus outwardly, to community members and wider population in need of support.

Our third speaker was [Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara](#), Abbot of the Village Zendo, New York. She discussed the changes at her Zendo (Zen Buddhist meditation centre) during the pandemic, including a move to online delivery of all meditation classes, with classes running daily both mornings and evenings. She noted a large increase in attendance and geographical catchment, with people logging in from all over the world. She also discussed a shift in the power structure, with younger members of the Sangha actively seeking digital solutions and working to move the community online, while offering advice to the leaders of the Zendo. Alongside these positives, Roshi Enkyo spoke of what she missed about being able to practise in person: the smell of the incense, the

feeling of community that comes through the physical presence of others, the vestments, the bowing. Nonetheless, she felt that, despite the various aspects that had to be let go, the core of the practice remained constant. She speculated that, in the future, her community may come to embrace a hybrid of online and in-person participation, which would enable them to continue engaging with those they have been able to reach during the pandemic.

Imam Dr. A. Rashied Omar is a Research Scholar at the University of Notre Dame, and the Imam of Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town. Imam Omar explained that the Muslim call to prayer has a prophetic injunction which advises that in emergencies prayers should be conducted at home. Most people have responded well to this call and have adapted their homes to include worship spaces. This, Imam Omar stated, has led to the empowerment of laity – a common theme among the speakers. He also lauded the ‘powerful global pulpit of social media’, where people are mobilised to care for vulnerable members of their community and can share inspirational messages and prayers. Finally, Imam Omar reflected on charity; how faith communities have responded wonderfully in aiding those suffering as a result of poverty, food insecurity, and digital exclusion.

“The dialogue was an invaluable opportunity to learn from – and be supported by – people and spiritual traditions across continents and oceans. Faced with the pandemic crisis, we took sustenance from the experiences, the successes, and the difficulties of diverse faith traditions. We are grateful for this powerful and helpful experience.”

*Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara, Village Zendo,
New York*

Our final speaker was Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, the executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis. Rabbi Potasnik praised Zoom in aiding faith communities to reach those who would be otherwise disconnected, allowing them to take part in various programmes. Those leading services have been highly creative in conducting adapted online rituals and, through this process, have widened their reach and expanded their congregation. However, Rabbi Potasnik pointed out that online ritual can present a problem. Within the Orthodox Jewish community, for example, it is considered forbidden to use technology on the sabbath, ruling out participation in a digital shul.

In summary, the following key themes emerged from the presentations:

- There has been an increase in participation in rituals across faith communities, with many people attending from regions previously outside the geographical reach of the groups;
- Exclusion through digital poverty needs to be taken seriously and its causes addressed;
- Lay people have in many cases been empowered during the pandemic, taking more responsibility for their own religious practices and the forms they take;
- There are particular barriers which prohibit certain faith communities from fully embracing digital ritual and other factors that may prevent or discourage the continuation of online religious practise in the future.

These themes and others – such as the advantages of online ritual for people with disabilities – were discussed further in the small ‘breakout room’ discussions that followed the speaker presentations.



Participant Feedback

Feedback responses were extremely positive, and some samples are included below. Participants praised the quality of the speakers and the event delivery, and they appreciated the opportunity to learn from diverse contexts and to engage meaningfully with people from different backgrounds in small group discussion.

“Fascinating, inspirational and thought provoking and so much more.”

“Gave a very broad view of how people and communities have and have not adapted and how they see / want things to change as we emerge from lockdown.”

“I loved the sense of true respect among the religions represented. It felt like an organization that we would like to affiliate with so that we can explore ways to collaborate as people of faith.”

“I loved the diverse insights and experiences in the different contexts and the focused management of the entire evening.”

“I found it very interesting to hear about how faith groups in Cape town and New York were coping and adapting to the restrictions of lockdown... [It was] inspiring to share with other faith groups and work together. We can learn from each other seeking that of god in everyone.”

“Any chance to connect and glimpse our collective experiences from various perspectives has a deep nutritive value. We get to see the fuller picture.”

Partner Reflections

Cape Town Interfaith Initiative

“In South Africa, the challenges of Covid19 have included the lack of easy access to internet connectivity because data in our country is a very expensive commodity, out of reach of many of our grass roots faith communities. Where possible, we overcome this with the spirit of *ubuntu*, and there are organisations who often sponsor this specific requirement so that our communities can access international events.

The value of participation with our brothers and sisters in Glasgow and New York was the realisation that the neighbourly sharing of experience and information was a mutually beneficial encouragement and inspiration to continue our work, to not give up, and to continue to honour the values expressed in our various religions because these are the elements that are foundational to the future of religion, the future of our societies and the future of all our systems.

The blessing of Covid19 is the way it has made our circles bigger. Our neighbours, we realise, are as much the people in New York and Glasgow as they are the folk next door. Our new superpower is the ability to take the global and ground it in the personal experience, and then to take the personal and find its global meaning.”

Rev Berry Behr, Chairperson

Interfaith Center of New York

“In this intercontinental, interfaith dialogue about post-pandemic religious practice, the “medium” was, indeed, “the message.” Our ability to share specific flavors of faith practices and diverse responses to Covid-19 challenges in Glasgow, New York, and Cape Town offered our international audience a window into the future. Substantive topics that came up on discussion included the empowerment of laypeople and young people, the possible reduction in emissions-causing air travel, the transformation of the domestic sphere into a ritual space, and the increasing importance of faith communities addressing a life and death digital divide. These topics were also thrown into stark relief by the format of the event itself – a cross-border zoom call.

“The Future of Religion” met the goals and aspirations of World Interfaith Harmony Week by walking participants through Arundhati Roy's portal into the future and allowing them to both participate and envision a new, Post-pandemic world.”

Rev Dr Chloe Breyer, Executive Director

Interfaith Glasgow

“The social distancing necessitated by the pandemic has presented faith communities with huge challenges and highlighted a number of previously existing inequalities. But

we have seen tremendous creativity and ingenuity as a result, and it was a pleasure to have the opportunity to explore some of these innovations with friends and partners from around the world and to think together about where we go from here. The pandemic has made us more aware than ever before of our global interconnectedness. How fitting, then, to come together as people of faith from around the world, to mark World Interfaith Harmony Week by sharing our learning and hopes for the future.”

Dr Rose Drew, Chief Executive Officer

Media Links

The full event can be watched here: <https://vimeo.com/518947236>

A three minute film of the event can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/519177317>

Event registration page: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-future-of-religion-how-has-the-pandemic-changed-the-ways-we-practise-tickets-133903367577#>

An example of our WIHW promotion:

<https://www.facebook.com/interfaithglasgow/posts/2054635911341530>

Post-event social media:

<https://twitter.com/InterfaithGlasg/status/1357010536244916227>

<https://www.facebook.com/interfaithglasgow/posts/2056417461163375>

