

Editorial

Religious Community and Communal Religiosity: Foundations at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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Robert Putnam observed that more people than ever go bowling, but fewer than ever do so as parts of teams, a phenomenon that he named “Bowling Alone.” This coinage became a metaphor for the decline of membership in clubs and movements, as well as in volunteering, and the dwindling of community involvement. In many areas of life, activities that people used to do together they now do alone (Putnam 2000). Among other concerns, Putnam examined the hypothesis that the transition from an “us” culture to an “I” culture over the past few years is also reflected in the ways that people use language (Putnam 2020). In other words, language is a tool that indicates a change in consciousness—from collective and communal thinking to a personal and particular thinking.

Communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding premise is based upon the belief that a person’s social identity and personality are molded largely by community relationships and only to a lesser degree by individualism.

The communal behavior and discourse that Putnam shows as disappearing from the lives of so many is related to the identification and prioritization of one’s own interests over the community or group, which is often based on religious, ethnic, or cultural affinities. In the religious world, communalism within religion can provide a sense of belonging and provide support for individuals who may feel marginalized or isolated within society. It can also provide a sense of purpose and meaning, as people come together to practice their faith.

At the beginning of the 21st century, many people believed that social networks and the enhanced ability to communicate provided by mobile phones would increase the sense of community. However, it has become quite evident that virtual interactions differ from face-to-face relationships and that media-created audiences are quite unlike real communities. According to Susan Pinker, “The power of digital networks and screen communication make the world seem smaller; but when it comes to life-changing transformations there is no rival to face-to-face contact” (Pinker 2015, p. 8).

In one of the largest ongoing studies that follows people throughout their lives, which began in 1938, researchers are documenting the lives of 268 men who were then students at Harvard University. They tried to identify the characteristics that contribute to a person’s prosperity: from personality traits through intelligence to health, habits, and relationships. At one point, George Vaillant took over the management of the project and documented his conclusions (Vaillant 2003, 2012). In an interview published in March 2008 in the newsletter sent to the study subjects, Vaillant was asked “What did you learn from the men of the ‘Great Study’?” He replied: “That the only thing that really determines life is our relationships with other people” (Shenk 2009). A review of the research that appeared in 2017 summarized it as follows:

Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives, the study revealed. Those ties protect people from life’s discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes. (Mineo 2017)



Citation: Rashi, Tsuriei. 2023.

Religious Community and Communal Religiosity: Foundations at the Beginning of the 21st Century. *Religions* 14: 697. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060697>

Received: 12 May 2023

Accepted: 17 May 2023

Published: 25 May 2023



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Religiosity—the level of religious faith and practice within a community—can have a significant impact on the lives of individuals and the overall functioning of a society. Different communities may assign different levels of importance to religiosity, depending on their cultural and historical contexts. It can be important for a community because it can provide a sense of meaning and purpose. According to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, religion serves as a “collective representation” that helps to give individuals a sense of belonging and purpose (Durkheim 1915). For many people, religion offers a framework for understanding the world and their place in it, as well as guidance on how to live a moral and fulfilling life. This can be particularly important in times of crisis or suffering, as religion can provide comfort and hope.

Religiosity can also play a role in shaping social and cultural norms within a community. Many religions have specific rules and rituals that help to define what is considered acceptable behavior within the community. These norms can provide a sense of cohesion and belonging and can help to modulate social interactions (Yinger 1970). Religion can also have an impact on political and social issues within a community. For example, some religious communities may advocate for certain causes or policies based on their religious beliefs, such as opposition to abortion or support for refugees (Casanova 1994). Similarly, religious leaders may play a role in shaping public opinion and policy through their teaching and advocacy (Huntington 1996).

Religiosity can be an important aspect of community life in that it provides a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. However, it is of primary importance that communities recognize the potential risks and pitfalls of religiosity and that they strive to achieve greater understanding and tolerance of those with different beliefs.

This Special Issue of *Religions* is devoted to the various aspects—the positive and the negative—of the religiosity of different communities. I hope and trust that researchers of religions and communalism will find great interest and value in the included articles, which explore a range of communities and different religions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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