

COVID-19, Religion, and Public Life

My second eight-week online block of classes began the last week of August, X month of the pandemic. Through September and October I worked in my chain café and did online schoolwork in the occasional afternoons and late evenings after closing. I'd read my religion textbook chapters on half-hour breaks and sometimes my ten, sound-cancelling headphones on. Our store closed for six weeks when COVID hit the east coast of the U.S., but reopened in early May. By the time this class started, our café seating was reopened, albeit with some seats "closed" to promote "distancing." I remain mostly uncomfortable with this. It's nice to see people, it's nice to talk to people, but there is no airflow. The number and variety of customers I see disregarding mask etiquette make me afraid and angry, in small startling pieces, over and over each day. I live with my parents and they are old. I do not hang out with people this year. In the religion class I've been taking online, Religion and Public Life, we began by learning methods and development of anthropological fieldwork and of ethnography. I feel an observer in many ways as part of my work. Our textbook discussed building relationships, establishing and finding boundaries, places of difference in belief, different ways of bracketing biases and framing sociological research, being distant while in-community and understanding boundaries between scientist and subject.

During the holidays, before I started school at all, the germ overseas was a topic of news discussion in the café. I mostly didn't comment. As I talk to regulars and our greater mass of customers the waves of news has shifted several times along with the pandemic. Now we talk of the college students, past these initial outbreak weeks of panics and hope-it-doesn't-happen-there and botched responses and students sent home and are talking a bit glumly about how different kids have settled in, in different places. The consensus in barista confessional is: this year was not worth it. Nothing turned out perfect, a lot turned out bad, many university solutions are mainly scam and scores of classes were never designed for distance learning. No one can seem to muster collective anger over these financial systems, perhaps for fear of publicly discussing financials. I'm lucky in that my program has been online for a long time, I am lucky that I intended to go to school online. I am unlucky in that I lost my hours in holiday disasters and the COVID shutdown and lost my work-based scholarship. I am working more hours now, so I can get it back. Almost a month ago, we got a new manager. For six weeks I managed to maintain A-plusses before sleeping through a night's deadlines two weeks back. Every day I go to work I breathe air I cannot control. Every day I come home I avoid my asthmatic mother. My computer is by my window, and I watch a parade of maskless suburban joggers and dog-walkers all day. It is harder to concentrate than usual. I am so sick of being careful, and I am not perfect, and I worry something will happen that I could have avoided better. I think it would be hysterically, perfectly deadly funny if I took a straw poll of the hundreds of customers walking in my door day-by-day. How many of you have had a test? How many of you know? How many in the last month? How many, ever? How much did it cost you to get it, in time and money? Do you wish it was easier? Have you worried lately? Do you ever worry about strangers' wellbeing? Do you feel very healthy today? Would you like to bet a few lives on it? Would you like to sit down? How is your morning? Welcome.

Asking this would be very rude in retail terms and I will have to take it as a matter of faith as my employer has taken it to be a matter of economics. Someone else can write the comprehensive argument on capitalist necropolitics as civic religion. A sociologist can do the poll. It's been two months. Most of my customers are currently probably fine, or not-fine in the same ways they were not-fine last year. I am grateful I am not alone through this year. Most of our protections mostly work, most of the

time. I am probably healthy. We do not know. That is one way to describe faith. Cases in the county are currently trending down, jerkily, though I still find myself on-edge when I let myself look too long at the masks abandoned while customers eat and drink and take their time. I have no faith the line will not turn back upwards. Our summer peak of new cases, though we didn't know it at the time, was two weeks before this session & my religion class began. Last week our county reported about a quarter the amount of new patients as those during that peak week. Last week I skipped another assignment, this time on purpose, because it wanted me to interview a religious person and ask them about how their relationship to religion has changed or responded to COVID (I had reasons for this, namely: I'm not harassing either of my two religious coworkers about that). In retrospect, my own lapsed religious impulse is acting up this year, and that's a change. It's been two months for this session, halfway through my classes before I lose the scholarship and stop school for a while. I'll be working more then, the new manager says. I wash my hands. I keep on my mask. I wash my hands. I wash my masks. I do my classwork, and it's all pretty interesting, despite only ever feeling like a weird distraction from the day's disaster. I wear my mask, I wash my hands. I let my room turn into a mess and I ignore it. I sleep through an essay for another class and soldier through the hit to my grade. I'll pass, don't think about it. This will all pass, don't think about it. I daydream, idly, picturing: if I entered a church again. I miss the music. It will be a year at least before I am comfortable listening to music in a crowd. I expect I will cry extensively at my next concert in some future. This year has not provided much transcendence. I go to work, I wear my mask, wash my hands. I bite my tongue. I put lotion on my hands. I hope some higher power is on my side when there are other people in the room. I hope some omnipotence knows that my daily strangers are being careful and that I am safe. I do not know. I wear my mask, I wash my hands. I'm probably healthy. We are all, in the café, very happy. It's almost the holidays again, in retail terms.