

Sabbath, Nyepi, and Pandemic: The Relevance of Religious Traditions of Self-Restraint for Living with the ‘New Normal’

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Abstract

This article focuses on the relevance of religious traditions of self-restraint, particularly Sabbath and Nyepi, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. From an economic perspective, the pandemic interrupts a lifestyle marked by an unceasing process of production and consumption that affects almost all aspects of life. Such a lifestyle, known as ‘productivism’, has been confronted with ‘anti-productivism’ promoted by groups of Marxism-inspired intellectuals and activists. Employing the method of public theology, this study reveals that religious traditions of self-restraint prepare humanity to anticipate interruptions of regularity, such as a pandemic, in a way that is critical of productivism yet distinct from anti-productivism. From a spiritual perspective, the pandemic and religious traditions of self-restraint should be perceived as synergistic appeals to a balanced lifestyle that is socially, economically, and ecologically harmonious.

Keywords

new normal, Nyepi, pandemic, productivism, public theology, Sabbath, self-restraint

Introduction

What started as a virus outbreak in the city of Wuhan, China, became a global multidimensional crisis affecting almost all aspects of life. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupts normal activities and events including those of education, business, religion, arts, politics, sport, travelling, and leisure. The term ‘new normal’ has been introduced to depict the changed situation to which people should adapt. Given the global nature of a pandemic, there is no option of moving to a foreign country to avoid living with the ‘new

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normal'. To be sure, wealth possession can still provide privilege to some extent. For instance, those living in a modern residency are less vulnerable to virus transmission than the inhabitants of a dense kampong. Also, rich countries can schedule vaccination much earlier with the option of having new types of vaccine than the poorer Global South which relies on a limited supply of more conventional ones. Nevertheless, for most people, coping with the interruption of their regular lifestyle is the only reasonable alternative to living as usual in times of a pandemic.

In addition to technological and economic as well as ecological guidelines suggested for living in the 'new normal', there have been religious pastoral responses focusing on questions of theodicy¹ and concerns about solidarity² in the context of mitigation. There are also theological reflections calling for using biblical resources of lamentation³ and theological anthropology⁴ as a spiritual way to survive in the extraordinary situation of the pandemic. The direction of this article is rather different. Here the aim is to make sense of the pandemic as an indispensable period of normal life. For many people today, this pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, the history of humankind demonstrates that pandemics are not at odds with the regularity of human civilization. They are, in fact, a part of life's normality. From the perspective of a Javanese local wisdom, a pandemic is a natural phenomenon, indicating that nature's self-rebalancing is underway.⁵ The question this study attempts to answer is: how do religious resources prepare humanity to face the interruption of regularity, such as the occurrence of a pandemic?

Interrupting life's regularity by self-restraint is a common tradition found in many religions and spiritualities. For instance, fasting is to be practised one full month every year during Ramadhan in Islam and forty days during the Lent session in Christianity. The Balinese subscribe to a Hindu tradition of '*Nyepi*' (silencing), that is, the day of total silence when all human activities are halted for 24 hours. Most of those traditions are rooted in the sacred texts. The Hebrew and Christian Bible is no exception in providing a reference for self-restraint as an interruption of life's regularity. One important biblical resource for this matter is the Sabbath tradition. This study links religious traditions of self-restraint, particularly the Sabbath and the *Nyepi*, to the debate on today's economic life with respect to the COVID pandemic.

1. See, for instance, Mohammed Guleid, 'Could Coronavirus Pandemic Be God's Punishment?', *The Standard*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001366570/could-coronavirus-pandemic-be-god-s-punishment>.

2. 'Interreligious Solidarity in Service to a World Struck by Covid-19', *Vatican News*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-08/pcid-wcc-statement-on-interreligious-solidarity-and-covid-19.html>.

3. N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

4. Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, 'Being Human in the Time of Covid-19', *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76.1 (2020), pp. 1–6 at p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6029>.

5. Engkus Ruswana, 'Refleksi nilai-nilai luhur kepercayaan/ agama leluhur dalam menjalani kehidupan normal baru', in *Virus, Manusia, Tuhan: Refleksi Lintas Iman tentang COVID-19*, eds. Dicky Sofjan and Muhammad Wildan (Jakarta: ICRS/KPG, 2020), p. 284.

Methodology

This study employs the method of a public theology that negotiates the ethical reflection drawn from theological resources and the moral issues discussed in a multidisciplinary public discourse. As Elaine Graham describes, '[p]ublic theology is less concerned with defending the interests of specific faith communities than generating informed understanding of the theological and religious dimensions of public issues and developing analysis and critique in language that is accessible across disciplines and faith traditions'.⁶

One of the characteristics of public theology is allowing theology to go out into the reality of public life rather than keeping it as an exclusive discourse of theologians or elites of the church. As Duncan Forrester contends, '[public theology] seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil'.⁷

The focus of this study is the implications of religious traditions of self-restraint for today's economic life. Particular attention is given to the Sabbath tradition with additional information concerning the Balinese *Nyepi* tradition. The meaning of the Sabbath will be derived from exploring hermeneutical works on relevant biblical texts and the Christian interpretation of it. The need to illuminate the Balinese-Hindu *Nyepi* tradition is to provide a comparable sample to represent eastern religious resources, in order to extend the relevance of this study for a multicultural context. As Duane Bidwell realizes, it is important for public theology to 'engage other traditions not as social contexts or systems of power, but as equal sources of spiritual, religious, and theological wisdom'.⁸ Treating other religious resources as such would make a Christian theological work more accountable in a multicultural public sphere.

The public debate singled out in this study concerns the moral significance of current economic life, specifically critiques on productivism. The serious effect of the pandemic on economic life makes the debate appealing for a project investigating a religious-ethical dimension of the pandemic.

Productivism

The economic life that has been interrupted by the COVID pandemic is marked by unceasing production and consumption. 'Productivism' refers to the worldview behind it. The term was first used in the area of agriculture to describe the shift from traditional, need-based production to a broader market-oriented one. By the early twenty-first century, the term has been employed in multi-disciplinary ethical discourses concerning

6. Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. xx.

7. Duncan B. Forrester, 'The Scope of Public Theology', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17.2 (2004), pp. 5–19 at p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095394680401700209>.

8. Duane R. Bidwell, 'Religious Diversity and Public Pastoral Theology: Is It Time for a Comparative Theological Paradigm?', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25.3 (2015), pp. 135–50 at p. 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2015.1122427>.

work and market issues.⁹ Pasi Heikkurinen et al. defines productivism as ‘the idea of producing ever-more goods and services that have nothing (or very little) to do with meeting the basic needs, e.g. of food and shelter’.¹⁰ This is reflected in the situation before the pandemic that, according to Felix Ringel, was characterized by ‘ever accelerating global flows of money, ideas, commodities and people’.¹¹ It was technically a circle of investment–production–marketing–profit–re-investment that required 24/7 digital-machine operation attracting human attention and often called for immediate human responses. Nations and individuals wanting to reserve a place in this progressive civilization have had to adjust themselves to such a lifestyle. Empirical research carried out by Silvia Bellezza et al. suggests that the overworked lifestyle has been perceived as a prestigious image of an individual in today’s highly competitive society.¹² Correspondingly, Angela Carpenter writes about the trend amongst American bankers to freely opt for an overworked lifestyle to survive the fierce competition and to meet the image-forming demand about a highly productive professional.¹³

It should be acknowledged that such an economic life has contributed to the materialization of a better life condition that renders both social and professional activities easier and more convenient to do, owing to the ever-innovating nature of technology. In terms of wealth creation, many countries report remarkable economic growth that significantly decreases the level of poverty with the emergence of the new middle class. Life expectancy in many parts of the world also shows improvement from year to year given the advancement in biomedical science and availability of better healthcare services. Also, the global illiteracy rate is declining, and more young people now have access to higher education.¹⁴

Such a praiseworthy improvement of life quality, however, does not entail eradication of ethical problems such as those related to equality, justice, and ecological sustainability. In fact, progress and productivity are often achieved at the expense of those ethical values. Highlighting the effects of productivism on family life, Carpenter argues that the

9. Bhabani Shankar Nayak, ‘The Capitalist Battle of Productiveness’, *The Citizen*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/15/18807/The-Capitalist-Battle-of-Productiveness>.

10. Pasi Heikkurinen et al., ‘Leaving Productivism Behind: Towards a Holistic and Processual Philosophy of Ecological Management’, *Philosophy of Management* 20.1 (2021), p. 30, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-019-00109-w>.

11. Felix Ringel, ‘Coronavirus: How the Pandemic Has Changed Our Perception of Time’, *The Conversation*, 28 May 2020, <http://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-the-pandemic-has-changed-our-perception-of-time-139240>.

12. Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia and Anat Keinan, ‘Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness and Lack of Leisure Time Become a Status Symbol’, *Journal of Consumer Research* 44.1 (2017), pp. 118–38 at p. 126.

13. Angela Carpenter, ‘Exploitative Labor, Victimized Families, and the Promise of the Sabbath’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38.1 (2018), pp. 77–94 at p. 82, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sce.2018.0005>.

14. Max Roser, ‘Proof That Life is Getting Better for Humanity, in 5 Charts’, *Vox*, 23 December 2016, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2016/12/23/14062168/history-global-conditions-charts-life-span-poverty>.

culture of productivism makes possible ‘a systemic exploitation of labor . . . [that] victimizes not only the workers themselves but also families and especially children’ given the widespread belief that production should be given priority over ‘the health of social institutions’.¹⁵ In a broader sense, productivism can also be associated with human trafficking, underpaid employment, workplace discrimination, unfair competition, corruption, and environmental destruction. Ellen Davis specifies the latter as ‘global warming, holes in the ozone layer, destruction of forests, radiation and chemical poisoning of soil and water, gene-splicing and [other] less publicized effects [of human work]’.¹⁶ Also, in the era of productivism, terrorism, crimes and violence continue to rise, making use of technological advancement. In other words, the betterment of life quality is not the whole story.

Anti-Productivism

Many have criticized the current economic lifestyle and there is a call for alternatives. Among others is the Degrowth movement which challenges the idea of never-ending economic growth. Started in the early twenty-first century in France as a campaign for the reduction of both production and consumption,¹⁷ the Degrowth movement defines itself as a group of activists and researchers which ‘advocates for societies that prioritize social and ecological well-being instead of corporate profits, over-production and excessive consumption’.¹⁸ Degrowth’s fundamental proposition is that the unlimited growth ideology embedded in neoliberal capitalism is being exercised at the expense of social solidarity and ecological sustainability. Degrowth wants to redirect the goal of the current economic life from profit maximization and restless productiveness to well-being and happiness that can be achieved only in not-for-profit social relations with a consistent commitment to preserve the environment.¹⁹ Degrowth proponents are not satisfied with the concepts of sustainable development and green economy, arguing that these concepts fail to address the core problem which is economic growth that resulted from an uninterrupted circle of production and consumption.²⁰ Although Degrowth shows much commonality with socialism and often employs Marxian resources and tools,²¹ Degrowth proponents refuse to be identified as a socialist group. In fact, Degrowth criticizes socialism for being not much different from capitalism in embracing the values of

15. Carpenter, ‘Exploitative Labor’, p. 78.

16. E. Davis, ‘Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers? A Biblical Perspective on Human Work’, *Anglican Theological Review* LXXXIII.1 (2001), p. 29.

17. Federico Demaria et al., ‘What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement’, *Environmental Values* 22.2 (2013), pp. 191–215 at p. 191.

18. ‘What is Degrowth? | Degrowth.Info’, <https://www.degrowth.info/en/what-is-degrowth/> (accessed 26 February 2021).

19. Roberto Puggioni, ‘Pope Francis and Degrowth: A Possible Dialogue for a Post-Capitalist Alternative’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 11.1 (2017), pp. 7–35 at p. 14, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341470>.

20. Demaria et al., ‘What is Degrowth?’, pp. 193, 196.

21. Puggioni, ‘Pope Francis and Degrowth’, p. 12.

growth and productivism as well as neglecting the environment.²² Whilst calling for a radical alternative for the existing economic system, Degrowth is not so much a practical-political movement than an ethical one aiming to revolutionize people's mindsets and lifestyles.²³

Another campaign for anti-productivism comes from a group of social theorists promoting the idea of anti-work. As with Degrowth, the anti-work theory has roots in Marxism.²⁴ Scholars promoting the theory include Andre Gorz, Kathi Weeks, Peter Frase, and Seth Ackerman.²⁵ Unlike critiques of work which emphasize the excesses of work, the anti-work theory focuses on the ontological understanding of work. It rejects the notion that work is so valuable that it is allowed to dominate people's lives. Accordingly, the notion of hard work as a virtue is false and must be rejected.²⁶ Proponents of the anti-work theory challenge the common understanding that work is inherently linked to human life. For them, work is at best a necessary evil to life and, thus, must be 'kept limited as much as possible'.²⁷ Kathi Weeks offers a particular exposition of two concepts to explain her anti-work position.²⁸ They are the work society and the work ethic. By the work society, Weeks points to a society where 'work is the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into social, political, and familial modes of cooperation'.²⁹ The work society is what the current 'post-welfare, neoliberal' western states are built upon, in which the fundamental values are 'enforcing work and defending property rights'.³⁰ The problem of the work society is that its languages of individual accomplishment and social commitment are materialized in the absolutization of productivity.³¹ In other words, productivism is the norm of the work society. Weeks goes on to argue that what makes people accept the norm of the work society is the "'official morality" . . . known as the work ethic'.³²

Referring to Max Weber's thesis, Weeks considers the Protestant work ethic an 'antinomy', since it embraces the aesthetic way of life that strictly constrains consumption, but at the same time shapes a world-friendly mentality that leads to the maximization of production. This results in capital accumulation which, in turn, drives the elevation of consumption.³³ Moreover, Weeks views the work ethic as 'not only a racialized, but a gendered construction'.³⁴ For what is considered a productive work is basically waged

22. Puggioni, 'Pope Francis and Degrowth', p. 15.

23. Puggioni, 'Pope Francis and Degrowth', p. 16.

24. Jeremy Posadas, 'The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45.2 (2017), pp. 330–61 at p. 343, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12180>.

25. Posadas, 'Refusal', p. 344.

26. Posadas, 'Refusal', p. 345.

27. Posadas, 'Refusal', p. 350.

28. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

29. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 8.

30. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 7.

31. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 8.

32. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 38.

33. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 48.

34. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 63.

work which is male-centred, whilst unwaged domestic work is considered non-productive work reserved for women. The practice of the work ethic, thus, requires the preservation of the patriarchal family ethic. As with the Degrowth movement, proponents of the anti-work theory are pessimistic about the idea of work ethics, considering it exhausted with the quality dimension of work whilst neglecting the problem with the quantity.³⁵

Anti-productivism is correct in insisting on the importance of preventing the global enthusiasm of productivism from undervaluing 'non-productive' activities, depreciating 'less-productive' people such as the elderly and people with disabilities, as well as harming the environment. Indeed, anti-productivism is worth supporting in highlighting the crucial role of unwaged domestic workers that is much neglected in productivism. In fact, in a lockdown, unwaged domestic workers were among those who continued to work or even work harder to facilitate their family members who were working from home. Also, anti-productivism has rightly enlightened the public about the significance of voluntary works for the economy, including those initiated by religious communities and charitable organizations. Nevertheless, both Degrowth and the anti-work theory, as with other types of anti-productivism, do not offer a concrete, realistic alternative for the system that they criticize. Their fundamental assumption, that work contradicts social life, overlooks the potentials of work to function otherwise, that is, as a social context where people of different backgrounds share not only their economic interests but also broader personal and common concerns. In fact, the spheres of work, family and charity often overlap, such as in the case of micro, small and medium enterprises that make up more than 90% of the private sector in the Global South, many of them taking the form of family businesses.³⁶ Furthermore, anti-productivism leaves an important question unanswered, namely what are people to do when they do not work? Traditionally, less work was related to aristocratic culture that put working people at the lower social rank, whilst those considered noble were the ones who claimed to have privileges in the economy without doing any real work.³⁷ Traces of aristocratic culture remain salient in many countries in the Global South where bureaucratic jobs are deemed more valuable than professional let alone technical ones,³⁸ resulting in high cost, over-bureaucratic public services and an unproductive economy that relies too much on imports. Besides, in today's religious societies, there is a link between job scarcity and religious extremism as in the case of young people's involvement in terrorism.³⁹ Therefore, in contrast to the assumption of anti-productivism, less work does not always result in a better social life.

Anti-productivism reflects the anxiety of a particular intellectual camp living in affluent societies with zero or minus population growth facing social problems that are rooted

35. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p. 109.

36. Rpir Prasanna et al., 'Sustainability of SMEs in the Competition: A Systemic Review on Technological Challenges and SME Performance', *Journal of Open Innovation* 5.4 (2019), pp. 1–18 at p. 8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/joitmc5040100>.

37. Bellezza et al, 'Conspicuous Consumption', p. 120.

38. Tobirin, 'Penerapan Etika Moralitas Dan Budaya Malu Dalam Mewujudkan Kinerja Pegawai Negeri Sipil Yang Profesional', *Jurnal Kebijakan Dan Manajemen PNS* 2.2 (2008), p. 53.

39. MohamedAbdelJelil et al., *Unemployment and Violent Extremism: Evidence from Daesh Foreign Recruits* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-8381>.

in hyper-industrialization. In fact, anti-productivism accommodates a vision within the context of ‘the wealthiest capitalist nations’, as Posadas admits.⁴⁰ It does not represent poorer societies in the Global South struggling to balance population growth and economic growth. The option of making a living by combining ‘dwindling savings, scraps of temporary work, and mutual favours, loans, and state benefits’, as practised by some anti-work activists,⁴¹ is simply unavailable in poor and middle-income countries. In fact, less production in those countries has driven many people to find employment abroad as migrant workers, leaving their family at home for years and, thus, putting their social and familial relationships at stake. There should be another way of addressing the worries about productivism, a more realistic way that does not necessarily deny the necessity of work. In what follows, an alternative approach will be suggested based on religious traditions of self-restraint.

Religious Traditions of Self-restraint

The fourth of the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the ancient Hebrew’s moral life, is the commandment to ‘remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy’ (Exod. 20:8). There are two versions of the Sabbath commandment in the Hebrew Bible: the Exodus version and that of Deuteronomy (Deut. 5:12). Based on an intertextual hermeneutic study, Gerald Klingbeil suggests that the two versions are complementary rather than contradictory, and that their differences are a consequence of the contextual approach employed by the authors.⁴² The Exodus version relates Sabbath to the creation story in which God rests on the seventh day upon the completion of creation. The Deuteronomy version associates Sabbath with the people’s historical background as slaves whom God had liberated. Despite the differences, both versions refer to the exodus narrative as the context of the commandment. In the case of the Exodus version, the liberating God, who has set the people free from slavery, is stated in the preamble of the Ten Commandments, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ (Exod. 20:2). Therefore, it is important to comprehend the Sabbath commandment as responding to the situation of slavery that the people undergo under Pharaoh’s political authority.

With respect to the Exodus version, Walter Brueggemann explains the connection between the Sabbath commandment and the first commandment which forbids the worship of other gods. He believes that the first commandment refers to the gods of Egypt, Canaan, as well as Assyria, Babylon and Persia, whom the biblical story envisages to be sharing the same character, that is ‘confiscatory gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable’.⁴³ The

40. Posadas, ‘Refusal’, p. 343.

41. David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p. 121.

42. Gerald A. Klingbeil, ‘The Sabbath Law in the Decalogue(s): Creation and Liberation as a Paradigm for Community’, *Revue Biblique* 117.4 (2010), p. 499.

43. Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance, New Edition with Study Guide: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, rev. edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), loc. 179.

biblical story depicts productivism as the norm of the economic life in the region. The gods, created to support productivism, know no rest, hence those who are required to worship or serve them are not supposed to rest either. The first commandment sets the minds of the Hebrew people free from the religious-ideological trap of productivism, and the Sabbath commandment provides the technical guidance of an alternative, liberating economic life.

The Exodus story of the Israelites' journey in the wilderness shows that Sabbath has been practised prior to the Sinai event. Thus, it is cultural before being legalized. The order to sanctify the Sabbath by resting from economic endeavours has been given when God gives manna from heaven as a response to the people's false memory of the past enslaving productivism (Exod. 16). This event of manna provides the Israelites with a genuine experience of a sufficiency economy on the grounds of God's own economy that should prevent them from being misled by the delusion of productivism. God, the producer of manna, rests on the Sabbath (Exod. 16:23-29). This mode of economic life, rather than restless work or lengthy rest, is one cultural lesson that the Israelites are being educated on in the wilderness. It is the new normal for the liberated people. Scott Sanders rightly suggests the relation of Sabbath to the wilderness as that of time to space. He argues that '[f]or wilderness represents in space what the sabbath represents in time—a limit to our dominion, a refuge from the quest for power and wealth, an acknowledgment that the Earth does not belong to us'.⁴⁴ Obviously, the wilderness is not an easy place for anyone. It depicts not only a physical challenge but also a spiritual journey where one learns how to realize one's vulnerability and finitude, yet at the same time attests one's belief in the unailing care of God. By practising God's economy in the wilderness, Sabbath observers build their resilience in times of trouble and uncertainty.

It is important to note that the command to rest on the Sabbath day applies not only to the bread-winners but includes 'your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns' (Exod. 20:10). It is a total rest that the Sabbath tradition points to. It is not merely resting from doing daily work, but also resting from undergoing inequalities and differentiation because of the work system and management.⁴⁵ Thus, on the Sabbath day, the equal, dignified nature of all creatures is reaffirmed. This implies a rejection of the absolutization of differentiation among God's creatures on the grounds of productivity. Klingbeil believes that the reference to the creation story in the Deuteronomy version and the inclusion of foreigners in both versions indicate that the Sabbath ethics was addressed to all humanity regardless of ethnicity or nationality.⁴⁶

On the part of Christianity, the biblical rules including the Sabbath commandment are not comprehended as positive law, but rather as ethical resources to be reinterpreted contextually. This is consistent with a consensus among Christian ethicists that the contemporary function of scripture should be descriptive rather than prescriptive.⁴⁷ Arguing that the

44. Scott R. (Scott Russell) Sanders, 'Wilderness as a Sabbath for the Land', *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2.2 (2002), p. 210, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2002.0044>.

45. Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, loc. 590.

46. Klingbeil, 'The Sabbath Law in the Decalogue(s)', p. 503.

47. Alan Verhey, 'Scripture and Ethics: Practices, Performances, and Prescriptions', in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), p. 21.

Sabbath commandment ‘has been legalized beyond measure’ that has made it joyless, Paul Lehmann calls for performing the Sabbath as a celebration that would signify the freedom from ‘prescriptive Sabbatarianism’.⁴⁸ This allows the practice of the Sabbath in creative and flexible ways whilst remaining consistent with its ethical principles.

For the anti-productivism camp, the Sabbath commandment is not radical enough. Although insisting on a total rest for all on the Sabbath, the commandment includes an acknowledgment of work for six days in a week (Exod. 20:9). Criticizing the Christian interpretation of the Sabbath, anti-work theorists challenge the legitimation of ‘a time structure in which more time is allocated to work than to Sabbath’.⁴⁹ To be sure there is some truth in it, but such a criticism could only make sense in the context of an affluent, high-tech society. It overlooks the traditional agricultural context in which the Sabbath tradition emerged. More seriously, it pays little attention to the quality role of the religious tradition of self-restraint as an ethical resource that engrafts virtues and promotes moral values. For the quantity of the rest day is the deontological aspect of the tradition which functions like a training event, that is, to give an experiential knowledge on basic values. As such the rest day is by design neither too long nor too frequent, but it takes place in a memorable time. In the Sabbath commandment, it is day seven which, according to the creation story, is the first day after the creation of humanity. Referring to Karl Barth, Carpenter suggests that the time management in the creation story indicates that the Sabbath is not only the first original human experience, but also the moral-spiritual foundation for the whole activities of human beings in the following days.⁵⁰ It is, therefore, paramount to focus on the ethical implications of the Sabbath than on its technicalities.

In parallel with the Sabbath, the Balinese-Hindu tradition of *Nyepi* is worth noticing. *Nyepi* is a 24-hour total lockdown in silence when no one is allowed to do any kind of work except in an emergency. The rule of *Nyepi* is called *Catur Brata* (The Four Principles of Self-Restraint), namely *amati geni* (off fire), *amati karya* (off work), *amati lelungan* (off travelling), and *amati lelanguan* (off pleasure).⁵¹ Practically, it is a time without eating or drinking, speaking or listening, travelling, social gathering, electricity, the internet, and other human services. The rules apply to all people regardless of social rank, occupation, gender, age, familial status, economic strength, and political affiliation. All public and commercial services must close, including airports and seaports, taxis and buses, all kinds of shops, wet markets and supermarkets, restaurants and cafes, hotel reception, offices, as well as worship sites. The impact of the tradition on the environment is undoubtedly healthy: the air quality in major towns in Bali has proven to be much fresher than on usual days.⁵² In addition to the significant reduction in carbon dioxide

48. Paul L. Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making and Keeping Human Life Human* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), p. 145.

49. Posadas, ‘Refusal’, p. 353.

50. Carpenter, ‘Exploitative Labor’, pp. 85–86.

51. I. Wayan Suharta, ‘Ogoh-Ogoh Attraction of Nyepi Ritual in Bali’, *Vidyottama Sanatana: International Journal of Hindu Science and Religious Studies* 3.1 (2019), pp. 57–67 at p. 58.

52. Tri Astuti Nuraini et al., ‘Comparison of Total Suspended Particulate (TSP) Measurement in Urban and Suburban Areas of Bali during Nyepi Day 2015’, *Forum Geografi* 33.2 (2020), pp. 173–83, <https://doi.org/10.23917/forgeo.v33i2.8670>.

emission, there are also notable savings of electricity, water, and fuel.⁵³ It is interesting that the *Nyepi* is part of the new year celebration according to the *Caka* calendar, demonstrating a confession that equality and harmony among creatures are the original and authentic nature of life. As with the Sabbath, the *Nyepi* is a refusal to value one's worthiness on the grounds of productivity or consumption behaviour. For in total silence everyone is equal regardless of possession, occupation, strength, or fame. In total silence, harmony among creatures is also salient. As part of the new year celebration, the ritual of the *Nyepi* is to be carried out only one day annually, but its ethical values are meant to ensoul the whole year in social life as well as the work sphere.

At this point, it can be summed up that the Sabbath and *Nyepi* traditions imply a balanced position, creating a sense that neither absolutization nor negation of work is appropriate. Instead of denying work, the religious traditions of self-restraint incorporate virtues for the transformation of work and resilience in difficult times. In this way, both of these religious traditions of self-restraint are at odds with productivism and, at the same time, do not fit well with anti-productivism.

Productivism, Anti-productivism, and Pandemic

In facing the pandemic, nations have attempted different mitigation policies, from lockdown to a 'business-as-usual' approach. Countries like Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, and Italy employed the lockdown policy for a limited time, whilst Sweden and Brazil opted for the business-as-usual. Overall, no government dares to put into effect a total lockdown policy for the entire country, considering the irreversible damage to the economy. The dilemma faced among policy makers regarding the pandemic is not always as simple as between saving more lives and keeping the economy growing. Even the new world's economic giant, China, applied a strict lockdown policy although only for limited areas and short periods of time. In any case, the lockdown is not meant to be total. Many types of work continue to be carried out from home owing to the advancement of technology, but even so there is a considerable number of people who have lost their jobs whilst new graduates are finding it more difficult to find employment. For poorer countries, decelerating the economy would result in fewer deaths from the virus infection but more deaths from starvation. An empirical research on the impact of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa indicates that only 6.8% of households could live well in a lockdown.⁵⁴ At the same time, countries who once subscribed to the business-as-usual approach, such as Brazil under the leadership of its controversial president, Bolsonaro, eventually applied some restrictions after confronting too many fatalities. The same can be observed in Sweden. Most countries, therefore, do not subscribe rigidly to either total lockdown or the economy-first approach. Yet, in any case, certain restrictions of normal life apply.

At the time of writing this article, it is too early to claim that a particular mitigation policy has been successful. Even countries that had applied strict lockdown policies, such as Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, faced repeating waves of virus outbreaks

53. Suharta, 'Ogoh-Ogoh', p. 58.

54. Eva-Maria Egger et al., 'Africa's Lockdown Dilemma', UNU-WIDER, 9 June 2020, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/africa%E2%80%99s-lockdown-dilemma> (accessed 17 March 2021).

when trying to relax the restrictions albeit in a very careful way. The most that can be said is that what most countries opt to apply, that is provisional restrictions, is likely to be a realistic approach in terms of both healthcare and economic considerations.

The pandemic puts both productivism and anti-productivism to the test. The necessary restrictions require significant reduction of economic activities. In such circumstances, giving priority to production and valuing humans according to productivity would put the lives of many workers in danger as well as victimize their close contacts, particularly if the elderly and those suffering from serious illnesses are amongst them. Such an approach is also unjust for healthcare workers who would have to carry the burdens of overcapacity in hospitals whilst taking the risk of losing their own lives.

In terms of decelerating production, the anti-productivism position would be appealing in times of a pandemic. For the pandemic restrictions considerably reduce the quantity of work and drive some works to be carried out in a flexible way, just as proponents of anti-productivism have been calling for. However, it would be reckless to take for granted anti-productivism's radical denial of work. If the solution to end the pandemic depends on an effective vaccination and responsible healthcare services, which can only be produced through the creative and hard works of scientists and healthcare workers, the negation of work is misleading. In addition, anti-productivism's idea of reducing work is aimed at giving more time and space for non-commercial social activities, whilst in the pandemic situation more socializing is as harmful as overwork. To be effective, the mitigation policy needs to be met with self-restraint from both economic and social activities. Anti-productivism's vision, therefore, is not compatible enough with the concept of surviving the pandemic.

In adjusting to such a restricted lifestyle, one who regularly practises a religious tradition of self-restraint would be quite well-prepared, finding a concrete circumstance to which one's religious tradition has been signifying time after time. Indeed, it is situations where temporary life restrictions are necessary that religious traditions of self-restraint anticipate.

Pandemic as a Medium of Spiritual Message

Despite the differences, productivism critiques and religious traditions of self-restraint both imply ideas on a just social life and responsibility to the environment. Such ideas are peculiarly appealing in the situation of a pandemic, in which it is worth questioning whether the pandemic has something to do with social and ecological responsibilities. From the perspective of an Asian spirituality, pandemic is not firstly a problem to be resolved, but a sign to be deciphered. Engkus Ruswana, a member of the Supreme Council of the Indonesian Beliefs in the One God,⁵⁵ offers a spiritual interpretation of the COVID pandemic. He believes that the pandemic should be accepted as a divine or natural warning for humans to decelerate the exploitation of nature. For a necessary interruption of regularity demonstrates that there is a disruption of natural harmony. At the same time, he goes on to suggest that the pandemic gives humans the experiences of limited

55. The term 'Beliefs in the One God' refers to local religions in Indonesia as distinct from major world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

isolation and restraint that enable them to realize the value and importance of social and economic lives.⁵⁶ In other words, the pandemic signifies a spiritual message for humans to live a more balanced life in relation to fellow human beings and non-human creatures.

It is, in fact, not a new message, since the same message has been proclaimed repeatedly through religious traditions of self-restraint, including the Sabbath and the *Nyepi* as well as various traditions of fasting. Yet in a production-oriented society, the ethics of those religious traditions are often greatly compromised. In the case of the Sabbath, very few communities practise it as a resting day for all, since a weekly total disconnection from regular economic activities is deemed high cost⁵⁷ or impractical.⁵⁸ Besides, it might be difficult to imagine the materialization of such a total rest in modern multicultural societies, in which observants of a religious tradition live side by side with those of other faiths. A time of silence for a particular community could be a session of cheerful festival for another community and an opportunity for profit making for those belonging to a different community. There may be religious communities that attempt to observe the Sabbath strictly, but most of them are part of a public life consisting of people of different cultures. This makes it impossible to apply the Sabbath as a total rest for all. Instead, Christians normally spend the rest day at the end of the week by combining leisure, physical exercises, and participation in religious services. Whilst such activities are intended to be rejuvenating, there are always people who do the operational jobs, and thus, work. Even religious worship services, which have been made professional particularly in urban and suburban cultures, involve several people who participate technically as paid workers, including priests, professional preachers, pastors, worship leaders, music performers, and janitors. Often the practices of the contemporary rest day not only fail to facilitate a total rest for all as emphasized in the Sabbath commandment, but hierarchical relationships as well as discrimination on the grounds of productivity and social class remain.

As for the *Nyepi*, in comparison to the contemporary practice of Sabbath by Christian communities, it is likely performed more consistently in its original form. This may be due to its nature as a local tradition of a small island with a relatively monolithic population. Technically, it may be owing to its frequency which is only once a year as opposed to weekly as in the case of Sabbath. Nevertheless, there is now a great pressure to commodify this tradition for the interest of tourism given the position of Bali as a popular global tourist destination.⁵⁹

In this respect, the pandemic amplifies the ethical concerns of the traditions, yet gives no opportunity for compromise. The advantage of a pandemic in comparison to religious

56. Ruswana, 'Refleksi nilai-nilai luhur', pp. 286–87.

57. Karl Bailey and Arian Timoti, 'Delight or Distraction: An Exploratory Analysis of Sabbath-Keeping Internalization', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 43.3 (2015), pp. 192–203 at p. 193, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711504300304>.

58. Samson Olanisebe, 'Sabbatical and Jubilee Regulations', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 46.3 (2018), p. 201.

59. Nararya Narottama, 'Nyepi Holiday Package: Between Commercialization, Commodification and Revolting to Hegemony', *E-Journal of Tourism* (2016), pp. 234–49 <https://doi.org/10.24922/eot.v3i1.20839>.

traditions is that it reaches the whole of humanity, so that its message transcends the boundaries constructed on the grounds of nationality, locality, religious affiliation, political preference, and economic level. Also, the pandemic has a strength of enforcement that no one and no nation can ignore. Although ‘vaccine nationalism’ may have given advantages to some rich countries,⁶⁰ and material possessions as well as political power may have made it possible for certain individuals to be less miserable, expecting such positions to be stable is false, since, as is globally recognized, during a pandemic ‘no one is [truly] safe until everyone is safe’.⁶¹ In a post-religious society where religions are deemed irrelevant and in a religious society where religions are often politicized, pandemic plays an irresistible role as a medium to deliver a spiritual message.

The notion of natural and social phenomena as spiritual signs is, in fact, not at odds with the Hebrew and Christian Bible. In Genesis, flood and rainbow are presented as signs of God’s responses to human morality (Gen. 7–9). In the narrative of Luke, Jesus points to ‘signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves’ (Lk. 21:25 NRSV), as indication that the event of redemption is near. Therefore, a Christian search for the spiritual meaning of a pandemic is well grounded. As Kjetil Fretheim suggests, understanding ‘the signs of times’, by negotiating theological resources and public reflections, is one important task of a public theology in the context of the current global, multidimensional crisis.⁶²

Conclusion

This study discusses three variables: firstly, the worldviews behind the contemporary economic lifestyle and its counterculture; secondly, religious traditions of self-restraint, particularly the Sabbath and the *Nyepi*; and thirdly, the mitigation policies concerning the multi-dimensional, global crisis of the COVID pandemic.

The pandemic has been interrupting the contemporary economic lifestyle which is characterized by unceasing production and consumption. As for mitigation, most governments attempt to balance the safety of the people and the sustainability of the economy. No country finds it reasonable to embrace the radical, utopian counterculture. Nevertheless, the mitigation process requires people to be at peace with some restrictions on daily life. Religious traditions of self-restraint have anticipated such circumstances, allocating memorable times to humanity thus providing the experience of resilience as a spiritual exercise.

Apart from the issue of mitigation, the pandemic is an impetus for evaluating what is deemed to be a normal life. Pandemic and religious traditions of self-restraint should be

60. Harry Kretchmer, ‘Vaccine Nationalism—and How It Could Affect Us All’, *World Economic Forum*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/what-is-vaccine-nationalism-coronavirus-its-affects-covid-19-pandemic/>.

61. ‘Why is No One Safe Until Everyone is Safe During a Pandemic?’, <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/why-no-one-safe-until-everyone-safe-during-pandemic> (accessed 22 May 2021).

62. Kjetil Fretheim, *Interruption and Imagination: Public Theology in Times of Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), p. 6.

comprehended as a synergetic collaboration between nature and culture, a warning about the vices of productivism, and an appeal for a more just and balanced yet realistic life-style. That is what the ‘new normal’ should be all about.

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