

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
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FREEDOM OF WORSHIP AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

Teresa Toldy

In Portugal, freedom of worship is protected by the religious freedom law. During the lockdown and state of emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, António Costa met with religious leaders so that an agreement could be reached on how to comply with the restrictive measures in place, namely with regard to the suspension of celebrations with crowds or, at least, within the temples, in light of the social distancing policy. The first meeting took place with the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon a few weeks before the great pilgrimage to Fátima in May, although a month before that the Cardinal of Leiria-Fátima had already declared, on his own initiative, that the May celebrations would be cancelled. António Costa also met with the leaders of the Islamic community of Lisbon. *Aliança Evangélica*, which brings together mainly Pentecostal religious groups, criticised the fact that António Costa did not communicate with them, which happened later. There are no reports of contacts between the Prime Minister or the Ministry of Health and other religious groups, namely with leaders of the historical Protestant Churches in Portugal or with leaders of *Terreiros*, Buddhist temples, Hindus or others. This asymmetry obviously reproduces a conception of the relevance of a religious group based on the percentage of its members in relation to the general population – a sociological criterion that is questionable from an anthropological and even political point of view. Conservative groups in the Catholic Church, with greater power and capacity to make themselves heard in the media, reacted

against the impossibility of religious services during the state of emergency. In fact, one of the arguments used in Parliament (by the CDS party) contrasted the authorisation for the commemoration of May 1st by the CGTP tradeunion federation with the suspension of religious services.

The impossibility of holding religious celebrations during lockdown created a situation which will merit further consideration in the future. Believers of the various religious groups themselves searched for alternative forms, especially through more conventional electronic means (computer applications or WhatsApp) and social networks. Hitherto regarded by some religious groups as a form of individualistic encapsulation, with a distracting effect regarding reality, these became the form of “community encounter” and mobilisation for small events of solidarity, namely with the sick and elderly, and even in worship.

All religious communities (or, to be more precise, those that succeed in arousing media interest) have expressed their willingness to comply with the sanitary measures imposed by the government, which can also show that daily civic life and religious practice converge. It is likely that the issue of “social distancing” still in place will continue to trigger new forms of “social approximation” through technological means, although such alternatives may generate or exacerbate existing forms of exclusion, given the requirement of “technological literacy”.