News



Congregants exit after services at the Life Tabernacle Church in Central, La., Sunday, March 29, 2020. Pastor Tony Spell has defied a shelter-in-place order by Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, due to the new coronavirus pandemic, and continues to hold church services with hundreds of congregants. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

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Tanzania's president claimed the coronavirus "cannot sit in the body of Christ." Israel's health minister dismissed a potential curfew by saying that "the Messiah will come and save us." A global Muslim missionary movement held mass gatherings — and took blame for spreading the disease.

While most leaders of major religions have supported governments' efforts to fight the pandemic by limiting gatherings, a minority of the faithful — in both religious and secular institutions — have not.

Some have insisted that in-person worship should continue because of the relief it can provide. Others have suggested that faith is an authority higher than science, and belief can turn back contagion.

The struggle to adapt religious behaviors to a pandemic that doesn't distinguish between denominations or national boundaries was especially urgent in its earliest weeks, before many countries fully locked down. But as more officials trace virus hot spots back to faith gatherings, calls have grown louder for the devout to protect each other's physical well-being first.

"One of the things that most religious faiths stress in the first instance is to care for the most vulnerable in a community, to save others' lives as a primary focus," said L. Gregory Jones, dean of Duke University's divinity school.

But for some people of faith — particularly those whose churches, synagogues and mosques are important community centers — that focus appears to conflict with the very fabric of their lives.

In majority-Christian Tanzania, President John Magufuli told a church congregation last month that he was "not afraid of coming here" because the virus could be combatted with belief.

Israeli Health Minister Yaakov Litzman had insisted on exempting synagogues and other religious institutions from limits on public gatherings, according to Israeli media reports, only to come down with the virus himself this month — apparently after failing to heed the social distancing precautions he had publicly preached.

Litzman is now widely seen as a symbol of lax attitudes that led to a disproportionate number of cases in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community that he belongs to, which makes up just over 10% of the population. Though he dismissed a possible Passover curfew last month, Israel ultimately imposed a national lockdown on the holiday's first night.

In India, the Muslim missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat came under fire with the online circulation of an audio clip said to be of its chief Maulana Saad, urging the faithful to continue to congregate at mosques.

"They say that the infection will spread if you gather at a mosque, this is false," Saad told worshippers. "If you die by coming to the mosque, then this is the best place to die."

A spokesman for Jamaat, Mujeeb ur Rehman, said the recording was taken out of context.

"There was no malice in it," he said. "During the same sermon, he also went on to ask his followers to follow the government guidelines to battle the spread of the virus."

Indeed, many Muslim clerics and religious authorities across the world have worked to promote mosque closures or other restrictions.

But the Pakistani government — accused of moving too slowly to curb gatherings — refused to order mosques closed. Instead, it limited congregants to five or less. Still, some hardliners remained defiant despite advice to stay at home from the country's Islamic Ideology Council. Maulana Abdul Aziz, a cleric at the Red Mosque in Islamabad, urged the faithful to challenge restrictions, arguing it was a sin to keep mosques empty.

In India, authorities said they linked hundreds of infections to Tablighi Jamaat's activities and accused the movement's leadership of negligence. The news inflamed religious tensions and sparked hateful comments against the nation's Muslim

minority.

Rehman acknowledged that "Jamaat was careless on its part, but the government is guilty too. First they failed to stem the outbreak and now they are turning the pandemic into a communal issue."

Most U.S. religious services have paused or shifted online as the federal government discourages group gatherings to help contain the virus. But a few faith leaders and congregants in America, where religious freedom was already a political minefield, have rebelled against those limits and claimed an incursion on their rights.

Others have taken less aggressive steps to assert the power of communal worship, pointing to what they see as the ability of belief to heal the pandemic's spiritual pain. Retired Catholic moral theologian Janet Smith is among those in her faith urging bishops to support the restoration of the holy sacraments, delivered in person using tactics that wouldn't flout governmental orders.

"We believe that Jesus is really there and is bringing graces in the world that will help stop this coronavirus," said Smith, who recently retired from Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. She suggested outdoor and drive-up meetings with priests as options for receiving sacraments.

Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College, pointed to an assumption among some that "we control God, and we don't — as if somehow, if we pray in a large number in a church or a mosque or synagogue, somehow this virus will come to an end."

Seeking solace in spirituality or relying on religious rituals for relief and protection, some believers across faiths have continued to shrug off coronavirus risks as they worship.

Last month in Iraq, some defied a curfew to observe the anniversary of the death of revered Shiite Imam Moussa al-Kadhim. One of the visitors who have trekked to the imam's gold-domed shrine complex, Ayoub al-Moussawi, said he has over the years braved threats to perform religious visits.

"We have always been subjected to all sort of things from bombs to explosive devices, but protection comes from God," said al-Moussawi. "This time it's the corona pandemic."

He said he took precautions such as donning a mask in crowded areas and sanitizing his hands. There were fewer pilgrims this year and many marked the occasion remotely from their rooftops, he said.

Al-Moussawi is a supporter of the Iraqi Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who blamed the spread of the coronavirus in part on the legalization of same-sex marriage in a tweet to his 1 million followers.

Some Iraqis have criticized al-Sadr, a Shiite Muslim, arguing he hasn't discouraged believers from visiting holy shrines.

Instead, al-Sadr urged visitors of one Shiite shrine to "hurry up in completing the visit and to follow order and medical and heath rules so as not to be a source of contagion for others." Al-Sadr rejected claims that he had undercut efforts to fight the virus.

(Fam reported from Winter Park, Fla. Associated Press writers Sheikh Saaliq in New Delhi, India; Kathy Gannon in Islamabad, Pakistan; Josef Federman in Jerusalem and Tom Odula in Nairobi contributed to this report.)

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