Thou Shalt Practice Social Distancing

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The coronavirus pandemic is likely to be a watershed event in world history, with a deep impact on society, politics, and religions. One can expect the rise of new messianic movements, for example, with some claiming that the pandemic is a sign that the apocalypse is coming, as some already believe. Conversely, some believers may lose their faith, because they struggle with the age-old "problem of evil"—why God would allow all this to happen—and find no good answer to it, as some frankly admit.

Many religious people will also see the pandemic as a test. They are absolutely right: The coronavirus pandemic is a major test for all religions. But it is a test of not merely their faith, as many believers typically think. It is also a test of their reason—whether they act rationally or irrationally, whether they help save lives or put them at grave risk.

At the heart of this test is a conflict between the rational requirements of health and the traditional requirements of religion. Rational health-conscious behavior, as advised by virtually all medical experts, requires social distancing—namely, that people stay away from each other, preferably at home. Most religious traditions, however, require social gathering—especially bringing the faithful to churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. So, which of these principles should come first?

The right answer should not be too difficult to find, as many religious leaders and communities have done since the emergence of the pandemic in late February. The Catholic Church, for example, responded to the deadly outbreak in Italy in early March by suspending all communal church services, "in coordination with the measures launched by the Italian authorities." Soon after, Pope Francis prayed to a stunningly empty St. Peter's Square, which is typically filled by huge crowds. He also called on the governments of the world to put "people first" and to take all the measures against a "viral genocide."

Similarly, Saudi authorities, whose responses to disasters have at times been irrationally fatalistic, took the right step in early March by closing the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, which are always swarmed by worshippers. Seeing the stunning photos of the empty Kaaba convinced many Muslims around the world that something really unprecedented was

going on. In many Muslim-majority nations, one after another, communal prayers were called off. Even the call to prayer issued from mosque loudspeakers, which includes the line, “come to prayer, come to salvation,” was reworded in Kuwait to say, “pray in your homes.”

In Orthodox Jewish circles, many rabbis also did the right thing by calling off synagogue services and reminding their communities, the “Torah obligation to protect the sanctity of life transcends all other considerations,” as Britain’s chief rabbi reminded the country’s Jews. Many Hindu temples were closed down in India. In Thailand, one of the worst-hit countries in Southeast Asia, some Buddhist monks began producing face masks from recycled plastic.

However, not all religious leaders and communities have taken such rational precautions against the pandemic. Some even rejected them in the name of faith.

One was Rodney Howard-Browne, the pastor of a large evangelical church in Florida, who defied the state’s public orders for social distancing, claiming that his church was “the safest place.” (Soon, he got arrested for doing so.) Another one was Jerry Falwell Jr., who dismissed the nationwide response to the pandemic as an “overreaction” and reopened his Liberty University after the spring break. (Soon after, many students tested positive for the coronavirus.) Another reckless Christian leader was Majdi Allawi of the Maronite Catholic Church in Lebanon, who reportedly dismissed protective measures such as wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. “Jesus is my protection,” he said, “He is my sanitizer.”

Some ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities have also been dangerously reckless. In the New York borough of Brooklyn, many members of the Hasidic community disregarded social distancing and gathered for Purim celebrations and religious weddings and funerals as the virus shut down the city in March. Several of those communities soon showed high rates of coronavirus infection. In Israel, some ultra-Orthodox leaders resisted the government’s calls for closing of yeshivas, where students study religious texts, insisting, “canceling Torah study is more dangerous than corona.”In Israel, some ultra-Orthodox leaders resisted the government’s calls for closing of yeshivas, where students study religious texts, insisting, “canceling Torah study is more dangerous than corona.” Consequently, Israel’s ultra-Orthodox, who make up about 10 percent of the national population, have accounted for half of all Israelis hospitalized for coronavirus infection.

In the Muslim world, too, there have been disastrously naive reactions to the pandemic. One of the most dramatic cases was that of the Tablighi Jamaat, an India-based Sunni missionary movement with as many as 80 million members around the world. Despite all the warnings, they held huge dayslong gatherings, first in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and then in New Delhi, soon proving to be a “super-spreader” of the virus in South and Southeast Asia. (The incident led some Hindu nationalists to spew religious hatred and blame Muslims for a #coronajihad, which became a trending hashtag on Twitter. But it was not a malicious conspiracy—just like the case of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus of South Korea, which also acted as super spreader, it was simply catastrophic carelessness.)

In the mainstream Sunni and Shiite world, rational precautions have been taken by most governments, but often belatedly, and despite resistance from the most dogmatic believers. In

Iran, one of the worst-affected countries, when authorities finally banned people from Shiite shrines, angry crowds stormed them. In Pakistan, where most clerics refused to limit mosque gatherings, police officers who tried to disperse crowds from Friday prayers were stoned by furious worshippers.

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