



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Monotheistic Religions and the Coronavirus Crisis

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on the world of religion. This can be seen in three major areas: attitudes of religious leaders, behavior and rituals of believers, and efforts to give a theological meaning to the pandemic. Spiritual leaders may have squandered an opportunity to reinforce their religions through their responses to the crisis.

The largest number of coronavirus deaths in Western Europe has been in Italy, Spain, France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. These are all countries that have seen a great increase in secularization in recent decades.

Is it too bold to suggest that the pandemic created a unique opportunity for religious leaders to call upon their believers to pioneer efforts to assist health workers, organize charities, help those who are alone, and so on? While this may have occurred on a local scale, it has not been an international movement encouraged by religious leaders. Has an opportunity to reinforce the place of religion in society been squandered?

Secularization has been greatly helped by the widespread belief that individuals determine their own futures. Yet the coronavirus has created huge uncertainties. How is the sickness passed from one person to another? Even those who display no symptoms can infect others. Why is there such a difference in the degree of sickness that befalls victims? When will there be a vaccine, and when will the pandemic end?

Secular people are often spiritually alone when confronted with death. In monotheistic religions, to varying degrees, community is important. In

periods of uncertainty, religion has, at least theoretically, a new chance to make inroads. The American theology professor Marcellino D'Ambrosio compares the current plague to the one that devastated Rome in the third century, and describes the inspiring way the Christian community of that time was transformed into a battalion of nurses.

Perhaps the reason modern-day Christian leaders are not leaders of society is that it has been a very long time since religious leaders were opinion leaders in Europe. Nowadays, they are the opposite: they are opinion followers. Now that the opportunity for a comeback has presented itself, they find themselves unable to make a fast paradigm shift. They are stuck in the mire of general societal debates like climate change and immigration.

Catholicism is the most hierarchical religion in Europe. In his Easter message, delivered to an empty St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis called for global solidarity to fight the coronavirus, warned that the EU risks collapse, urged debt relief for poor nations, and called for the relaxing of international sanctions. None of these topics touch on religious issues, and his authority in these areas is weak at best.

UN Secretary General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire at the end of March, and the Pope supported this appeal in his weekly blessing. This was a typical example of being an opinion follower rather than a leader. The Pope did take one action: he established an emergency fund at the Pontifical Mission Societies. This fund supports the presence of the Catholic Church in mission territories, which are far from the countries hardest hit by the virus. He also created a special prayer.

The Pope's statement about the cause of the pandemic was not theological but ecological. Speaking of catastrophes, he said, "I don't know if these are events of nature, but they are certainly nature's responses." He could have stressed that nature is, theologically speaking, a creation of God, but he made no such point.

The UK's Queen Elizabeth is not a religious leader, though she is the head of the Church of England. This year, she gave her first-ever address to mark the Easter holiday, and it contained a spiritual appeal: she said the "discovery of the risen Christ on the first Easter Day gave his followers new hope and fresh purpose, and we can all take heart from this."

The tenor Andrea Bocelli sang at Milan's empty cathedral in an online concert watched by millions around the globe. Jews worldwide were called upon to participate in the writing of a unity Torah scroll.

The White House called on faith-based groups and churches to instruct their worshippers to follow health guidelines. This was an important step, as in some cases the guidelines interfere with the execution of rituals. The world's leading Sunni cleric, Yusuf Qaradawi, called for mosques around the world to suspend all gatherings of congregations for worship including Friday prayers.

Orthodox American Jewish sociologist Samuel Heilman pointed out that the Jewish religion is deeply wrapped up in communal life. Feeling a physical closeness to the community is critical to feeling a spiritual connection to God. For Orthodox Jews, therefore, quarantine poses a significant religious danger. This is particularly true for the ultra-Orthodox, some of whom are resisting the health guidelines. There is an above average percentage of ultra-Orthodox victims of coronavirus both in Israel and abroad as a result of their customs and beliefs.

A mega-church gathering of evangelicals in France is believed to have been the source of the country's major outbreak. In Bourtzwiller, a community within the town of Mulhouse, a gathering took place in February of more than 2,000 worshippers from all over France. Germans also participated. These believers carried the virus throughout France and into Germany.

The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent government measures affect believers in very different ways. Muslims and Jews, even if they cannot go to their mosques or synagogues, can say their prayers at home. For a Christian, not being able to go to church on Sunday may be more problematic. Churches that rely to any significant extent on collecting money from those present on Sunday may face financial difficulties.

There are many other problems farther from the public eye. For example, many North African Muslims in France expect, when they die, to be buried in their country of origin. In the absence of flights this has become extremely difficult if not impossible.

It may be too early for theological explanations of the coronavirus crisis to be given by mainstream figures. There has been an upswing, however, in extremists who are eager to explain God's purpose in sending the pandemic. One Muslim preacher speaking on Palestinian Authority TV said coronavirus is a soldier of Allah being used to punish sinners, who include those who attack his believers. Extremist pastors and rabbis blame the pandemic on homosexuals. The Chief Rabbi of the Israeli town of Safed said coronavirus happened because the world is approaching the days of the Messiah.

Over the course of time, believers will begin to talk to the media about how the virus and the lockdown influenced their spirituality and relationship to God.

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