

Adapting rituals; Faith+Reason; Around the world, the devout adjust to new ways of worshipping

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FULL TEXT

Organized religions were not built for social distancing.

Worshippers in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples from India to South Korea to Ukraine to Canada have been unwitting coronavirus vectors.

Across continents - as we saw recently - celebrations around holidays including Easter, Passover, Nowruz and Ramadan were upended as people gave up communal prayers and rites.

In the face of all manner of disruptions and cataclysms, religious practices have adapted and persevered - and the coronavirus pandemic is no different. Across continents, rituals have begun to adapt to a changing way of life.

Here's a look at the ways faithful in some countries are trying to sustain old traditions, while living through a pandemic: ISRAEL Under Jewish law, the body of the deceased must be ritually washed before burial in a smock and shroud. These days in Israel, the group of people who ritually wash and prepare the body, known as the chevra kadisha, wear hazmat suits. They receive bodies wrapped in impermeable plastic wrappings, which they remove for the ritual and replace before removing again to lower the deceased into the ground.

For Jews around the world, the seven-day mourning period after the death of a loved one, known as shiva, is a time when people visit the house of the mourner to pay respects and pray. There's no easy equivalent. Nonetheless, some have turned to virtual shiva on platforms like Zoom as a way to comfort the bereaved. ITALY Pope Francis has opposed the Italian government's move to close churches - which remain open for personal prayer under certain circumstances - but he's urged followers to consider alternatives to confession in person.

"If you cannot find a priest to confess to, speak directly with God, your father, and tell him the truth. Say, 'Lord, I did this, this, this. Forgive me,' and ask for pardon with all your heart," the Pope said during a live-streamed morning mass.

Priests in Italy are permitted to hear confessions if they wear masks and gloves and remain at least three feet away from the parishioner. Pope Francis has cancelled all of his public appearances and conducts prayers through live-stream. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES Amid the pandemic, the ministry of justice in the United Arab Emirates, a Muslim-majority country in the Persian Gulf, has launched an online platform for Muslim marriages.

"Once all the required information is submitted, the couple then have to book an appointment with the Ministry of Justice, who will then appoint an imam to recite the Qur'an via a video conference," the Gulf News reported. "After the fees have been paid online, approvals will be texted to the couple's phones."

Polygamy is legal in the UAE, where, according to Islamic law, men can have up to four wives (often, if they can afford it, in separate homes). But, religious authorities have warned, it's a violation of the coronavirus-related lockdown to travel from one city to another to visit a different wife. THAILAND Many Buddhist monks rely on alms as a source of sustenance and connection with the lay community.

In Thailand, they wear face shields as they interact with face mask-wearing devotees, who provide of food in prepackaged bags or through plastic shields to reduce physical contact.

RUSSIA The kissing of icons, revered in the Russian Orthodox Church, is still allowed. A volunteer sanitizes the

icon after every worshipper partakes in the tradition. It's a workaround that still leaves public health officials worried.

The Moscow Patriarchate has introduced other preventive measures, like ordering church personnel to don disposable gloves when giving out ritual bread, or serving a traditionally communal ceremonial drink with disposable spoons instead.

PAKISTAN Pakistan requires that people of a certain income pay zakat, a traditional Muslim charity tax. But with an estimated 25 per cent of the population unable to afford to eat twice a day during the country's lockdown, according to Prime Minister Imran Khan, the coronavirus has become a central focus of zakat giving.

Religious charity networks, usually busiest around holidays, are mobilizing to receive donations and distribute basic goods including antibacterial soap.

Supermarket shoppers in Karachi are pausing after they shop to offer food or money to impoverished people on the street, the BBC reported.

The exchange often comes with a simple request: that the recipient pray for the coronavirus pandemic to end soon.

The Washington Post

DETAILS

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