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**CORONAVIRUS** | MAR. 12, 2020

# COVID-19 Is a Devil Testing Organized Religion

By *Ed Kilgore*

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Religious communities have to be careful not to love people to death. Photo: Keith Bedford/Boston Globe via Getty Images

One of the great scriptural foundations of Christianity as an organized religion was Jesus's saying (in [Matthew 18:20](#)): "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." But in a [public health crisis](#) like the one currently posed by COVID-19, whenever two or more Christians gather to share prayers, hugs, meals or the bread and wine of communion, there among them could also be coronavirus. And Christians form just one of the U.S. religious communities that are struggling to stay true to their traditions and serve those who depend on them without loving people to death.

Celebrations of the festive Jewish holiday of Purim were curtailed by many synagogues earlier this week, as the [Washington Post reported](#):

Washington, D.C.'s Adas Israel Congregation on Friday canceled its Purim carnival and the party scheduled for after services Monday night. Elsewhere in the United States, [Temple De Hirsch Sinai](#) in Seattle shelved its plans for a Star Wars-themed Purim program, and a massive Purim party was [reportedly canceled](#) in Lakewood, N.J. Celebrations in places like Israel and Italy also have been canceled.

The practice of Islam has been [hit even harder](#), obviously in coronavirus-stricken Iran — where Friday prayers have been canceled in more than 20

cities — but also in Saudi Arabia, where the issuance of tourist visas for the annual Umrah pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina were abruptly halted.

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Initial concerns among Christians in the U.S. have often centered on the Eucharist, or communion, particularly in those denominations that practice it at least weekly and distribute it by hand, by drinking from a common cup, or by “intinction” (dipping a communion wafer into the cup of wine or juice, which usually means multiple fingers are touching the liquid). As NPR reports, a lot of churches are changing ancient practices, at least temporarily:

The Episcopal Dioceses of Los Angeles this week told its congregations to stop offering Communion wine. Christian religious leaders at the regional level of various denominations in Chicago, Seattle, Houston,

San Francisco and elsewhere have taken similar actions. Some, like the Catholic Archdiocese of St. Louis, are asking clergy not to use the shared Communion cup.

The Greek Orthodox Church, by contrast, has announced as a matter of doctrine that it does not believe the coronavirus can be transmitted via communion wine or wafer. To put it mildly, that's a controversial position.

But as Vox's Emily Todd Van Der Werff explains, ecclesiastical concerns go far beyond the communion table:

[E]ven beyond communion rituals, most churches practice some variation of the “passing of the peace” — in which congregants shake hands and wish each other “peace be with you.” During Holy Week, which directly precedes Easter, many churches traditionally wash parishioners’ feet, to replicate a moment from the Bible.

But even outside of official forms of worship, most churches are spaces where there are plenty of handshakes and hugs, before and after services. And that's to say nothing of other gatherings churches might host, like coffee hours after services, fish fries during Lent, or soup kitchens for those in need.

So some churches are taking more extreme measures, like suspending regular worship services altogether, notes the *New York Times*:

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In a dramatic move to slow the spread of the coronavirus in one of the most affected regions of the country, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle suspended all public celebration of Mass, effective immediately, becoming the first Catholic archdiocese in the country to do so....

It was the most significant example of how the coronavirus is increasingly disrupting religious life across the United States, from a mosque in the Seattle area that canceled traditional Friday prayer services last week to Kentucky, where the governor on Wednesday urged all churches to cancel services.

Also on Wednesday, the Episcopal bishops in Virginia and Washington, D.C., announced that all churches in the dioceses would be closed for two weeks, including the Washington National Cathedral, which has held presidential funerals and is a focal point of Christian life in the capital.

In some areas, believers of all types are probably paying attention to declarations by public health experts and elected officials urging avoidance of religious or non-religious events involving “large audiences.” But there’s often fine print that may not be so carefully heard or observed, as in California, where Governor Gavin Newsom has called for the suspension of gatherings of more than 250 people. Public health officials added this warning:

The California recommendations say small events at venues that do not allow 6 feet of space between people should be postponed or canceled. Gatherings of people at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 should be limited to no more than 10.

My own little church in California only has about 50 active members, but a majority are probably at high risk of serious illness from COVID-19 and they

love to hug each other and break bread together, both during and after worship services.

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As Van Der Werff observes, there are ways to maintain religious communities with far less physical contact; some churches in hard-hit Washington State are already going there:

“A lot of us are ramping up ways to keep and hold community in the midst of this, either by Facetime, Googling, Zoom calls, Facebook Live, all those forms of media that can help keep and hold a community together,” [Rev. Patty] Baker told me. St. Clare [Episcopal Church]’s most recent service was streamed on Zoom, a videoconferencing application that’s similar to Skype, for anyone who couldn’t attend Mass in person.

These changes are being adopted with different levels of rigorousness in different parts of the country. Many churches in the center of the US, where coronavirus is not yet as prevalent, have not taken any such measures, while churches in densely populated areas are already stepping up precautions.

Precautions also affect services that churches offer to people who are more vulnerable than sick or elderly parishioners, as Bishop Marianne Edgar Budde observed in announcing the new regime at the National Cathedral:

Bishop Budde encouraged worshipers to join the National Cathedral for online services on the next two Sundays. She said that parish schools would be allowed to make their own decisions about whether to close, and that ministries that largely serve people who are hungry or homeless would continue to do so.

“We will err on the side of our compassion, but we want to make sure that our volunteers and all who come to receive those necessary services are safe,” Bishop Budde said at a news conference.

Safety is compassionate, too. And believers of all stripes know that God helps those who help themselves with thoughtful prudence.

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## THE Intelligencer FEED

6 MINS AGO

Things aren't looking good on Long Island, either

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NEW: [@NassauExecutive](#) declares state of emergency in Nassau County, just east of NYC, home to major suburbs. County now has 48 confirmed cases of [#coronavirus](#).

—[@jessemckinley](#)

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13 MINS AGO CORONAVIRUS

**Donate To a Food Bank**

By ZAK CHENEY-RICE

And donate money, not canned food.

23 MINS AGO

### Chaos may reign for the rest of the primary process

“

BREAKING: Louisiana will postpone next month's Presidential Preference Primary due to coronavirus concerns.

—@WAFB

### MOST POPULAR

#### 1. **Coronavirus Shows Us America Is Broken**

By DAVID WALLACE-WELLS

#### 2. **Cuomo Bans Gatherings Over 500 People, Closing Broadway**

By CHAS DANNER, MATT STIEB, AND BENJAMIN HART

#### 3. **Biden Displays Unpresidential Competence in Coronavirus Remarks**

By ERIC LEVITZ

#### 4. **McConnell (Reluctantly) Nixes Vacation Plans to Work on Virus Bill**

By ERIC LEVITZ

#### 5. **Trump's Speech Shows He Has No Idea What to Do About the Coronavirus**

27 MINS AGO

Is New York next?

“ BREAKING: [@LASchools](#) and San Diego Unified have both decided to close effective Monday due to concerns about the [#coronavirus](#), per a statement from [#LAUSD](#).

—[@kystokes](#)

11:42 A.M.

Things are going great

“ Lookups [@MerriamWebster](#), in order:

pandemic, coronavirus, quarantine, corona, epidemic, draconian, lockdown, novel, martial law, xenophobia, apocalypse, self-isolation, cancel, apoplectic, presumptive, endemic, mitigate, vector, calamity, virus, pestilence, postpone, Kafkaesque

—[@PeterSokolowski](#)

11:41 A.M.

A hint of international cooperation?

“ Following my call with [@realDonaldTrump](#) and all G7 leaders, we agreed to organize an extraordinary Leaders Summit by videoconference on Monday on Covid-19. We will coordinate research efforts on a vaccine and treatments, and work on an economic and financial response.

—[@EmmanuelMacron](#)

11:22 A.M.

**Well, that's something**

**“** ///BREAKING: Trump plans to declare a national emergency over the coronavirus outbreak, invoking the Stafford Act to open the door to more federal aid for states and municipalities, sources tell me, [@jendeben](#) and [@SalehaMohsin](#)  
—[@JenniferJJacobs](#)

11:20 A.M. CORONAVIRUS

**“When a Bear Is Charging at You, If You Are Not Energized, You Are Dead.”**

*By DAVID FREEDLANDER*

The bully governor meets his moment.

11:15 A.M. CORONAVIRUS

**Why Isn't Trump in Quarantine?**

*By ERIC LEVITZ*

The president recently met with Jair Bolsonaro's aide, who tested positive for coronavirus.

10:58 A.M.

**This has nothing to do with anything**

**“** To this point, and because we have had a very strong border policy, we have had 40 deaths related to CoronaVirus. If we had weak or open borders, that number would be many times higher!

—[@realDonaldTrump](#)

10:49 A.M.

## A lot is riding on today's Capitol Hill negotiations

“ NEW: There is nervousness, unease — call it what you want — among HOUSE REPUBLICANS about the coronavirus bill that PELOSI negotiated with MNUCHIN

There's an effort afoot right now to get [@realDonaldTrump](#) to publicly urge a yes vote

—[@JakeSherman](#)

10:33 A.M.

## ...and another major sporting event

“ Mayor Walsh: Boston Marathon postponed until Sept. 14 due to coronavirus concerns.

—[@BreakingNews](#)

10:04 A.M.

## Another major sporting event goes down

“ Big news from Augusta National: The Masters will be delayed.

“We hope this postponement puts us in the best position to safely host the Masters Tournament and our amateur events at some later date,” Fred Ridley the club's chairman, said in a statement.

—[@alanblinder](#)

9:25 A.M.

## Many would beg to differ

**“** Trump, asked by [@peterbakernyt](#) whether he regrets disbanding the Global Health Unit of the National Security Council two years ago: “I just think that this is something, Peter, that you can never really think is going to happen.” [#pandemic](#)  
—[@BenjaminHarvey](#)

9:24 A.M. CORONAVIRUS

## Cuomo Bans Gatherings Over 500 People, Closing Broadway

*By CHAS DANNER, MATT STIEB, AND BENJAMIN HART*

New York City has 95 confirmed cases as two schools in the Bronx close and the St. Patrick’s Day Parade is officially postponed.

8:55 A.M. CORONAVIRUS

## How Do You Campaign During a Pandemic?

*By GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI*

In a week, the 2020 election has entered totally uncharted territory.

8:21 A.M.

## Why wasn’t this happening three weeks ago?

**“** NEW: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says two diagnostic tests that may detect coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in approximately one hour will receive “advanced development support” from their department.

—[@Yamiche](#)

7:57 A.M.

**For now, NYC school closings are on an ad hoc basis**

**“** NYC announces new school closings due to [#Coronavirus](#)

- New Dorp HS + Hungerford bldg in SI
- Brooklyn College Academy School and 4 Brooklyn Occupational Centers
- Brooklyn College campus

All will close for minimum 24 hrs for cleaning.

# of confirmed NYC cases is still 95.

**—@NYCSpeakerCoJo**

**3/12/2020 COVID-19**

## **Does the Coronavirus Think I'm Old?**

*By MATT STIEB*

How to read the stark differences in mortality rates among age groups.

**3/12/2020**

**Trudeau, meanwhile, is in self-quarantine**

**“** BREAKING: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's wife has tested positive for COVID-19 [#cdnpoli](#)

**—@MariekeWalsh**

**3/12/2020**

## The proxy conflict between Iran and the U.S. is heating up again

**“** Breaking News: The U.S. carried out retaliatory strikes on an Iranian-backed militia in Iraq, a day after an attack that killed 2 Americans and a British soldier <https://t.co/r5L56XtxYi>  
—@nytimes

**3/12/2020** CORONAVIRUS

## Most U.S. Sports Leagues Have Suspended Their Seasons Due to Coronavirus

*By CHAS DANNER*

The NHL, MLB, MLS, and NBA are all either suspending or canceling play due to the coronavirus pandemic.

**3/12/2020** CORONAVIRUS

## We Can't Go Back to the Way Things Used to Be

*By SARAH JONES*

The coronavirus debunks many American myths.

**3/12/2020** CORONAVIRUS

## The Coronavirus Is Testing Organized Religion

*By ED KILGORE*

Religious believers often look to faith communities for safety in times of danger. But what if that poses public health dangers, too?

3/12/2020

## The new standard for coronavirus campaign rules

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Bernie Sanders campaign has “asked all staff to work from home and will no longer hold large events or door-to-door canvasses, instead moving to digital formats and outreach wherever possible,” per spokesman, who says it’s out of an abundance of caution due to coronavirus issues.

—@sahilkapur

3/12/2020 CORONAVIRUS

## Why Experts Doubt Warm Weather Will Slow Coronavirus Spread

By MATT STIEB

“The heat, generally speaking, kills this kind of virus,” Trump has said. Epidemiologists aren’t inclined to agree.

3/12/2020 CORONAVIRUS

## Arts Organizations Are Heading Into Crisis. A Few Things Might Mitigate It.

By JUSTIN DAVIDSON

Performers and staff, already living close to the edge, have little margin for a long layoff.

3/12/2020 VISION 2020

## Biden Displays Unpresidential Competence in Coronavirus Remarks

By ERIC LEVITZ

In a marked departure from modern presidential norms, Biden opted to *avoid* spreading misinformation in his remarks on the pandemic.

3/12/2020

## Where we stand

**“** There are at least 1523 cases of the novel coronavirus in the United States, according to the state and local health agencies, governments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

—@ShimonPro

3/12/2020 CORONOVIRUS

## Reporters on the Road Confront Their Mortality

By IRIN CARMON

“I worry about my story being bad, not about whether I’ll die.”

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