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WORLD: Too little, too late? Religions slow to react to Covid-19

Vatican's move to hold Holy Week services without worshipers has seen Asian churches follow suit, but other faiths are recalcitrant

By Michael Sainsbury

UCA News (19.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/33wE6uG> – China has been something of a benchmark in using harsh measures to prevent mass gatherings to contain the spread of the deadly

Covid-19 coronavirus.

One of its early measures was closing all places of worship where hundreds, often thousands, pass through, potentially leaving traces of the disease for others to unwittingly collect and pass on.

In South Korea, which has also been an exemplar in containing the disease, the Catholic Church cancelled Mass at more than 1,700 churches for the first time in its 236-year history. Buddhist temples also called off events, while Protestant churches held online services.

Yet religions across Asia have taken weeks to heed this valuable lesson. But now is the time, with most of the world's major religions due for major celebrations in April. Easter is on April 12, the end of Holy Week celebrations that begin with Palm Sunday on April 5. Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Easter a week later. Rama Navami, an important Hindu festival, is on April 2. The Sikh festival of Vaisakhi is on April 13. The Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins on April 23 or 24 depending on the country, while the Jewish Passover begins on April 8.

Governments and religions have been slow to act. On March 10 and 11, seven weeks after the seriousness of Covid-19 had become apparent, Indians and other Hindus across South and Southeast Asia held the annual Holi festival to celebrate the beginning of spring. It's a celebration renowned for its color, people smear each other with bright dyes and, as with most celebrations, they embrace.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced he would not attend the festival and many did not turn out due to advice to avoid large gatherings because of fears they would spread the virus.

Yet it was only advice; there was no official ban on Holi celebrations and countless millions of people across India celebrated. Like other countries in South and Southeast Asia, India has moved to block flights from countries where there are apparently more infections – due to far more widespread testing – but the government has been slow to restrict its majority religion.

India is far from alone. Indeed, this pattern that has been seen across the region, whether the majority religion is Hindu, Buddhist or Islam. Even Catholicism has continued to hold ceremonies or be open for worship despite increasing the danger from the disease to the entire population.

Yet where Catholicism is the minority religion, some clerics have been quicker to act.

Myanmar, where the Church's most senior cleric Cardinal Charles Maung Bo is also president of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, was one of the first to take decisive action by shifting the country's annual Marian celebration from early February, then on Feb. 29 canceling it altogether. It was a prescient move. Yet the country's largest Buddhist stupa, the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, has remained open.

On March 15, the Vatican sent a pointed message to churches around the world when it announced that Holy Week celebrations in Rome will be closed to the public because of the “current global public health emergency.” Pope Francis’ weekly public audiences have been suspended until April 12 but will be livestreamed by Vatican News.

This saw rapid responses from churches in the region including Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India to follow suit and cancel all Lenten Masses. This was not a moment too soon as cases of infection across South and Southeast Asia are starting to rise despite low levels of testing.

But like the Holi festival in India, regular celebrations, often daily, of attending a temple or a mosque by followers of majority religions have largely gone unchanged until this week.

Now many Hindu temples across India are closed or restricting entry to visitors. Siddhivinayak Temple, one of the most visited shrines in Mumbai, has closed until further notice. Tuljabhavani Temple in Osmanabad has also been closed, while Mahakaleshwar Temple in Ujjain will not allow devotees to attend its Bhasmanti event until the end of this month.

In Malaysia, where religion comes under the purview of the country’s 13 states, only Perlis state canceled prayers on March 13. But after a meeting of religious leaders and the sultans who are titular rulers of nine states, a decision was made to close mosques for 10 days from March 17, covering the

next two Fridays.

In all likelihood, this suspension will be extended after a Muslim convention proved to be a local epicenter of Covid-19. In some states the traditional call to prayer has already been tweaked to include the phrase “pray at home” instead of “come to prayers.”

In Indonesia, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto, a devout Christian, attended a major Islamic conference on Feb. 27 to ask Muslim clerics to pray for an end to the lethal virus.

As virus infections started mounting, the Indonesian Ulema Council on March 16 issued a fatwa on compulsory Muslim prayers during the pandemic.

Council chairman Hasanuddin said Muslims were not permitted to perform Friday prayers in those areas where the virus had spread uncontrollably until the situation returns to normal. Unfortunately, this has let much off the country of the hook for now and underscores the hopeless response of the Indonesian government, which should have acted on this by now.

While measures now being taken by religions across the region will undoubtedly have a positive effect of slowing or halting the spread of Covid-19, it's also true that most could have moved earlier if they had been paying heed to medical experts. Many of their responses have probably been enacted too late. Only time will tell. While prayers are surely worthwhile, it's tough action from governments that is needed.

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