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CHRISTIANITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic interrupted my most reliable rhythms: teaching college classes during the week and attending church on Sunday. I was fortunate, however, to avoid the worst of the sickness and to be able to move both work and worship online. Other Christians suffered incomparably more. Yet many Christians experienced the pandemic through religious practices and convictions. They experienced quarantines as church closures, knew the casualties of COVID-19 as sick and dying fellow congregants, and looked to their faith to guide their responses to the crisis and to make sense of the suffering.

These religious realities suggest secularization narratives do not fully account for how health crises have unfolded in the United States. In his classic history of nineteenth-century cholera epidemics, Charles Rosenberg (1962) argues that, as doctors improved their ability to explain and prevent infectious disease outbreaks, Americans looked less to God and more to public health measures to spare them from such scourges. Yet this shift should not be interpreted as a straightforward triumph of medicine over religion, as if the former simply displaced the latter. After all, the relationship between the two involved far more than a contest between medical and religious aetiologies. The 1918 influenza pandemic illustrated the vital roles religion and faith continued to play in a world ruled by modern medicine. The newfound dominance of bacteriology was on full display during this crisis, as researchers hunted in laboratories for the offending microbe, and as many Christians willingly obeyed public health mandates (Crosby 2003). Yet the revivalist Billy Sunday also prayed against the flu just as he prayed against German military advances (‘Prayer Sunday’s Influenza Remedy’ 1918). Presbyterian minister Francis J. Grimké (1918), meanwhile, interpreted the pandemic through his crusade for racial justice, arguing that the fact that African Americans did not suffer disproportionately from influenza refuted scientific racism—demonstrating that White supremacy was unscientific in addition to being unchristian. More broadly, faith healing movements thrived, medical missionaries sailed for foreign shores, and clergy began to organize a professional hospital chaplaincy (Cadge 2012; Wall 2015; Williams 2013). Clearly, the advent of germ theory and robust public health institutions did not banish religion from American responses to disease outbreaks or the broader domains of health and medicine.
The COVID-19 pandemic has reflected this complex history. While few American Christians competed with medical scientists in explaining the nature of COVID-19, their religious convictions still provided a compass as they navigated the global health crisis.

**Church closures**

In the first weeks of March 2020, as COVID-19 raced through the country, many Americans continued to gather in Christian churches. As they shook hands, sang, and passed the tithing plate, worshippers proved able vectors for the virus. Journalists and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention quickly began documenting how such church events became hotspots for the spread of the disease (Chabria 2020; Ghinai 2020; Harriot 2020). Soon churches had to decide: would they continue to meet during the pandemic?

Most governors provided exemptions for attending religious services in their stay-at-home orders (Villa 2020). Nevertheless, by April, every Roman Catholic diocese and the vast majority of Protestant churches had voluntarily suspended in-person worship (Gecewicz 2020). Religious leaders who supported these decisions tended to frame church closures and obedience to other social distancing measures around the Christian obligations to love your neighbour and to care for the vulnerable. The Episcopal Bishops of Michigan, for example, issued an open letter declaring that ‘loving our neighbor’ requires ‘quarantining, refraining from traveling, physical distancing when in public, and closing down places of gathering where transmission is likely’ (Perry et al. 2020). Across the country and across denominations, Christians employed similar language to inspire compliance with public health mandates and to imbue them with larger meaning.

While most Americans supported church closures, a vocal minority invoked their religious liberty in defiance of such strictures. ‘We hold our religious rights dear,’ Louisiana Pentecostal preacher Tony Spell explained, ‘and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says’ (Silliman 2020a). This conviction prompted several lawsuits nationwide, as church leaders argued that quarantine orders violated the First Amendment right to the free exercise of religion (Schor 2020a). The Supreme Court eventually upheld state-imposed limitations on religious services for the time being (Barnes 2020).

The requirements of Christian faith amid the pandemic nevertheless remained in question by early summer. In June, the protests sparked by the police killings of George Floyd and other unarmed African Americans required Christians to confront the question afresh: did neighbourly love demand that they quarantine or march to declare ‘Black lives matter’?

**Adaptations**

Whatever American Christians decided about attending services or marches, they demonstrated creativity in adapting their faith to the rigours of epidemiological best practices. As in past epidemics, much attention focused on the Eucharist. Early in the pandemic, for example, Catholic priests began placing wafers in communicants’ hands rather than on their tongues, while Episcopal clergy used tongs to distribute only bread (Gody and Farzan 2020). The suspension of church services rendered even these practices moot. While some then had to forego the Eucharist altogether, Protestants comfortable with self-administered communion looked for other solutions—whether pre-packaged communion elements, homemade unleavened bread, or simple store-bought crackers. The necessity of these and many other changes prompted reflection about the nature of Christian practices. ‘What is the heart of confession?’ asked Presbyterian minister Letitia Campbell. ‘What is the heart of gathering for prayer?'
Which elements of it are things we can adapt and still hold onto something that feels meaningful? (Zauzmer and Bailey 2020).

The most common change Christians made was to move church services online. Pope Francis began livestreaming his daily mass in early March (‘Pope Francis’ Morning Mass Broadcast Live Every Day’ 2020). By the end of the month, most Protestant churches in the United States had similarly migrated online. Despite the proliferation of internet-broadcasted services in recent years, especially among larger churches, most congregations had not embraced this technology. So church leaders often found the change abrupt and stressful (Pastors’ Views [April] 2020; Pastors’ Views [March] 2020).

Broadcasting did not solve all the liturgical challenges the pandemic presented for American churches. First, religious practices that went beyond mere content delivery could not be so easily translated into the digital sphere. The Catholic Church, for example, did not permit remote penance, leading some priests to hear confessions in parking lots (Zauzmer and Bailey 2020). Second, not all Christians could move their activities online. Just as the shifts to remote work and school left behind many Americans—especially working-class racialized minorities—who lacked the jobs, means, or home environments to support these shifts, so the widespread embrace of ‘Zoom church’ excluded many worshipers. Some pastors worried about connecting with elderly congregants unfamiliar with social media and video conferencing tools, while others had to minister to entire congregations without reliable internet access. This technological disparity hurt African American churches in particular, fewer of which went online than White congregations (Banks 2020; Gecewicz 2020).

Ministry

The limitations of online church highlighted the difficulties of ministering amid quarantine, sickness, and death. Protestant clergy, for example, emphasized the challenge of offering pastoral care from a distance. While video conferencing and phone trees provided some comfort, pastors still missed weekly in-person interactions with their parishioners and worried about not visiting sick or isolated members. Perhaps most challenging of all, even as many churches faced more deaths associated with COVID-19, church leaders could not hold normal funerals to care for the grieving (Pastors’ Views [April] 2020).

While one-fifth of Protestant ministers reported COVID-19 diagnoses in their church by April, evidence suggests those diagnoses were not evenly distributed among Christian communities (Pastors’ Views [April] 2020). On the contrary, they seemed to conform to the emerging pattern of racial disparities noted during the pandemic, as African Americans, Latinx, and other racialized minorities suffered from COVID-19 in numbers that far outstripped their percentages of the population—often two or three times over (The Color of Coronavirus 2020). These disparities manifested themselves in churches, as communities that ministered to racialized minorities suffered profound losses. In Detroit, for example, the Greater New Moriah Baptist Church felt the heavy hand of racial inequity. Pastor Kenneth Flowers contracted COVID-19, as did his wife, his elderly mother, and twenty other members of his congregation. Several members died (Warikoo 2020). Such devastation took an enormous emotional toll. Mike Carrion, pastor of the hard-hit Promised Land Covenant Church in South Bronx, searched for comfort even as he struggled to keep pace with the deaths in his largely-minority congregation. In a recent sermon, he reached for Psalm 30:5: ‘Weeping may endure for a night, but joy will come in the morning’ (Bailey 2020a).
Even as they struggled to care for each other, there were Christians who worked through their churches and parachurch ministries to meet the needs of their broader communities. When New York City emerged as one of the epicentres of the pandemic in the United States and patients overran local hospitals, for example, the evangelical aid organization Samaritan’s Purse established field hospitals in Central Park and in the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine (Bailey 2020b). Christians launched similar efforts all around the country. Some provided medical care directly, while others chipped in however they could. Churches donated N95 respirators to hospitals, sewed cloth facemasks for nursing homes, and offered free COVID-19 testing in church parking lots. As quarantines brought joblessness and then hunger, churches redoubled their food pantry ministries (Bailey 2020c; Gryboski 2020; Janney 2020; Miller 2020).

Meaning making

When Christians looked for meaning in the pandemic, some saw providence at work. A few outspoken right-wing preachers, for example, attributed the spread of COVID-19 to divine punishment, explaining that God was chastising the United States for tolerating transgenderism, abortion, and other such ‘sins’ (Greenhalgh 2020). Amid an uptick in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories concerning the pandemic, one minister described COVID-19 as divine retribution on Jews for not believing in Jesus Christ (Richman 2020). Franklin Graham suggested American idolatry might be to blame: ‘I think God is trying to get our attention. He wants us to worship him’ (Bailey 2020b).

Graham illustrated another common interpretation of the pandemic, especially among White evangelicals: the hope that the crisis might precipitate a revival. As the pandemic exposed the limitations of human powers and quarantines separated people from their worldly preoccupations, people might once again put their trust in God. These optimists cited the millions of people who now heard the gospel preached online as well as surveys that reported Americans were turning to prayer and finding their faith buoyed (Gecewicz 2020; Laurie 2020; Most Americans 2020).

This spiritual boon appeared most abundant among the communities hardest hit by the virus, as more Black and Latinx Americans said the pandemic strengthened their faith than White Americans (Gecewicz 2020). Yet leaders of these communities tended to offer narratives not of optimism but of endurance. Seeing COVID-19 as yet one more American racial tragedy, some African American Christians looked to the religious resources that helped them survive slavery, Jim Crow laws, and racial segregation. ‘It’s a time where you can really feel hopeless,’ explained Shakira Sanchez-Collins, associate pastor of St. James AME Church in Chicago, ‘and I think the church is actually how people are getting through this’ (Anderson 2020; Dias 2020).

Still other Christians perceived in the pandemic a demand for justice. The crisis revealed how systemic and scientific racism, economic inequality, gender bias, citizenship status, incarceration, lack of health insurance, and other compounding factors had long undermined the health of marginalized communities in the United States, thereby ensuring those communities suffered disproportionately from COVID-19. The disparate burdens of the pandemic became for many American Christians another call to activism, whether to help those most harmed by the COVID-19 or to demand structural transformations to address historic injustices. Some combatted the anti-Asian racism that accompanied the spread of the virus, while others recommitted to longstanding efforts on behalf of the poor, immigrants, and other vulnerable communities (see Borja, this volume). The George Floyd protests only rendered such
social justice work—especially antiracist advocacy—more urgent (Silliman 2020b). The pandemic thus took on spiritual meaning as one battle in the longer war for a more just America (Schor 2020b).

**Looking ahead**

As spring gave way to summer, much of the national conversation about the pandemic turned to when and how the United States should emerge from quarantine. Survey data showed that reopening churches ranked among Americans’ top priorities (Rasmussen 2020). Yet, just as governors, college presidents, and business owners had to assess risks and chart a careful course forward, so church leaders had many questions to answer. Should churches regather? Is it safe for congregants to sing? Would worshiping six feet apart feel strange? (Bailey 2020d). Individual Christians, meanwhile, made their own decisions about returning to public services. Whether believers went to church or stayed home, however, religious convictions and practices promised to remain central for them as they navigated this historic crisis.

**Bibliography**


