

Can prayer save us from COVID-19?

There is a difference between fideism and finding strength through faith

When U.S. President Donald Trump declared March 15 as a National Day of Prayer to seek divine help and strength in the face of the coronavirus, the initiative did not receive much national attention.

This raises some interesting question regarding the place of prayer and faith during times of national and global epidemics like we are currently experiencing.

Research shows that there is a correlation between prayer and a positive health outcome.

This is because religious faith gives people hope in the face of crisis. It also inspires positive ethical responses and changes in lifestyles that limit unsafe behavior than can expose people to diseases and infections.

However, Christians and people of faith have diverse opinions and convictions about the efficacy of prayer in bringing an end to an outbreak of this kind.

This is because of the diverse ways in which religious people respond to the two crises of faith that emerge during an epidemic.

No religious explanations, no religious solutions

The first is the inadequacy of religious explanations for outbreaks like COVID-19. The second is the ineffectiveness of religious solutions to contain and mitigate the spread and effects of epidemics without paying attention to the germ-theory of diseases.

These two realities were clearly evident in the greatest outbreak in human history, the Great Plague (1347-50) that killed more than one-third of the population of Europe. This plague created a crisis of faith among Christians about God's ability to save them, because religious leaders were among the many people who died.

The prayers, rituals and religious processions through the streets to ask for divine intervention apparently did not bring physical healing. The people quickly realized that being religious or spiritual does not immune anyone from diseases, infections and death.

Providing comfort and hope

However, religious people believe that prayer and religious faith do offer an access to spiritual energy. Faith makes an appeal to a higher power, which brings comfort to Christians by the healing grace that – Christians believe – only God can give.

Religious faith also helps Christians to make sense of evil, diseases and outbreaks like COVID-19. It helps them look with hope beyond the shadows of the present uncertain times.

Historically, Christians everywhere have always relied on prayer in moments of anxiety and uncertainty.

American Religious historians Daniel Reff and Rodney Stark attribute the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire to the ability of religion to create a strong social network, and to offer people healing rituals and charitable outreach and solidarity in the face of the frequent plagues and infectious diseases that besieged the population.

The pope, petitions and spiritual solidarity

It was not surprising that Pope Francis recently visited the shrines containing the icon of Mary and the Crucifix of St. Marcello — two important places where many Catholics over the centuries have gone to pray for divine help during outbreaks of disease.

The pope prayed for an end to the outbreak and healing for the sick. That's because he believes prayer is a form of spiritual solidarity through which we can be close to one another and to God.

In praying for healthcare workers at these shrines, Francis implicitly admitted the instrumental role of human agency in bringing health to the sick and stopping the spread of the coronavirus.

Closing churches for better or for worse

At the same time that he was visiting these important shrines in Rome, churches in North America and Europe were shutting their doors for public worship and Mass in an effort to stem the virus' spread.

These represent two contrasting realities and show the tension even among Christians and their leaders about what to do in times like these.

Some Catholics have expressed reservation at what they perceive as extreme measures that deny them the opportunity to experience spiritual contact and healing from God through public worship, which has been the Christian community's way of responding to plagues in the past.

Catholic commentators, such as R.R. Reno, editor of *First Things*, argue that closing churches is a betrayal of spiritual care. But the question worth answering is whether it really is a lack of faith to take precautions against infection, which includes closing churches in order to enforce social distancing.

A bishop warns against fideism and urges charity

In the Diocese of Vanne in northwest France, for instance, resistance to church closures was so strong that the local bishop, Raymond Centène, was forced to make a public statement in which he warned that "risking one's health and that of one's neighbor" by congregating in large numbers for religious services was not an act of charity.

He also advised the people that praying for 'health without taking any precautions to prevent the spread of the disease is not faith but "fideism".

The bishop's message is apt for our times because fideism is a blind faith, which could actually worsen the outbreak. This happens when people of faith neglect to take the necessary precautions validated by science, while believing and praying that God will protect them from infection.

One must also reject the false claim of those Christian leaders who blame God for this outbreak, saying it is divine punishment for the sins of the world.

Rather than blaming God, a particular country, political party or national government, there should be a national and global effort to fight this scourge.

Faith should inspire people to see our common humanity under threat, to see in those who are suffering a brother or sister so that we can all work together in lifting up those who are weak, comforting those who are dying and giving hope to those who are frightened.

Science and religion

I have seen the destructiveness of irrational faith from my experience in the humanitarian sector in Africa during the fight against HIV/AIDS and Ebola.

Many people believed that one of the reasons for the high mortality of Ebola in West Africa during the initial phase of the 2014 outbreak was because people sought spiritual healing rather than self-isolating and avoiding bodily contact.

Many of the traditional and Christian healers who claimed to have supernatural powers to cure people of the Ebola virus ended up dying and infecting so many others.

Albert Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."

I believe in the power of prayer. But I also believe that prayer must go hand-in-hand with good works, good science, best practices, sound judgment and bold human effort and action.

The axiom of the preacher is so true for our uncertain times: "Pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you."

Therefore, everyone – beginning with our national leaders and including all the rest of us – should pray for the courage to assume full responsibility for what each of us must do to contain and mitigate this pandemic.

While the call to prayer should be left to religious leaders, the heads of our governments should concentrate their energy on uniting their countries, comforting their nation, and leading the charge against this outbreak with truth and clarity in a non-partisan manner.

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