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Religious festivals cancelled or scaled back due to coronavirus

All major world religions are limiting large gatherings and physical contact to halt transmission of Covid-19



▲ Muslim pilgrims circle around the Ka'bah in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in August last year. The country is currently closed to overseas visitors. Photograph: EPA-EFE

Events to mark important religious festivals could be cancelled or curtailed in the coming weeks because of the coronavirus crisis.





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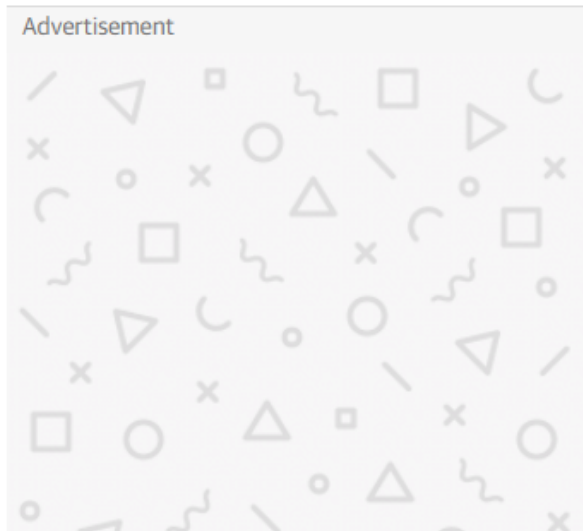
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Next month, most of the world's major religions have festivals involving large gatherings of people. Easter is on 12 April (a week later for Eastern Orthodox churches); Passover begins on 8 April; Rama Navami, an important Hindu festival, is on 2 April; while the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi is a few days later. The Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins around 23 April.

The traditional mass to celebrate Easter at the Basilica in Rome, followed by the pope's Urbi et Orbi blessing in St Peter's Square, is usually attended by tens of thousands of people from all over the world. But after the square was closed off by Italian police and public masses and funerals were cancelled, Easter celebrations are now in doubt.

The Vatican is livestreaming the pope's daily 7am mass and the Angelus on Sundays. Despite the restrictions on movement in Italy, Francis - who has tested negative for the virus - has urged Catholic priests to "have the courage to go out and visit the sick ... and to accompany the medical staff and volunteers in the work they do".

Most churches across the world have already advised congregants not to shake hands as a "sign of peace", to ban sharing communion cups and





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placing wafers directly on the tongue, and to stop the practice of intinction, or dipping wafers in wine. But the risks of the virus spreading as a result of physical proximity could mean official bans on services of worship, or people deciding simply to stay at home.

In the UK, the Church of England has also **advised** against intinction and the placing of wafers directly on the tongue by those administering Eucharist. Physical contact - the “laying on of hands” - during blessings are suspended. It is considering issuing further guidance on elements of those traditional Holy Week and Easter services that could increase risk of transmission, such as the veneration of the cross.

The Greek Orthodox church, however, has **refused to suspend the ritual** of worshippers sipping from the same spoon during Holy Communion, saying: “This cannot be the cause of the spread of illness.” Critics have urged the church to listen to the advice of scientists.

For the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims, Ramadan is likely to present extra challenges. During the holy month, Muslims fast from dawn until sundown, but those with severe sickness, including flu, are permitted to break their fast.

During Ramadan, mosque attendances usually peak, with people crammed against one another. Friday prayers have already been suspended across the Middle East as a result of the virus.





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▲ Islamic call to prayer changes in Kuwait amid coronavirus fears - video

Saudi Arabia has banned overseas visitors since the end of February, meaning those wishing to undertake pilgrimage to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina are unable to do so. About 12 million people usually visit Mecca each year, mostly for the hajj, which this year begins on 28 July. However, thousands wishing to perform umrah, a pilgrimage that can be undertaken at any time of year, have been affected by the ban.

The Muslim Council of Britain has not advised any restrictions on gatherings but has warned that could change. “We would expect the mosque committee





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and scholars to show clear, decisive leadership and follow the public health advice, which may include considering the suspension of congregational prayers and events,” it said.

Jews wishing to visit relatives in Israel for the weeklong Passover holiday may find their entry to the country effectively barred. This week, the government ordered all those arriving in Israel from abroad - both Israeli citizens and others - to self-quarantine for 14 days, a ruling initially valid for two weeks, but which could be extended. Thousands of Christian pilgrims wishing to visit holy sites in Jerusalem at Easter may also be affected.

The Conference of European Rabbis has advised people not to kiss the Torah scroll, and Israel’s chief rabbi has said people should not touch or kiss mezuzahs affixed to door frames. Some US synagogues are cancelling all communal events, and others preparing to livestream services and offer online tuition for children preparing for barmitzvahs and batmitzvahs.

Many Hindus taking part in celebrations of Holi, the festival of colours when coloured powder is thrown in the air and people paint each other’s faces, in India this week wore face masks as a precaution against coronavirus. The prime minister, Narendra Modi, announced he would not take part in public celebrations and advised people to avoid large gatherings.

Celebrations for Rama Navami, a public holiday in India, which marks the birth of Lord Rama, attract thousands of devotees at places associated with him, such as Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh and Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu.





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Gurdwaras are considering postponing events, including nagar kirtans - hymn-singing processions that can attract thousands of people - to mark Vaisakhi, according to City Sikhs, a UK organisation. The Vaisakhi nagar kirtan in Southall has been delayed until later in the year.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/14/religious-festivals-cancelled-or-scaled-back-due-to-coronavirus>

