

The Impact of the Pandemic on Religious Practices: Data Analysis from Responses by Muslim and Arab Christian Participants

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The following is a brief qualitative analysis based on interviews data and focusing on select questions regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 and the disruption in religious services.

The data examined for this report includes responses from over twenty men and women (most of them were women) concerning how (and if) they were impacted by the challenges in practicing their faith. Interviewees were overwhelmingly Muslim but there were also some who identified themselves as Christian. Most of them came from immigrant background.

One of the recurring theme was regarding identity and how to balance between one's faith and cultural identity as an American. Some noted that they felt an apparent contradiction between their Arab background and the culturally approved and sometimes tacit denigration of Arabs and their cultural heritage. This theme was echoed by Arab-Americans from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds.

Another major theme was resilience. Several responded to the question regarding challenges by saying that the pandemic and the difficulties have helped them become stronger in their faith. They became more firm in their practice and felt greater reliance on God in their life. Two Muslim respondents spoke about trust in God as key to handling crisis of this nature. Using different examples, they argued that as a Muslim it is their belief that anything that happens whether that be good or bad is in the long run good for them. God desires patience from believers and the pandemic is a time to test one's faith through patience and endurance.

Among the challenges, several Muslims said that not being able to celebrate and enjoy ramadan, the month of fasting, especially in 2020 when places of worship were shut down due to stay at home orders, was one of the most difficult periods they had to endure. The things they reported to have missed included the chance to practice during the spiritually intensive period of the year and social get-togethers and the breaking of the fast at sunset with family and friends. Some respondents said they were financially affected but almost all of them acknowledged the major toll on their mental health due to social isolation.

On the question of virtual participation most responded by saying that it was a blessing that they were still able to connect with and hear from others, especially online sermons by religious leaders. However, the experience was not very fulfilling. Religious leaders did offer help by citing Muslim sources in order to make sense of the circumstances during the peak of the pandemic. One respondent recalled learning about a religious leader from early Islamic period who giving directives during a plague saying do not leave your town and home so as not to spread the disease. This was seen as a religious teaching that directly spoke to the social distancing guidelines received during 2020. Religious leaders' efforts to do outreach were helpful for mental health according to vast majority of survey participants.

Most of the respondents spoke about the coming of the vaccine as a sign of hope implying that they believe in the remedy proposed by the government, and they have faith in science as a way out of this crisis. A handful of Muslims responded by saying that religion neither helped nor hurt

them in this present crisis because they did not practice or rely on religion. Another Muslim responded similarly but for the opposite reasons. Her feelings about religion did not change much because she was already fully practicing and relied on faith to deal with all of life's challenges. Both kinds of respondents spoke about being not reliant on visiting the mosque; the first because they were not practicing and the second because they were self-reliant, prayed at home and did not frequent their place of worship. This response is often received from female practitioners who have in many cases found mosques inhospitable and/or unprepared for their needs, such as providing adequate childcare facilities.