



DULUTHINK

NEWSLETTER OF THE LAKE SUPERIOR FREETHINKERS

The activities of LSF have been suspended temporarily, in cooperation with efforts to limit the severity of the coronavirus epidemic. We will keep members informed as plans develop.

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When faith threatens public health

By Candida R. Moss (CNN)

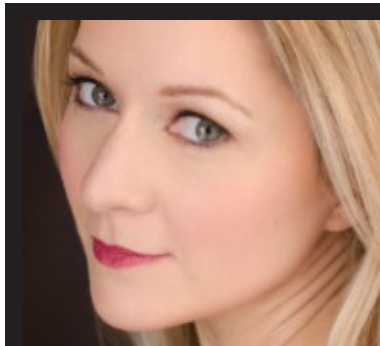
This week, as stores, restaurants and other businesses shuttered their doors to help stem the spread of coronavirus, a number of conservative Christians chose to frame their response to the pandemic in a different way: as an opportunity to choose “faith over fear.”

Writing in *First Things*, which describes itself as “America’s most influential journal of religion & public life,” editor Rusty Reno wrote that “the mass shutdown of society to fight the spread of COVID-19 creates a perverse, even demonic atmosphere.”

Reno argues that fear of death is being allowed to distort social order. “Everything for the sake of physical life? What about justice, beauty, and honor? There are many more things precious than life (...) The Eucharist itself is now subordinated to the false god of ‘saving lives.’”

Reno is not alone, though many churches have responded to spread of Covid-19 by going virtual. Cardinal Raymond Burke -- while affirming the need for safety measures such as social distancing and regular cleaning -- recently argued that church attendance should nonetheless be considered an “essential” behavior akin to grocery shopping. A pastor in Louisiana held a crowded service for more than 1,825 congregants last Sunday on the basis that he “hold(s) our religious rights dear” and believes that the virus is “politically motivated.”

Early reports about the spread of coronavirus in South Korea linked “more than half” of the country’s 3,730 cases to the Shincenoji Church of Jesus, a religious group that the government describes as a cult. Religious communities have the potential to provide support, comfort and spiritual nourishment to members -- but they can also



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become hotspots for the virus.

While religious activity may be an essential part of people’s lives, the assumption that social distancing equates to spiritual estrangement is up for debate. Should religious freedom be allowed to put the lives of the many at risk? If the 12 disciples could miss the crucifixion and still become saints, can’t Christians skip church for a few weeks and still make it into heaven?

As a New Testament scholar and a high-risk patient (I am immunocompromised following a life-saving kidney transplant), I would argue that they do not. Parables like that of the “lost sheep” emphasize that the whole group must compromise when the life of a single person is at stake. Having written three books about early Christian martyrdom, I can confidently say that God’s guardianship does not mean protection from physical suffering

or death. During periods when they were socially marginalized or persecuted, a number of bishops and high-profile Christians went into exile -- its own form of social distancing -- in order to avoid death.

Then, as now, the ability to remove oneself from harm’s way was a matter of social privilege. Only the wealthy could choose flight.

There are all kinds of ways that people can envision the Christian response to coronavirus. Some might say that qualified Christians -- medical workers, emergency personnel, food industry workers -- should put themselves on the front lines by caring for others, which they are already doing. They have done so historically, in the early church, when plagues struck their communities.

For the majority of people (including Pope

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**When faith threatens public health***Continued from page 2*

Francis), that practicing social distancing and protecting the most vulnerable is the Christian way. It's the embodied interpretation of love thy neighbor. Interestingly, it is religious conservatives who are pushing back against social distancing norms.

What is most frightening about these latest expressions of "religious freedom" is not just that they threaten to place others at risk, but that religious conservatives form a substantial part of Donald Trump's voter base -- his plan to reopen by Easter may be well timed to speak to them.

In the past two months, the President has already spread misinformation and generally dragged his feet. If inaction and noncompliance with government guidelines starts to be framed as question of religious freedom, then it could further stall the widespread implementation of

stricter guidelines. No individual's religious freedom should be able to threaten public health, and certainly not because those who prioritize religious freedom tend to vote Republican.

Moreover, Liberty University, one of the biggest and most influential names in Christian education, announced Tuesday that it would choose to reopen despite the crisis. While it did not cite faith as a reason to do so, it does signal to its followers that it's OK to do the same.

For the past 40 years, pro-life religious conservatives have argued that in opposing abortion and euthanasia they fight for society's most vulnerable: the unborn and the elderly. Given that people older than 70 and pregnant women are at high risk for severe illness, the unborn and elderly may face severe complications from the virus. If Christian conservatives want to practice what they preach, it is in quiet care, rather than reckless faith-driven bravado, that salvation lies.

LSF's support of Duluth's WE Clinic mentioned in FFRF's *FREETHOUGHT TODAY*

FFRF Kentucky

FFRF Kentucky purchased items for senior citizens living in Section 8 housing at American Village in Louisville in July 2019. The chapter purchased beds for residents who had been sleeping on the floor. It also donated pillows, bed linens, wash rags, towels, plates, silverware, blankets, lamps, shower curtains and hooks and personal toiletries.

FFRF Maine

FFRF Maine helped fund shelves and a utility sink for the Litchfield Food Bank. The rest of the grant money was spent on food for the needy in the Litchfield area.

Lake Superior Freethinkers

Lake Superior Freethinkers expanded its partnership and support for the WE Health Clinic (formerly the Women's Health Center) in Duluth, Minn. WE Health Clinic is the only abortion services provider in northern Minnesota. Using matching funds, LSF supports the WE Health Clinic through volunteer work and with LSF members serving on WE Health Clinic's Board and committees. In October 2019, LSF members volunteer during one of the WE Health Clinic's annual fundraisers.

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