

Comforting sermons in empty cathedrals

As COVID-19 forces people to stay put at homes, believers access livestreaming of religious services

LIAM STACK
NEW YORK

At 11:15 on Sunday morning, the Reverend Kristin Kaulbach Miles, a priest at Trinity Church Wall Street, stepped into the sanctuary of the soaring 1846 Gothic Revival building in Manhattan and delivered a sermon about the need to come together in the face of COVID-19.

But no parishioners were there.

The scene was repeated at some of the most well-known houses of worship in New York: St. Patrick's Cathedral, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York; Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church; and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York. Something similar had already played out in the city's mosques during Friday prayers and in synagogues at Shabbat services on Saturday.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of religious services across New York and much of the country this weekend, but faith leaders have stepped into



Message of hope: Reverend Mark Bozzuti-Jones performing Sunday service as it gets livestreamed at Trinity Church in Manhattan. •NYT

the breach in an effort to comfort and lead communities that are increasingly anxious and unsure about where to turn.

On Sunday, ministers preached messages of calm and compassion to empty churches as their congregants watched on livestream, isolated at home by public health warnings that convinced the Catholic Church

and several major Protestant denominations to shut their doors.

COVID-19

At Trinity Church, Miles told the story of Jesus asking a Samaritan woman for water "in a way that follows the COVID-19 safety protocols." Looking across the empty pews, she urged the wor-

shippers at home to be there for each other.

"Every hand we don't shake must become a phone call we make," she said from the pulpit. "Every inch and every foot of distance we put between ourselves and another must become a thought about how we could help that other should the need arise."

The only people seated in

the pews were other parish priests, who clapped for each other when the Mass was done.

There have been more than 600 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in New York and two deaths, officials said, sending a wave of fear across the region that has upended daily life.

'Resist panic'

"The government is utterly failing to provide rational, reliable leadership," said Jeffrey Cahn, executive director of Romemu, a popular Upper West Side synagogue that he said was the first in New York to cancel in-person Shabbat services. "As religious leaders we have a pulpit," Rabbi Cahn said.

On Friday night, Rabbi David Ingber used the livestream service to offer comfort to worshippers.

Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest urged his viewers to "resist panic" and not to "demonize or scapegoat" Asian people for a pathogen first detected in Wuhan, China. "This virus is no one's fault." NY TIMES

China empowers its Internet police to mute virus anger

Online critics of government's response face backlash

PAUL MOZUR
SHANGHAI

As China tries to reshape the narrative of its fumbled response to the COVID-19 outbreak, it is turning to a new breed of police that carry out real-world reprisals for digital misdeeds.

The Internet police, as they are known here, have gained power as the Communist Party has worked to seize greater control over the thoughts, words and even memories of China's 800 million web users. Now, they are emerging as a bulwark against the groundswell of anger over governance breakdowns that exacerbated the epidemic.

Officers arrive with an unexpected rap at the door of online critics. They drag off offenders for hours of interrogation. They force their targets to sign loyalty pledges and recant remarks deemed politically unacceptable, even if those words were made in the relative privacy of a group chat.

In the central city of Chengdu, a recent law school graduate, Li Yuchen, said he was pulled from his home in early February after writing a sarcastic treatise in classical Chinese about censorship. The police questioned him from late afternoon until midnight, first asking him whether he loved his country, to which he said yes. Li said he was forced to sign a statement disavowing his views and pledging loyalty to the party.

The experience mirrored what happened to the hero of Mr. Li's essay, a Wuhan doctor named Li Wenliang, who tried to alert colleagues about the spread of a mysterious virus in a chat group, only to be called to a police



New messaging: China is trying to reshape the narrative of its fumbled response to the coronavirus outbreak. •NYT

station and forced to sign a confession for spreading rumours.

Many voices

When Li died of the coronavirus, waves of mourning and anger swept across China's Internet.

"Li Wenliang said that a healthy society shouldn't have only one voice," wrote Li Yuchen, who is not related to Li, the doctor. "I think the best way to mourn him is to continue to be a citizen" and continue writing, he wrote in a later post on WeChat.

That has become more difficult. To check anger over Li Wenliang's death, and the deaths of the many others his warning might have saved, authorities have doubled down on the very tactics that drove the fury in the first place: using the Internet police to muffle the most outspoken.

Little is known about the group, formally part of the Cybersecurity Defense Bureau, which has long policed hacking and online fraud. But occasional government releases offer clues. In 2016, the 50-million person region of Guangxi said it had almost 1,200 Internet police officers.

The goal was to have one Internet police officer for every 10,000 people in the region, a sign of the force's ambitions.

Enlarging roles

In the early years of Chinese social media, punishments doled out to critics were rarely severe. As millions took to clones of Twitter and Facebook, which are banned in China, censorship usually meant disappearing posts and inaccessible foreign websites. Now the police actively pursue the authors of forbidden material, and irritation has been replaced by fear.

Friends and families warn each other not to speak too openly in group chats. The changes have come as China's leader, Xi Jinping, has pushed hard to extend the party's iron-fisted rule over the Internet.

Mr. Xi has given new resources to domestic security forces. The Internet police's uncanny speed in finding people, who might believe they are hidden among the Internet's hordes of anonymous grumblers, is the result of billions of dollars in new spending on surveillance technology. NY TIMES

To track virus, Israel to tap cellphone data

The aim is to find people who came into contact with virus carriers, and ask them to isolate themselves

DAVID M. HALBFINGER
ISABEL KERSHNER
JERUSALEM

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has authorised the country's internal security agency to tap into a vast and previously undisclosed trove of cellphone data to retrace the movements of people who have contracted the COVID-19 and identify others who should be quarantined because their paths crossed, officials said.

The unprecedented move to use data secretly gathered to combat terrorism for public health efforts was authorised on Sunday by Mr. Netanyahu's holdover Cabinet. But it must still be approved by Parliament's Secret Services Subcommittee before its existence lapses at 4 p.m. on Monday, upon the swearing-in of a new legislature. That is by no means assured.

The existence of the data trove and the legislative fra-

mework under which it is amassed and used have not previously been reported. The plan to apply it to fighting the virus, alluded to only vaguely by Mr. Netanyahu, has not yet been debated by lawmakers or revealed to the public.

The idea is to sift through geolocation data collected from Israeli cellphone providers about millions of their customers in Israel and the West Bank, find people who

came into close contact with known virus carriers and send them text messages directing them to isolate themselves immediately.

Threat to democracy

Disclosure of the plan is certain to raise alarms among privacy advocates and among critics of Mr. Netanyahu.

Mr. Netanyahu's caretaker government on Sunday authorised prison sentences of

up to six months for anyone breaching isolation orders; barring visitors, including lawyers, from prison and detention facilities and allowing the police to break up gatherings — as of now, more than 10 people.

It is the existence of the cellphone metadata trove and its use to track patients and carriers that privacy advocates say poses the greatest test of Israeli democracy at a fragile moment. NY TIMES

New avenues for Saudi women as social codes relax their grip

Though they remain legal minors when it comes to marrying and living on their own, there is a general easing up of attitudes



Driving to freedom: Saudi women at a driving school in Riyadh. •NYT

VIVIAN YEE
MEDINA

For Westerners — squinting at Saudi Arabia across a vast landscape of stories about oppressed women, ultraconservative Islam and human rights abuses — the desert kingdom often leaves a single, damning impression: Here is a country that women are desperate to flee. But the changes driven by

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler, have complicated that image over the last few years, codifying for women the right to drive, attend sporting events and travel without a man's permission, among others.

As the social codes that long governed their lives relax their grip, more women are wearing their hair unco-

vered and mingling openly with men — at least in larger cities. But whether reality lives up to the law depends on the dice roll of birth. Day by day, it still falls to women in many households to negotiate their freedoms with the fathers, husbands, brothers and sons, who serve as their legal guardians.

Even before the legal changes, Saudi women from

tolerant families rarely had to chafe under requirements that a male guardian approve plans to get jobs or travel abroad. For them, permission was nearly always granted.

Women remain legal minors when it comes to marrying, living on their own and other matters. Those from more traditional families are still yoked to male guardians

for whom fear of God, change or what the neighbours will think often outweighs the letter of the law.

The easing up of attitudes has mirrored a general loosening of Saudi society, much of it owing to the changes brought by the Crown Prince, who has erased many restrictions and defanged the religious police. NY TIMES

IN BRIEF



Journalist says he got virus from Hanks' wife

CANBERRA
An Australian TV network's entertainment editor has tested positive for COVID-19 after meeting Tom Hanks' wife, Rita Wilson. Richard Wilkins said that he was tested because he met Ms. Wilson at the Opera House. AP

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