

RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. *Recent findings demonstrate a growing interest in religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic and indicate a positive link between religiosity and mental health, agreeableness, and higher emotion regulation skills. On the other side, some surveys describe religious people as reluctant to follow the public health experts' recommendations. They also tend to score lower on intelligence and analytic thinking measures. Religiosity is a ressourcefull in facing adversity, giving a sense of meaning, comfort and closeness. Religion/spirituality can also be a source of stress and strain during major life crises raising profoundly unsettling doubts about religious beliefs. Therefore, it is essential to study how religion in our country has influenced the psychological process of perception of the pandemic and how religious views impact religious struggles. This study analyses the religious notions of the COVID-19 pandemic and religious struggles. How do different religious interpretations of the pandemic affect different struggles? For this purpose, we interviewed believers from different religious communities - Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. The analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals two main points of view. The focus of the first religious interpretation is pandemic as retribution for the self-forgetfulness of man and the consumerist attitude toward God's creation. The main narrative in the other interpretation considers diseases and suffering that accompany human life as a natural consequence of original sin and perishable human nature. Both points of view relate to different struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; religious struggles; religious beliefs.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong negative impact on individuals and social life. In addition to its evident physical consequences, it has also been linked to adverse psychological effects, including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Boyraz, Legros, 2020; Hristova, Karastoyanov, 2021; Bakracheva, Zamfirov, Kolarova, 2020, 2021). Recent findings demonstrate a growing interest in religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Religiosity increases in response to unpredictable natural disasters. From February to March 2020, when cases of COVID-19 dramatically surged, Google searches for the term “prayer” increased 50% in 95 countries across the globe (Bentzen, 2021). Empirical data suggest that religiousness has a Janus-face impact on coping with stress (Kranz et al., 2020). There is evidence of a positive link between religiosity and mental health, agreeableness, and higher emotion regulation skills (Vishkin et al., 2019). Conversely, some surveys describe religious people as reluctant to follow public health experts’ recommendations (Plohl & Musil, 2021). They also tend to score lower on intelligence and analytic thinking measures (Pennycook et al., 2016; Zuckerman et al., 2020). Traumatic events like COVID-19 can often lead to significant resource loss. As a result, people often go through various types of struggles, including religious ones. Religion/spirituality can be a source of stress and strain during major life crises raising profoundly unsettling questions: Why does God allow such pain and suffering? Is it a punishing act from God? Do I still believe in God? How can I live up to my spiritual values? Has my religious community abandoned me? Does my life have a deeper ultimate purpose and meaning? These questions are signs of religious/spiritual struggle (Exline, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the life of religious communities and the performance of religious worship. Anti-epidemic measures included closing temples and banning religious gatherings around the world. In Bulgaria, churches remained open with an express requirement

to comply with anti-epidemic criteria. Religious practices such as kissing icons in the Orthodox community were not allowed, and the ritual burial practice among Muslims for those who died from COVID-19 was under anti-epidemic measures. Accepting Holy Communion has caused sharp controversy and created a dividing line between Christians. Researching the religious views about Covid-19 and analysing the specific religious struggles during the period of the pandemic in Bulgaria will contribute to a deep understanding of the religious phenomenon in our country under the exceptional conditions of a highly stressful situation. Therefore, it is essential to study how religion in our country has influenced the psychological process of perception of the pandemic and how religious views impact religious struggles. The current qualitative study researched religious views and religious struggles in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Religious narratives reveal the views on the pandemic in the context of religious beliefs (e.g. causality, meaning, sequences). Religious struggles occur when a part of one’s religious belief, practice, or experience leads to negative emotions, concerns, or conflicts (Exline, 2013). The theoretical model proposed by Exline includes supernatural struggles or struggles with the divine that involve negative emotion or conflict centred on beliefs about a deity or a perceived relationship with a deity (e.g., ‘felt angry at God’) and struggles with demonic forces involves concern that the devil or evil spirits are attacking an individual or causing negative events (e.g., ‘I felt as though the devil was trying to turn me away from what was good.’); interpersonal struggles involve negative experiences with religious people or institutions or conflict with others around religious issues (e.g., ‘I felt angry at organised religion.’). Intrapersonal struggles are focused on one’s thoughts or actions. There are three types of intrapersonal struggles: moral struggle, in which a person wrestles with attempts to follow moral principles or feels intense guilt in response to perceived transgressions (e.g., ‘I wrestled with attempts to follow my moral

principles.’); doubt struggles in which people are troubled by doubts or questions about their religious beliefs (e.g., ‘I questioned whether life matters.’), and struggle around ultimate meaning, in which concern centres on a lack of perceived deep meaning in life (e.g., ‘I felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs.’) (Exline, 2013). Some studies links religious struggles with emotional distress and poor physical health (Ai, Pargament, Kronfol, Tice, Appel, 2010; Koenig, Pargament, Nielsen, 1998).

PURPOSE

The survey aims to explore and analyse the different religious views and religious struggles in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

For this purpose, semi-structured interviews with 30 participants were conducted – believers from different religious communities - Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims at the end of the fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (February, March 2022).

The participants completed a task to give a name of the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and describe the story behind it. After that, they were invited to answer the semi-structured interview with the following questions: How do they explain the COVID-19 pandemic from their faith and relationship with God? Has the pandemic affected their faith and relationships with people in the religious community? What was the biggest challenge or difficulty in this situation?

The present study applies Directed Content Analysis (DCA), which involves using existing theories to guide the identification of key variables. Exline’s model of different types of religious struggles was used.

RELIGIOUS VIEWS ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Applying a narrative inquiry, data are interpreted, and two main themes are identified. The first religious interpretation focuses on understanding the pandemic as retribution for the self-forgetfulness of a man and the consumerist attitude towards creation. The other theme describes the disease and suffering accompanying human life as natural consequences of the perishability of human nature after ‘the Fall’. Both points of view lead to various struggles.

The first religious interpretation reveals the radical dualisms between religion as a safe space and the world as an unsafe space. The leitmotif in these stories is heroism. The main character lives in apocalyptic times, persecuted for his faith. Society and the world are drowning in fear and sin; therefore, they must receive retribution. Furthermore, the protagonist must win the battle against the invisible enemy, the virus, by not following the anti-epidemic measures against religious habits, demonstrating that God cares for him.

In this story, God is testing our faith through the pandemic. The best illustration was the inscription on the door of the Bulgarian Metropolitan Cathedral: ‘Zone free of COVID-19’¹ and the words of the Bulgarian Metropolitan, who announced that the church has ‘never transmitted and spread diseases... There have never been epidemics in the church’ and a person can only be infected if his faith is weak².

In the interviews, this point of view is presented more veiledly. The trials are not related to God. ‘They are human experiments’ – according to one of the participants, a 50-years old theology student. God does not punish but is deliberately permissive so that people can come to their senses.

¹ <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/sliven/otec-evgeni-ianakiev-v-krizisni-momenti-hramovete-sa-bili-vinagivotvoreni-2218733>.

² <https://www.mediapool.bg/svetiya-sinod-slabata-vyara-vodi-do-zaraza-karame-velikden-po-plan-news304462.html>.

In this point of view, COVID-19 is retribution by 'our' God towards others who wronged them or are seen as a threat to humankind or their convictions (Pieterse, T., Landman, C. 2021).

'The world lies in sin' is revealed in the critical view of humanity. A 41-year-old monk: 'People have turned away from God and have been given into passions. Awareness is needed.' The central theme is the distance of a man from God, giving in to passions, and their consumer attitude toward creation. That causes the crisis and brings retribution.

It is a story of 'persecution against Orthodoxy' - there is a conspiracy against Christians, so the prescriptions of secular authorities should not be followed. The belief that 'God cares about me and my health' rejects the anti-epidemic measures and recommendations concerning worship and sacred objects. The interviewers strongly opposed the anti-epidemic measures, which required a change in the cult practice, such as kissing icons and accepting The Holy Communion. They cited the crucial lesson of Apostle Peter: 'You of little faith, why did you doubt' (Matthew 14:30, 31).

In the context of this point of view is the understanding of vaccination 'as a manifestation of unbelief.' Therefore the vaccination is a compulsion and an expression of 'ungodly philanthropy, which does not respect what even God does not dare to take away from the man - freedom' - 41- year-old monk.

The second religious interpretation reveals the role of religion in supporting and strengthening the human spirit in the face of life-threatening challenges.

A different point of view comes from the attitude of responsibility towards others during the pandemic, which tests men's honesty and requires constant attention.

According to a 45-year-old priest, who described the pandemic as a tunnel, the doctors also are our neighbours: 'We have forgotten that the Lord works through doctors (Sirach. 38:1), and we were not interested in their fatigue, care, and advice. We forgot the words of St. Silouan that 'our neighbour is our life,' or we did not apply them at all'.

The narratives convey an important message on the meaning people attach to events and their lives during a challenging time. It looks beyond what is happening and accepts that God is omnipotent and trustworthy and He is in control. According to Pieterse et al., it also serves as a survival mechanism, expressing that it is time to see the bigger picture and that God is in control, no matter how bad the situation is (Pieterse, T., Landman, C. 2021).

'Dignity lies in the intense sense of responsibility for others - a 45-year-old priest. - The meaning of the pandemic is an opportunity for religious conversion and expression of faith and love in God, overcoming selfish aspirations, and showing concern and love for one's neighbour'.

The pandemic is a reminder of the fundamental nature of the church as a society - explained a 50-year-old pastor: 'The pandemic is God's blessing and mercy. In my opinion, what came out thanks to the pandemic is something that is slithering as a problem in churches. There is a misunderstanding about the nature of the Church as a society. The pandemic is an opportunity to regain our presence and function as a society. In case of suffering and illness, the main task of the Church is to unite people in helping and caring for the people who are weak and who suffer'.

Alienation between God and creation has been with humankind since the beginning of time, with 'the Fall' in the Garden of Eden, as told in Genesis. Suffering and death are consequences and results of the original sin, and health is a gift from God. On the other hand, God accepts our desire to be healthy. This desire is blessed and embodied in the medical profession. Christ himself is a healer. Although we will not receive this wholeness in life, this complete healing implies Adam's condition. Health is a foretaste of this wholeness in the age to come - 45-year-old priest.

A 55-year-old Islamic religious leader named the COVID-19 pandemic 'Covid University'. He described the month of suffering by the coronavirus as a period of searching for meaning. According to him, the somatic sense of the illness was the recuperation of the lungs' functionality based on breathing

through exhaling. ‘The psychological meaning of exhaling is a symbolic and realistic form of acceptance, forgiveness and peace. The social meaning of COVID-19 was to remind mercy, empathy and closeness. In the COVID-19 pandemic reality, the religious, ethnic and cultural differences disappeared.’

The role of religion in the COVID-19 response is heavily conditioned by religious attitudes toward science - according to one of the participants - an orthodox monk:

‘Where these are constructive and harmonious, religion plays a role in supporting and strengthening the human spirit in the face of life-threatening challenges. Where these relationships between religion and science are neither constructive nor harmonious, people will tend to resort to religion as an alternative non-scientific or even anti-scientific account of these challenges. These antagonisms towards science can manifest in conspiracy theories or radical dualisms between religion as a safe space and the world as an unsafe space.’

This antagonism has affected him straightforwardly. Because he’s never seen any disharmony between religion and science, he urged people to get fully vaccinated. About 20 left his parish in disgust, thinking that he was either a faithless apostate or in a few cases, an agent of the devil!

The topics given to the COVID-19 pandemic by the participants are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES

The participants’ struggles are mainly religious. Religious struggles are based on an organised group’s teachings, practices, or group dynamics. Main religious struggles reported by the participants establish two of the religious struggles as outlined by Exline et al. (2013), including interpersonal struggles (i.e., negative experiences with religious individuals and institutions or conflicts with others on religious issues) and moral struggles (i.e.,

Table 1

Topics focused on dualism

Topics
Retribution
Attachment to the material world
Consumerism attitude toward creation
Selfishness
Sinfulness
Corruptibility
Peccability
Split
Testing faith

Table 2

Topics expressing the supportive role of religion during the COVID-19 pandemic

Topics
Chaos, uncertainty
Split, opposition, division
Altruism or ‘love feats’
Quarantine of common sense
Covid’s university
Lack of logic
God’s blessing, God’s mercy
Tunnel

difficulty in following ethical principles and guilt for transgression).

There was no expressed anger or negative feelings about God. Results probably reflect a scientific explanation of the disease's cause, presented at the pandemic's beginning. Moreover, expressing such negative emotions toward the religious community is inappropriate.

In the first approach of religious narratives, the main struggles shared by the interviewers are moral: 'Why the society restricts my religious beliefs and cult practice and my free choice?'; 'My illness is a sign of lack of faith; it is because of my sins and the corruptibility of my conscience'.

The conflict between religious habits and anti-epidemic measures provokes bifurcation and hypocrisy. According to the 50-year-old priest, his parishioners often complained of the transgression of the rules and ambivalent behaviour and feelings toward their faith: 'I wear a mask when I am at work, and come and stay in church without a mask to demonstrate the faith that God cares about me'; 'I felt guilty about not going to church because of my fear'; 'I felt responsible and guilty because my priest or my old parents became ill'; 'I felt angry about restrictions related to the vaccine'.

In the second approach of religious narratives, the main struggles have interpersonal character. On the one hand, the relationship with the church hierarchy and institution - the sense of feeling betrayed by the church hierarchy, the lack of clear messages from the institution to support their efforts. On the other hand, relationships with people - to serve the people without risking their lives and being exhausted to resolve conflict situations.

Struggles are also related to an effort to find meaning in the situation and to be helpful to others who suffer. Struggles in the process to accept and forgive yourself and the neighbour for transgression, to change the mental schemes, convictions and tenets and transform them from axioms to hypotheses. Then to do the long and challenging research about their predispositions to the end where the personality is reinvented as well as the relation with Cod and my neighbour.

The common fact that reuniting the two previously described approaches is the focus of the stories on personal religious growth. Some people choose to divert their focus to a goal of personal religious and, spiritual growth. Some examples included: 'Working on my fears and developing patience', 'accomplishing things that haven't been done before because of lack

Table 3
Examples of General and Religious Struggles in the Sample

General Struggles	Financial problems; Fear of illness and anxiety for loved ones; Awareness of the situation's seriousness; Physical and mental exhaustion.
Religious Struggles	
Interpersonal Struggles	Feeling of being betrayed by religious leaders and community; Lack of institutional support with clear messages; Aggression insults from unbelievers and conspiracy beliefs; Struggles related to the split, division between believers; A priest: 'Why we as a church society didn't manage to unite the people to help each other?'
Moral Struggles	Pandemic as a period of quarantine of common sense Vaccination as an encroachment on free choice; Condemnation as apostasy of bishops and priests who called for observance of measures or vaccination; Bifurcation and hypocrisy; Being unable to forgive oneself for a transgression;
Doubt Struggles	An Islamic religious leader: 'Why my friend who was a man with great morals and faith passed away, and I could do nothing to help him?'

of time - reading spiritual books and more time to pray; finishing research on religious people's well-being", and 'self-reflecting and growing as an individual" and 'starting a new project - starting my services as a priest".

CONCLUSION

The article presents data from studies of religious views of the COVID-19 pandemic and religious struggles expressed by believers from different religious communities in Bulgaria. The interpretation of data identified two main themes. The first religious view is the understanding of the pandemic as retribution for the self-forgetfulness of a man and the consumerist attitude towards creation. It is based on the dualism between religion as a safe place and the world as a hostile place. The other theme describes the disease and suffering as natural consequences of the perishability of human nature after 'the Fall'. It reveals the supportive role of religion in strengthening the human spirit in the face of traumatic events. Both points of view reveal various struggles during the traumatic event.

Most religious struggles related to the COVID-19 pandemic appear interpersonal and moral. The results suggest that the difficulties associated with the pandemic exert more pressure on participants' social relations on the one side and their fundamental personal beliefs on the other. In accordance with the research in this field, the data confirm that during the traumatic event as the COVID-19 pandemic, people are trying to reconcile their pain, fears and the bad that is happening with the omnipotent love of God and the situation as a part of his greater divine plan (Pieterse, T., Landman, C. 2021). These events often force people to keep their faith that God remains constant and trustworthy, but they also bring a significant change in their personal life, becoming consistent after all. Moreover, the participants share their convictions that they became stronger because of the challenges and the new knowledge and that the tragedy also brought a new start in their life. The results confirm, as in the other studies, that COVID-19 is not only a physical virus but

also a spiritual virus that challenges people of their peace, beliefs and convictions.

This qualitative work may provide ideas for future quantitative research in this area. The results suggest further research on the correlation between religious attitudes to the COVID-19 pandemic and how people assess the role of science and religion in their world-views.

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