






COVID-19 and two sides of the coin of religiosity



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Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) first appeared in China in late 2019 and since then it has become a pandemic. Various countries, in accordance with their cultures, have adopted different approaches to deal with the spread of this disease. The dimensions of this disease and its global spread are such that it will certainly have enormous effects on various aspects of human life for many years. One of these issues is examining the approach of religious countries in dealing with this crisis. The issue of science and religion is one of the main issues in the philosophy of religion. A historical event that human society is struggling with today is the COVID-19 crisis. The issues of religion and science were intertwined during the COVID-19 outbreak, contrary to what some thought. This shows that the opposition between religion and science is not real but aims to attack religion without a valid reason. Given the importance of the subject, this article addresses two aspects of people's exposure to religion during the COVID-19 period. On the one hand, the researchers' field observations indicate that group of citizens has turned towards religious teachings since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, another group of citizens have distanced themselves from religiosity, raising the duality of science and religion.

Contribution: This article describes the dual attitude of citizens towards religiosity due to the occurrence of COVID-19, which has not been previously considered in research.

Keywords: COVID-19; divine religions; religiosity; religion; science.

Introduction

In the divine religions, God is omniscient (e.g. in Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayat 20; Surah Al-Isra, Ayat 99; Surah Al-ahqaf, Ayat 33) and omnipotent (e.g. in Surah Saba, Ayat 48; Surah Ghafir, Ayat 19; Surah Al-Haqqa, Ayat 18), and God is pure benevolence that is closer to human beings than the vein of the heart (Surah Qaf, Ayat 16). He is aware of human suffering and is kind and compassionate towards human beings. He hears their prayers and responds to their requests (Surah Az-Zukhruf, Ayat 80). The big question that arises in the minds of people when catastrophic events occur is whether those events are compatible with the existence of a God who has such attributes. Did the wise God not know that the world he created would contain such suffering? Could the mighty God not have created a world free from suffering? Should a benevolent God not refuse to create a world that is full of great suffering? In the face of these questions, pious people are confronted only with epistemic doubts, and by referring to their epistemological knowledge, they try to somehow reconcile the existence of bad events with the existence of a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful and all-benevolent. In answering this question, religious thinkers have often addressed the issue of misfortunes and their relationship with the attributes of God while discussing divine justice in their works. But it seems that in the new world and with the complexities of the questions people face with traditional answers, one of the epistemological concerns of religious thinkers in the coming years will be finding new answers. In the meantime, it is not far from the expectation that, at least in the medium term, we will witness a distancing from religiosity and the spread of ungodly thoughts and actions among a part of Russian society.

The role of religion in human life

When a person thinks of the word 'religion', they may think about punishment, reckoning, submission, piousness or dominance, as well as law and religious conviction (Manzoor 1988). Religion does not have a single meaning recognised by all, even though various interpretations of it are suggested (Hadavi Moghadam 1998). According to Qur'anic interpretations, religion refers

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to a collection of beliefs and ethics, along with laws and regulations to lead humans in the right path of life. Sometimes, this collection of beliefs is right or wrong, and it can even be a mix of right and wrong. In this sense, a religion is called a true religion if it teaches the truth; a religion is said to be a false religion if it teaches truth along with some false beliefs and ideas (Javadi Amoli 1993). In this way, the true religion contains beliefs that are in line with facts and provides sufficient guarantees for correctness and righteousness (Mesbah Yazdi 1998).

The role of religion in human life can fall into two categories, viz. (1) the role of religion in individual life, as a means for humans to get much closer to God and reach perfection, wherein religion has an individual role, and its scope is limited only to personal life. Indeed, some people today confine religion to this view and do not assume any social role for it. (2) The role of religion in social life may be one in which religion attempts to bring humanity to true perfection; however, it goes beyond individual life and has diverse social aspects.

From a psychological perspective, religion can have many functions in human societies. No new sciences, like psychology, have thus far revealed the secrets of religion and religiosity, and they have not even made their inevitable necessity tangible in worldly life. Of course, it should be noted that basically psychology does not seek the value of the truth of religion, because the determination of this issue is beyond the ability and special work of this knowledge. What this knowledge pursues and is within its competence is the fruits and psychological functions of religion, regardless of its authenticity and the value of its truth (Ilyashenko, Ivanova & Khasimova 2021), as discussed below.

Giving meaning to life

Explaining the meaning of life is among the most significant functions of religion. Every human being asks themselves, 'What is this life good for?', 'What do suffering and death mean?' and in general, 'Is the world worth living in or not?' Finding the right answers to such questions gives meaning to life, and failure to do leaves life meaningless. By explaining the immortality, wisdom and purposefulness of existence and its orientation towards goodness, perfection and exaltation, in the light of the plan of the wise and merciful God, religion gives the most reasonable and pleasant meaning to human life and the world (Motahari 1993).

If humans think that they are nonexistent and that there is absolute nothingness after this life, then life will have no value at all. The things that make life pleasant and enjoyable for man, give warmth to his heart and widen the horizon of his vision, are man's belief in the world of eternity, solitude, human survival and the belief that, 'You are not mortal and you will survive, you are bigger than the world, this world is

a small and temporary nest for you, this world is only a temporary cradle' (Motahari 1993).

Improving health, wellness and peace of mind

Mental health, particularly peace of mind, is one of the most essential human needs. In today's world, anxiety, apprehensiveness, depression and agitation are becoming much more prevalent in spite of scientific and technological breakthroughs, so the dire need for more peace of mind is felt more than ever before. The role of religion in enhancing mental health and peace of mind is thus of utmost importance in many ways (Motahari 1993).

Creating harmony between the inner and outer worlds to relieve suffering

Creating harmony between the inner and outer worlds, and consequently relieving suffering and a sense of unhappiness, are among the many benefits of religion. Unquestionably, there are some discrepancies between human desires and the realities in the outside world. Such differences sometimes lead to painful and boring external conditions for humans (Nasri 2003).

Cultivating purposefulness and idealism

One of the most notable functions of religion is to introduce ideals and direct humans to complete perfection. Throughout history, humans have preferred ideals such as prosperity, wealth, fame, social status, love, beauty, knowledge, etc., but the highest ideal has been that which fulfills the following conditions, i.e.: it is reasonable, can be achieved and provide the interests of the individual; therefore, it creates a driving force in man to move towards the ultimate goal of life. This ideal is only formed from the truth of religion and the religious meaning of life (Nasri 2003). Citing Einstein, Bruce Miller says that '[s]cience informs us of what is, and it is religion (i.e. revelation) that informs us of what it deserves to be' (Motahari 2003).

Responding to loneliness

One of the ever-increasing problems faced by humans in the industrialised world, following the emergence of metropolises, is the sense of loneliness. Here, the term does not mean physical loneliness or disconnection with others, but rather it denotes a social loneliness resulting from the inability of people to respond to the needs of others and a lack of concern for others. When more and more people become self-centred, many feel neglected and deprived of their needs (Javadi Amoli 2001).

In other words, a person in this world finds themselves among the multitude of people who are always bound by their selfishness and even if they do seemingly good and useful actions to others, they are mostly mixed with all kinds of requests, tendencies and apparent selfishness. But people are never alone in their religious attitudes. God is always with them.

The COVID-19 pandemic

The first cases of COVID-19 infections were reported in China in late 2019, and then this disease became a pandemic in less than four months. Considering their cultural relations, different countries have thus far adopted different approaches to deal with this disease and its prevalence, although the current analysis of such approaches seems impulsive. The dimensions of this disease and its global spread are such that it can certainly bring many adverse consequences in various aspects of human life for many years into the future (Ahorsu, Lin & Pakpour 2020). This condition has accordingly moved all questioning minds and raised countless questions about it, including the study of the approaches adopted by religious countries in the face of this crisis. It seems that reflecting on existing shortcomings can result in efforts to look at the issue of the relationship between science and religion. This question is undoubtedly within the framework of previous works to appreciate this issue, but this study claims that the COVID-19 crisis opens new windows to the issue of the relationship between science and religion, so it examines this new perspective.

According to the scientific evidence, the virus responsible for COVID-19 is within the scope of modern medical science, so it needs to be addressed based on the standard techniques developed in medical science. In view of that, the nature of the symptoms of this disease as well as the various methods of its prevention and treatment can be assessed; finally, the spread of this disease can be controlled and managed well (Fassin 2021). Since religion also claims to have influential views on various issues, any comment from the religious community regarding this process is a burden for the change of science and religion. There are certain comments in Russia that have been raised about opposition and have presented the conditions for proposing to change this issue. The positions that are raised by the religious community in opposition to medical recommendations indicate conflict, and the positions that are based on medical recommendations can be considered as independence, dialogue or unity. Therefore, it is assumed that the scientific solution to the COVID-19 crisis has been well defined, and the attitudes governing the religious community in opposition to it determine the relationship between science and religion. In terms of reacting to such comments, some people have raised the issue from different angles. The main claim in this study is that the pandemic has created a unique opportunity in relation to the issue of the relationship between science and religion, and it seems that thinkers have ignored its monopoly characteristics, and they have been ultimately incapable of a general analysis of the issue, although they have provided answers based on previous models.

Divine religions and COVID-19

The discussions of religion have long been considered by various schools of thought, and each has been considered and challenged in its own way. Despite all these encounters, religion and its manifestations have always existed in all

societies, from the elementary to the advanced levels, in various ways, and it has not been possible to remove them from the scene of human social life. These ups and downs of religion indicate that human beings need a genuine religion independent of social and credit agreements. Religion is one of the most important factors shaping the values and beliefs of human beings in different societies and has undeniable effects on their behaviour and character, especially in Islamic society. With the development of modern institutions in different societies, the need of today's humans for a spiritual and stable institution in which to take refuge is very much felt (Eskandari et al. 2016). The issue of religion and religiosity has always been one of the most important intellectual and practical issues of human beings. The issue of religion and religiosity can be traced practically to the heart of history, and its existential effects and role-playing can be pointed out even in the most primitive human societies. This is one of the reasons why religion is important in the field of human thought and research; the importance of religion is such that it cannot be ignored and expelled from human life for any reason, under any pretext or effort. From the perspective of the teachings of the prophets, religion is rooted in the truth of existence and religiosity arises from human nature. With the spread of COVID-19, waves of fear, stress and anxiety were created among the people of the world. The intensity of these problems was reduced with the help of religion and religious beliefs (Petrov et al. 2021). This is because the positive emotions that people have in the divine religions reduce their anxiety (Ilyashenko et al. 2021).

The relationship between science and religion

The relationship between science and religion is among the fundamental issues in the philosophy of religion. Numerous philosophical attempts have been made thus far to shed light on the relationship between science and religion, each one giving emphasis to one aspect of the problem. Apart from the typical discussions in this respect, which can be found in many sources, the issue of the relationship between science and religion is one of the most-cited topics within the philosophy of religion, because (like other issues such as the meaning of life, religion and ethics) it has been raised in different historical moments, and it is necessary to reconsider it according to the new conditions. The COVID-19 crisis has put the issue of the relationship between science and religion at the forefront of research today.

In the related literature, many models have been proposed so far to investigate the relationship between science and religion in general, according to the rulings declared by religious authorities or those in charge of science. For example, Alistair McGrath (1999) presented a two-dimensional model, comprised of opposition and nonopposition, which is by itself made up of the convergence and divergence of science and religion. On the other hand, Ian Barbour (2000) believes in a four-dimensional model for the problem of science and religion, in which all four dimensions (i.e. conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration) are

interconnected. Indeed, the subtlety of each model sheds light on the similarities and differences between science and religion, but in general, the model proposed by Barbour (2000) significantly meets the objectives in this study. This is because, firstly, the given model is more theoretical and comprehensive and can better explain the standpoints in Russia on the COVID-19 crisis, and secondly, it provides a conceptual-theoretical framework, which is common to almost all models developed for examining the relationship between science and religion.

Given the studies fulfilled in connection with COVID-19, the existing models proposed for analysing the relationship between science and religion are deficient. This inadequacy is more evident because none of the models can evaluate the concrete realities of the relationship between science and religion in Russia. In addition to the explicit conflicting views, all theoretical models developed for explaining the relationship between science and religion have at least a general inefficiency; that is, they are theoretical, claiming the issue of science and religion and discovering the relationship between science and religion as two general things. Based on this, the rules of science and religion become important in determining such a relationship. But what has actually happened in relation to the COVID-19 crisis in Russia indicates a conflict, this time not at the level of science and religion, but at the level of the religious and scientific community. Therefore, objections to medical advice from the religious community cannot be considered as a religious perspective and cannot even be analysed according to the model presented by Barbour (2000), but at the same time they cannot be ignored. However, they must be taken into account in the relationship between science and religion.

The opposition of some groups in the religious community against the closure of holy places and the bans on religious practices should be thus considered as a conflict at the level of social realities, but the conflict is not between science and religion. Theoretical models for analysing the relationship between science and religion have so far failed to provide the grounds in this regard, and all have stayed behind the institutional level because of much emphasis on generalities. However, this conflict has certainly occurred at the level of the religious community, and it relates to the concrete realities of religion. In fact, it seems that, firstly, there is a conflict between religion and some groups in the religious community, and secondly, there is a conflict between some groups in the religious community and science. None of these conflicts is considered in the theoretical models for investigating the relationship between science and religion. Therefore, a general inefficiency is observed in all theoretical models. To make up for this shortcoming, a solution can be raised through the design of folk or popular religion. In fact, this type of religion seems to be the key to resolving the conflicts between some groups of the religious community and science.

The key to understanding the conflict between science and religion in relation to the COVID-19 crisis seems to be that

the conflict is not the same as between science and religion, but between people's perceptions of religion and science. So far, many attempts have been made to define folk religion as one of the categories that social thinkers have made to realise part of the activities of religious society. In the analysis of religion, social thinkers cannot stop at the general level, but must also look for categories to explain its social realities. For this purpose, they have observed the actions of the religious community, which cannot be explained in the statements of the official religion, and they have even pointed to the concept of folk religion to compensate for this deficiency. Accordingly, folk religion is a witness to aspects of religion that are ignored in institutional studies based on religious scriptures and sometimes have normative values.

In most cases, two types of folk religion are likely to occur, viz. the folk religion shaped in small tribal communities and the folk religion developed in large communities (Heibert, Shaw & Tienou 1999). Concerning the requirements of this study, the second type was delineated and then defined with respect to the official religions in urban and large communities. In this line, Charles Long (2014) has thus far recognised at least seven definitions for folk religion, relevant to the second interpretation here:

Folk religion refers to the religion of ordinary people living in a religious community, in opposition to the religion of the clergy, as the traditional bearers of wisdom, and typically based on the sources of enlightenment [...] here, once the legitimate knowledge is controlled by the clerics, ordinary people try to interpret the scriptures in their own way, to meet their own needs, consciousness, and discernment. (p. 20)

More efforts are thus being made to respond to folk religion, both by those in charge of the official religion and intellectuals, wherein the former often denote folk religion as religious deviance, and the latter refer to it as superstitious. Apart from the criteria developed for distinguishing beliefs, misrepresentations and superstitions, such labels are the tools at the disposal of the official religion, on the one hand, and intellectuals, on the other hand, consciously suppress folk religion and subconsciously ignore it in their analytical systems, a fact that must be admitted from the perspective of the phenomenology of the religious community but which is excluded from the analytical systems for normative reasons. Of note, this negligence leads to a misunderstanding of the concrete issues in the religious community.

This seems to be true for the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, folk religion, which has developed under the official religion over the years and has been aided by the teachings of the official religion, has established teachings and concepts for itself that are not necessarily consistent with the interpretations of the official religion. Nevertheless, this discrepancy does not occur except in times of crisis. With regard to COVID-19, some circumstances have occurred, for example, the teachings of folk religion about visiting the shrines of the Imams have been formed within the official religion and even confirmed,

but they have gone beyond that and emerged in moments like the COVID-19 crisis to oppose the official religion.

According to the common model of religiosity, religious people turn to legitimate commentators for the scriptures, as the custodians of the official religion, once various issues arise, because they either do not have the ability to interpret by themselves or legitimise their interpretations. However, this is not the case everywhere. In fact, in some cases, popular clerics do not find the interpretations provided by legitimate commentators satisfactory and deviate from them, particularly in terms of dealing with issues that are concerned with politics and power relations. Here, folk religion first tries to find its own interests in the legitimate interpretations by the custodians of the official religion or it tries to advance its demands independently if it does not succeed in this direction. In the face of the practices of folk religion in such situations, the official religion considers these religious people to be extremists, but such interpretations at least do not interfere in the analysis of social realities, and they are not even respected in such analyses because of their purely epistemological dignity. In fact, what happens is a part of religion, so distinctions such as that between official religion and folk religion should be taken into account.

It seems that folk religion accounts for the conflicts occurring in the concrete realities of the religious community in connection with the COVID-19 crisis, but it is not visible at the institutional level. According to the common models for examining the relationship between science and religion, it is claimed that there is no conflict between science and religion, at least with regard to the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath in Russia. Rather, there are conflicts between the official religion and folk religion, and folk religion and science.

Dual effects of COVID-19 on religious beliefs

The believer's relationship with God is based on trust and hope (Surah At-Talaq, Ayat 3) and when faced with adversity, due to the intense resentment that results, some may feel absent, silent, or indifferent to God. It will be difficult for them to continue their relationship with God. In this way, religious thinkers point to the effect of misfortunes and the consequences of existence in misfortunes (Routledge, Abeyta & Roylance 2016). This is especially the case for those who are in an accident and are severely hurt or those who are depressed and disturbed by financial crises. The question that bothers one in this situation is why God allowed misfortunes to occur in the universe. In this situation, it is not only the epistemological and intellectual aspects of humans that are facing misfortunes, but their feelings and emotions are also suffering. In these circumstances, they seek to find meaning in their present life situations and to know the reasons for their suffering. They look for ways to repair their relationship with God. For such persons, merely receiving theoretical and theological explanations for their plight is not enough. They need a refuge and thus seek divine support.

Their problem is not that of a doubt that can be solved with a logical and philosophical answer but rather of pain and suffering, and thus they need comfort and relief. It is not unreasonable to expect that, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting financial and employment crises experienced by a large section of Russian society, a part of the religious community will continue to face the consequences of the unfortunate existence of COVID-19, at least in the short term. Many families have been devastated by this disease and have buried their loved ones in a strange and unconventional way, alone and without any rituals of mourning. Huge financial losses, unemployment, worries about the future and severe economic pressures have caused all kinds of psychological distress. In this situation, one of the possibilities in the field of religiosity is the feeling of despair and hatred towards God and the feeling of abandonment and helplessness, which may lead to consequences such as emptiness, despair, depression and even aggression in a part of the society in the short term.

Recent field studies and observations since the COVID-19 crisis indicate a significant increase in the number of people who have prayed (Abdollahi 2020). A group of people in Russia have flown a balloon with a picture of Jesus (pbuh) on it and asked people to ask Christ to save them. Social studies also show that after crises such as war, earthquake, storm, and the like, people have a tendency to visit religious places and to become more pious. All of these signs indicate that the COVID-19 crisis, in addition to fuelling psychological tensions that may lead to the segregation of religion among sections of Russian society, also creates a favourable psychological environment for a return to religion and spirituality among the general public.

Perhaps the most tangible effects of COVID-19 can be seen in people's heightened interest in religious rites and ceremonies, including attending temples, mosques, churches and shrines. That is why the closure of these centres to prevent the spread of the disease has had severe mental and psychological effects on this part of the religious community and has fuelled resistance and protests. The Georgian Orthodox Church resists the recommendation not to hold Easter ceremonies. The protest rally in front of the shrine of the infallible Shiite Imams in Iran and the violent insistence of the ultra-Orthodox Jews to perform prayer services next to the Western Wall, among others, are examples of the ideological reactions of the religious people to the closure of religious places. On the other hand, instead of resisting and protesting against the bans, a significant number of religious people have tried to restore and perpetuate their collective religious identity through other activities. Innovative forms of 'Easter' rites for Christians around the world are an example of the creativity of religious communities in adapting religious rites to the COVID-19 emergency. Many Christians performed Easter rituals in cars, by placing their photographs on empty church seats, through virtual conferencing software or on balconies or the roofs of houses. In the Muslim religious community, the presence of some clerics in hospitals with special clothes for medical staff, preparing food packages for the poor,

helping to disinfect public places and providing mourning spaces in cyberspace, among others, are attempts of religions to continue to play an effective role in social service and to prevent religious communities from being marginalised in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion

In summarising the above, the Holy Qur'an says: 'We are above them and we are superior to them' (Surah Al-A'raf, Ayat 127). In the hearts and minds of the righteous servants of God, despair and hopelessness dry up and the deadlock in their lives becomes meaningless. Hardships and unfortunate events sometimes make a person so tired and helpless that they lose all their strength and cannot bear the slightest internal and external pressure, seeing nothing on the path of life except darkness, despair and hopelessness. One thinks that one is closed to oneself and this sometimes leads to the fact that those who do not believe in God or do not have the proper trust in him prefer to leave life over life. But the hardships of life will never defeat those who have hope in the Almighty God, who is omnipotent and omniscient. Therefore, no matter how much misfortune surrounds them, not only does their hope not turn into despair, but they also gain extraordinary power of faith and use it as a shield against misfortune; thus, misfortunes serve as opportunities to strengthen their faith in God, which in turn makes them more resilient.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, health experts have identified it as a global threat to humanity and advised people of many preventive measures to deal with it. The enactment of these new laws and regulations covers all areas, including religion, and there are even some restrictions in this respect. On the other hand, the form of imitation of the religion field from the health field is not considered and it is invalid, because distinguishing the customary issues and examples of rulings is not one of the duties of the mujtahid, and perhaps experts in the health field can do this better, and in the discussion of COVID-19, distinguishing the examples of care and preservation of life is the responsibility of the health sector.

With the arrival of modernity and the decline in formal institutional legitimacy in religion, wherein religious intellectuals have also played a major role, there is more room for the emergence of informal and popular forms of religion. It seems that with the emergence of modernity and the fading of official institutional legitimacy in religion (in which, of course, religious intellectuals also had a great contribution), more space is provided for the emergence of informal and popular forms of religion. It turns out that the decrease in the credibility of the official institutions of religion and the opening of possibilities for individual and personal interpretations also have consequences, among them is the emergence of forms of religiosity that, although they are more individual, in addition, they act self-sufficiently. And they need less external authority to act at the social level. Among these more self-sufficient measures are the conflicts

that happened at the concrete level in opposition to scientific recommendations and contrary to the opinion of the official religious institution in the COVID-19 crisis in Russia. Here, official religiosity has been accused of superstitions and intellectualism, both distorting the images of the social realities of religion in this country. It seems that the correct approach is to include folk religion in religious analyses and attempt to deal with it appropriately.

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The authors contributed equally to the writing of the article.

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