

# Religious Narratives and Religious Coping Strategies in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Recent findings demonstrate a growing interest in religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic and suggest that religiousness has a Janus-face impact on coping with stress. On the one hand, the empirical data indicates a positive link between religiosity and mental health, agreeableness, and higher emotion regulation skills. On the other side, some surveys describe religious people as being reluctant to follow the recommendation of public health experts, and they also tend to score lower on intelligence and analytic thinking measures. However, how religiosity in our country impacts psychological processes of perception and coping with stress during the pandemic is not studied yet. The research reveals religious views on the COVID-19 pandemic through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with believers from different Bulgarian religious communities—Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. The focus of the one religious interpretation is pandemic as retribution for the self-forgetfulness of a man and the consumerist attitude towards 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 various coping methods with challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, religious coping, religious beliefs, retribution

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact individuals and social life worldwide. In addition to its evident physical consequences, COVID-19 has also been linked to adverse psychological effects, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Boyras & Legros, 2020; Hristova & Karastoyanov, 2021; Bakracheva, Zamfirov, Kolarova, & Sofronieva, 2020, 2021). Empirical data also found an increase in practising praying at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bentzen, 2020) and the relation between increased religiosity and a greater tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Boguszewski, Makowska, Bożewicz, & Podkowińska, 2020). Traumatic events such as COVID-19 can often lead to significant resource loss. As a result, people try to engage in coping strategies, including drawing on religious resources, to work through negative emotions in the face of adversity (Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to explore how religion in our country has influenced the psychological process of perception and coping with stress during the pandemic. The current qualitative study explores religious narratives and coping strategies 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 individuals often turn to their religious beliefs, values, and support systems to cope with stress and difficulty (Pargament, 1997). Individuals usually draw on religious resources when coping with traumatic events to make sense of their experiences (Feder et al., 2013; Park, 2016). For example, researchers in the field of religious coping argued that people try to conserve their perception and understanding of a Higher Power during difficult times. Specifically, Pargament outlined five forms of religious coping that feature different goals, including gaining comfort and closeness to God, gaining intimacy with others, finding meaning, gaining control, and achieving a life transformation. Religious coping is finding meaning through benevolent religious reappraisal (i.e., reframing the stressful event through a religious doctrine). It is also gaining control through collaborative religious coping (i.e., partnering with God to problem-solve), active religious surrender (i.e., giving up one's control to God), and passive religious deferral (i.e., passively waiting for God to take control of the situation). Some people use religious coping to seek comfort and closeness to God. For example, individuals may seek spiritual support by searching for comfort and reassurance through God's love. Others get involved in religious activities to shift their focus away from stressors and to gain intimacy with others. For example, some seek support from clergy members, whereas others attempt to provide spiritual support to their peers. Finally, some people use religious coping to transform their life. In contrast, others look for religion/spirituality to find a new direction in life or shift from a state of negative emotion to a state of peace (Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy, 2011).

### **Purpose**

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

### **Method and Procedure**

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

The participants completed a task to give a name to 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 does he/she explain the COVID-19 pandemic from his/her faith and relationship with God? Has the pandemic affected his/her faith and relationships with people in the religious community? What was the biggest challenge or difficulty in this situation? What did he/she do to cope with it?

The present study applies Directed Content Analysis (DCA), which involves using existing theories to guide the identification of key variables. We used the model of religious coping style (Pargament, 1988) and religious coping strategies (Pargament et al., 2011) to identify coping themes.

### **Results**

Applying a narrative inquiry, data are interpreted, and two main themes are identified. The first religious interpretation focuses on understanding the COVID-19 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 coping with the traumatic event.

The first theme is: “Who caused the COVID-19 pandemic”?

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:30, 31)

The principal personages are the narrator and God, and the stories are based on their relationship. The leitmotif in this story is personal heroism. The main character lives in apocalyptic times, persecuted for his faith. Society and the world are drowning in fear and sin; therefore, it must be aware and receive retribution. COVID-19 was seen as retribution by “our” God towards others who wronged them or were seen as a threat to humankind or their convictions. Furthermore, the protagonist must win the battle against the invisible enemy, the virus, by not following the anti-epidemic measures against his religious habits and thus demonstrating the faith 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”<sup>1</sup> and the words of the Bulgarian Metropolitan, who announced that the churches “never transmitted and spread the disease... Never there were epidemics in the church and that a person can only be infected if his faith is weak”<sup>2</sup>.

In the interviews, this point of view is presented more indirectly. The responsibility for the trials is not on God. He does not punish but is permissive so that people can come to their senses. If the pandemic results from human sins, the narrator’s mission is to prove his belief in God, who cared about him in this fallen world.

“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 given in to passions. Awareness is needed”. The central theme is the distance of man from God, the surrender of passions, and the 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 conviction that “God cares about me and my health” rejects the anti-epidemic measures and recommendations concerning worship and sacred objects.

Those interviewed strongly opposed the anti-epidemic measures, which required a change in the cult practice, such as the kissing of the icons and the acceptance of Holy Communion. They cited the crucial lesson to 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”, according to a 47-year-old student in theology.

The second theme is: “What is the meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic”.

“Our neighbour is our life.” (St. Silouan)

The principal personages are the narrator, his neighbor, and God in this story. A different point of view comes from the attitude of responsibility towards the other person. The pandemics test the honesty of the men, which requires constant attention. According to the doctor from *The Plague* (Camus, 1948, p. 253), “The good

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

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

man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous willpower, a never-ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses.”

According to a 45-year-old priest, 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 but lived, I am my life, and my brother does not care. After all this, as a church, we must give the correct answers, make the proper diagnosis, and try to heal ourselves, and the doctor is among us”.

The interviewed, in this approach, cited the response of a contemporary Greek Orthodox monk Porfiri. To the question: “Why do many spiritual people and monks refuse medical help, believing that the Holy Mother of God will help them directly?”, he replied, “It is selfishness, a cunning act—to think that God will make an exception for you from many others by intervening miraculously. God still works miracles, but you should not expect it for yourself. God, Himself works through doctors. God gave us the doctors and medicines, says Holy Scripture”.

In other words, in times of epidemics, dignity lies in the intense sense of responsibility for others. 45-year-old priest: “The meaning of the pandemic is an opportunity for religious conversion, faith, and love of God, overcoming selfish aspirations, and showing concern and love for one’s neighbour”.

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 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 is a healer, although we will not receive this wholeness in life. This complete healing resolves Adam’s condition. Health is a foretaste of this wholeness in the age to come.

Some participants in the survey report reframing their pain, fears, and affliction with the omnipotent love of God and their part in his greater divine plan. According to Pieterse and Landman, tragic events often force people to keep faith that God remains constant and trustworthy, which is a further prominent message (Pieterse & Landman, 2021).

50-year-old pastor: “The pandemic is God’s blessing and mercy. What came out thanks to the pandemic is something simmering 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 the case of suffering and illness, the main task of the Church uniting people, in helping and caring for the weak and suffering comes to light”.

The narratives convey a powerful message in the meaning people attach to events and their lives during challenging times. 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 & Landman, 2021).

55-year-old Islamic religious leader named the COVID-19 pandemic “COVID University”. He felt very ill and suffered a lot from pneumonia caused by this virus. He was between life and death for a whole month. “It was a period of searching for meaning. I reframed the somatic meaning of the illness as the recovery of the functionality of the lungs, or the process of breathing threw exhaling and refined the psychological meaning of exhaling as a symbolic and realistic form of acceptance, forgiveness and peace. The social meaning of COVID-19 is expressing authentic mercy, empathy and closeness. In the COVID-19 pandemic reality, the religious, ethnic and cultural differences disappeared”.

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

Table 1

*Topics Focused on the Cause of the Pandemic*

Cause of the COVID-19 pandemic
Retribution
Attachment to the material world
Consumerism attitude toward creation
Selfishness
Guiltlessness
Corruptibility
Peccability
Split
Testing faith

Table 2

*Topics Expressing the Meaning of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic
Chaos, uncertainty
Split, opposition, division
Altruism or “love feasts”
Quarantine of common sense
Covid’s university
Lack of logic
God’s blessing, God’s mercy
Tunnel

### Religious Coping Strategies

The first and most prevalent theme of coping involved religious coping strategies. The survey participants also reported some general types of coping, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Classification of General Types of Coping Applied by Participants*

Psychological coping	Health-related coping	Interpersonal social coping
	Focus on healthy life	
Starting new activities and hobbies	Healthy eating	Family time
“Enough time to do things that haven’t been done before”	Herbal products and usage	Family support
Time to achieve new skills	Outdoor activities	“Time to fall in love and get married”
	Outdoor training	
	Ballet online training	

Manly participants reported seeking spiritual support to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Different styles of religious coping are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Religious Coping Styles*

Religious coping styles	Examples
Collaborative	“I prayed to God to help me understand and make sense of what was happening.”
Problem-focused	“I constantly solved problems that arose in my ministry and work.”
	“I did my service, worship, funerals, encouraged and comforted people who suffered.”

Table 4 to be continued

Positive reframing	"The pandemic is God's blessing and God's mercy. The pandemic is an opportunity to regain our presence and function as a society."
Self-focused	"Because it is a human experiment and has nothing to do with God, I supported myself and other people not to lose courage and not succumb to fear."
Avoidant	"I avoid thinking about the problem by reading, practices hobbies, and reading religious books."
Surrendered to God	Practising church singing. "I did what was necessary and left myself in the hands of God."
Transformational	Focus on personal religious growth: "Working on my fears and developing patience"; "Accomplishing things that haven't been done before because of lack of time—reading spiritual books and more time to pray"; "Finishing research on religious people's well-being." "Self-reflecting and growing as an individual." "Starting a new project—starting my services as a priest."

The interviewees reported using prayer as the primary way to manage. For example, "I pray more often, hoping God would help me to find meaning", and "ask for God's wisdom through prayer".

Some participants relied on religious materials, including reading religious books. Others reported coping through spiritual fellowship. For instance, one participant got involved as a singer in religious services.

The coping strategies include specific religious practices: "I shared prayers with my spiritual brothers and sisters and participated in common prayers and services online. We calmed down and reassured each other that God would not leave us, which helped us greatly", searching for meaning through: "I believe and know that God does not give any crisis if something good does not come out of it", "I am convinced that the pandemic is part of God's providence and serves humility. It is a call for normalcy in human relations, to our participation in attention and care for others".

### Interpersonal/Social Coping

The second prevalent theme of coping was interpersonal coping. Most participants reported utilising various interpersonal resources to navigate emotional distress during the pandemic.

First, the priests and volunteers coped through the manifestation of love for one's neighbour and altruistic behaviours that helped to benefit other people. They sought meaning and gratefulness in caring for people. Additional sought comfort through close family members (e.g., spouse, children). For example, some responses included: "I had a meaningful time with my son and my sister" and "I talked with my son, and we became closer", one priest said. "I had my wife who supported me while suffering and being exhausted", and "I got to appreciate my wife's companionship more".

Overall, these responses establish the importance of relationships with significant others and friends and awareness that these relationships are a resource for coping.

### Focus on Personal Religious Growth

A significant part of the participants chooses 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 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".

The research participant, a COVID-19 survivor, described the new coping strategy. He applied active coping strategies to become a researcher and experimenter in the face of adversity. He perceived the situation as a unique possibility of being a researcher in a field not well known. Because he has no fear of death as a believer, he decided to dedicate this period of his life to investigating the illness. According to him, the situation is an opportunity to relearn the way of thinking and acting as he learned his whole life.

### Conclusion

The study presents data from studies of religious views of the COVID-19 pandemic and religious coping strategies. 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. The other theme describes the disease and suffering as natural consequences of the perishability of human nature after “the Fall”. Both points of view reveal various coping with the traumatic event. The religious coping strategies used in the present study reflect the participants’ active efforts to maintain a sense of connection with the sacred and interpersonal relationships during times of confusion and adversity and focus on personal spiritual growth.

The most prominent finding of the study is the religious view of COVID-19 as an opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills to help others survive and the related religious coping strategy of becoming a researcher in the face of adversity.

The results suggest that a quantitative analysis of the relations between the presented variables is needed when searching for the predictive role of religious views on the meaning of traumatic events and behavioural responses.

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