

Insight

## Religion and behaviour: relevance during the current COVID-19 pandemic

Sujita Kumar Kar, Shreya Shukla, Vikas Menon, S M Yasir Arafat

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated global instability. As the mortality and morbidity figures rise day by day, the routine life has been restricted by significant limitations. Addressing these changes pose another challenge. The role of religion becomes more pronounced in the wake of the ongoing global pandemic, the resulting social distancing rules, and the lockdown imposed, as a common coping mechanism. Religion, however may too have negative impact on the mental health. Recent pandemic had witnessed several religious events, activities and influences of religion on public behaviour, which have both positive and negative effects. This article discusses the influence of religion on human behaviour during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Key words

Religion, Behaviour, COVID-19, Pandemic

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created global chaos. As the mortality and morbidity figures increase day by day, significant limitations have been imposed in the routine life. As mental health is affected adversely due to the direct and indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, attempts are being made to address this critical issue by sensitizing people about effective coping measures.<sup>1,2</sup> Coping with the restrictions posed and their mental health impact is posing another challenge.

### Religion and behaviour: the brighter side

People use various psychological mechanisms or coping methods to deal with distress in challenging situations. Religious coping is one of the various coping measures used to combat stress and the challenges of life. There are some initial arguments that religion is an immature way to deal with life challenges at the time of stress. Subsequent research evidence supports that religion can be positive and a negative way of coping.<sup>3</sup> Religious coping may help caregivers of patients to cope in a healthier manner.<sup>4</sup> As religion is a vital part of a majority of the world

population, it affects our social attitude and our behaviour in day-to-day life. On the one hand, it is known to play a role in wars and intolerance, yet many acts of understanding, empathy, and charity have their roots in religious beliefs.

One might reason – what is the relationship of a virus with religion? Masses are gripped by fear and apprehension regarding the current situation. The need to be in control is natural; the loss of such control over one's life leads to much anxiety. Religion may have some role to deal with the psychological distresses at such times. According to a recent study almost 11-25% of the population of USA is atheist.<sup>5</sup> These statistics show that a majority of people believe in God. This faith provides a feeling of continuity between the old non-COVID world and the new one we now face in the changing times. Earlier, religion was thought to be negatively associated with health, but their relationship is more intricate, and some positive aspects have also come to the surface.<sup>6</sup> Research suggests a positive impact of religion on mental health, specifically in terms of happiness and general satisfaction with one's life.<sup>7</sup> Religion remains a constant entity in the face of adversity.<sup>8</sup> Formation of a relationship with a spiritual entity, which is at the core of each religion, gives a sense of security and confidence.<sup>9</sup> It is also seen to affect death anxiety and acceptance of death among people.<sup>10</sup> God is conceptualized as someone who loves all beings unconditionally, which is very comforting for people in such turbulent times;<sup>9</sup> and believe in God is associated with decrease in death anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

Many people have lost jobs and homes during the COVID-19 pandemic and have been left stranded in various places. A lot of religious groups are providing them with basic amenities all over the world. In India, the Gurudwara and Archdiocese of Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka have been involved in distributing food packets to migrant workers.<sup>11,12</sup>

### Religion and behaviour: the darker side

The association of religion and behaviour is not as rosy as it seems. Although religion is a supporting pillar in the development of resilience, yet it is seen that fanaticism is

harmful. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection, social distancing has been recommended and is being practiced worldwide.<sup>13</sup> Activities that involve large human gatherings include religious activities, funerals, wedding ceremonies etcetera. These activities have been suspended in the wake of the current situation. Prayer meetings and funerals involve singing, physical contact through hand shaking, hugging, sharing food and fomites.<sup>14</sup> As people gather in the religious places to offer prayer, there is a chance of spread of infection due to a breach in the social distancing practice.<sup>15</sup> These factors lead to a sudden surge in number of cases of COVID-19 in various parts of the world. Religious congregation, the Tablighi Jamaat, was alleged to be responsible for more than a thousand cases in both Malaysia and India.<sup>16</sup> A funeral held in ISKON, London was alleged to be responsible for 21 cases of COVID 19.<sup>16</sup> In a locality of orthodox Jews, almost 40% were found to be infected. Such a high rate of infection was related to Jews attending prayer meeting in large numbers on the occasion of Purim. Similarly, in South Korea, among those attending Shincheonji Church of Jesus, more than 5000 were found to be COVID positive.<sup>16</sup> A study conducted in Netherlands, found a strong association between church attendance and hospitalisation rates in COVID-19 patients.<sup>17</sup>

Spreading misinformation by various religious leaders among the masses regarding the pandemic is detrimental.<sup>16</sup> Religious leaders implicating that the virus is politically motivated or a satanic entity fighting to abolish the church misleads the people. They are motivated to flout the guidelines issued to control the spread of COVID-19. This has disrupted the control measures in place by the government. Public religious figures have a significant impact on the masses.<sup>15</sup>

The impact religious entities have on the public might also be used to spread the word about the measures to be taken to prevent further spread of COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) had appealed to follow specific guidelines and to do the risk assessment of people who attend the religious ceremonies by the religious leaders.<sup>18</sup> The government of India, had also developed a standard operational procedure (SOP) for addressing the spread of COVID-19 in religious places.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the faith leaders were also instructed to stick to the safety principles in faith-based communities' activities.<sup>20</sup>

### Using religion to strengthen mental health

Religion plays a significant role in shaping the behaviour as well as developing coping mechanisms in the people. The positive effects of religion must be acknowledged. Religion and faith have a powerful influence on human behaviour. Religion facilitates the cultivation of empathy, compassion, and humanity. It may help in instilling hope in difficult times and fostering connectedness.<sup>3</sup> Dealing with the larger population and their needs during this COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge of the hour. Researchers and policymakers are working on innovations.<sup>21</sup> People's religious beliefs can be used as a measure to develop a list of religion-based public health

ideas (e.g. disseminating the awareness through religious leaders) and initiatives, which can be propagated and promoted during these crises. There is a need to control the politicization and sensationalization of events on the basis of religion. It would be beneficial for society at large if public figures and media understand their social responsibilities. Experts must see where religious practices are causing issues in controlling the pandemic and should devise alternative ways around that roadblock for the greater good. On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the state government of Maharashtra, India had allowed opening of the religious places in the state.<sup>22</sup> There is a need to remember the importance of precautionary advisories issued for containment of spread of COVID-19. As many countries in the world, including several states of India are now witnessing the re-emergence of COVID-19 cases in a second wave; any ignorance or laxity in precautionary measures may cause a huge damage.

### Conclusion

Religion is an integral part of society. During this COVID-19 pandemic, influence of religion may act like a double-edged sword. There is a need of multi-sectoral co-ordination (between public, religious leaders, government and public health experts) for using religious beliefs and practices in a positive manner supporting the efforts for a successful containment of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Author information:** Sujita Kumar Kar, MD, Department of Psychiatry, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, 226003, UP, India. E-mail: drsujita@gmail.com; Shreya Shukla, MBBS, Department of Psychiatry, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, 226003, UP, India. E-mail: shreya49shukla@gmail.com; Vikas Menon, MD, Department of Psychiatry, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), Puducherry, 605006, India. E-mail: drvmemon@gmail.com; S.M. Yasir Arafat, MD, MPH, MBA, Department of Psychiatry, Enam Medical College and Hospital, Dhaka, 1340, Bangladesh. E-mail: arafatdmc62@gmail.com

**Correspondence:** Dr. Sujita Kumar Kar, MD, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, UP, India. E-mail: drsujita@gmail.com

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