

Research Paper

Exploring the Role of COVID-19 Pandemic on Religious and Spiritual Experiences of Iranian Population: A Phenomenological Study



Zohreh Khosravi¹, Fatemeh Shahisadrabadi², Parvin Rahmatinejad^{3*}

1. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Department of Consulting, Faculty of Humanities, Branch Fatemeh Alzahra, Yazd Farhangian University, Yazd, Iran.

3. Department of Psychiatry Nekuei Hedayati Forqani Hospital, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran.



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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: The spread of COVID-19 has led to numerous changes in different domains of life throughout the world, including health habits, jobs, consumption patterns, lifestyles, and religious ceremonies. Phenomenological questions, religious challenges, and many questions regarding the cause of the pandemic also resulted from these changes. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to explore the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious and spiritual experiences of the Iranian population.

Methods: A qualitative design based on a phenomenological approach was used. The sample included 18 subjects who were selected using a purposeful sampling method. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews.

Results: The Colaizzi method was used to analyze the data and member checking, self-monitoring, and immersion were used to examine the credibility of the results. The study findings included 175 primary codes, of which two main categories and 11 subcategories were extracted. Belief in God and religion was the first category extracted that included the following subcategories: no change in belief in God, no change in lack of belief in God, reconsidering one's own beliefs, amazed by the power of God, amazed by the knowledge of God, Expecting miracles from God, and Increased sense of spirituality or closeness to God. The second category was beliefs about existence that included the following subcategories: no change in Beliefs, believing that human abilities are limited, thinking about existence, and believing in the importance of changing our behavior towards nature.

Conclusion: According to the study result, the experience of COVID-19 had affected participants' attitude towards religion, spirituality, God, nature, and the system of the world; most of the participants reported improvements in their previous beliefs and attitudes as a result of these changes. Therefore, some conversations, such as the epidemic of a disease (COVID-19) can affect the religious attitudes and beliefs of individuals.

*Corresponding Author:

Parvin Rahmatinejad, MA.

Address: Department of Psychiatry, Nekuei Hedayati Forqani Hospital Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran.

Phone: +98 (25) 37118268

E-mail: rahmatinejadp@yahoo.com

Introduction

Since the spread of COVID-19 first in China and later in other parts of the world, different aspects of everyday life, including personal and social aspects, in different societies have undergone a lot of changes. The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in cultural aspects, sports, businesses, health habits, consumption patterns, lifestyles, and religious ceremonies all over the world. From a psychological viewpoint, during the pandemic, people are vulnerable to a sense of uncertainty, fear of the disease, moral distress, sadness, and loneliness. There are increasing concerns about coping with the anxiety resulting from COVID-19 and also the long-term personal and social effects of the pandemic [1]. Chinese researchers have reported a significant increase in psychological problems, including anxiety, depression, stress, and PTSD during the COVID-19 pandemic [2, 3]. In a study by Qiu et al., about 35% of 52730 participants reported experiencing symptoms of psychological distress [4]. A review of literature on the effects of quarantine during previous outbreaks, including SARS, H1N1, MERS, and Ebola virus indicated that people who were forced to isolate themselves during quarantine reported high levels of psychological distress [5-7].

Research on the relationship between mental health and stressful life events has confirmed that such events can challenge our fundamental beliefs about our identity, the world, and the future [8]. In such conditions, as a result of experiencing a new lifestyle that is different from what they were previously accustomed to, many people enter a period of their lives, during which they may experience existential preoccupations regarding the universe, life and death, God, religious/spiritual beliefs, and an unclear future. According to Segal and Geertz (1973), at least three experiences are possible during a crisis, including confusion, suffering, and uncontrollable moral paradoxes that if severe enough, can present one with fundamental challenges [9].

During a crisis, people who are less concerned with religion, spirituality, and existential issues tend to show a sudden interest in these matters. On the other hand, research studies have shown that during stressful events, including natural disasters, people become more interested in their religious beliefs [10, 11]. Therefore, given the contagious and threatening nature of COVID-19, and considering its rapid spread in many countries that have presented them with significant challenges, it seems necessary to examine people's perceptions of this phenomenon with a special focus on existential issues

and religious/spiritual beliefs and also coping strategies based on these beliefs. On the other hand, given the fact that COVID-19 is a new phenomenon, few studies have tried to examine the effects of the pandemic on people's perceptions of existential and religious/spiritual beliefs and coping strategies based on them. Because religion can provide people with coping strategies in the face of social, health, financial, and cultural problems and can explain scientific advancement in different domains, such as health-related ones [12, 13], it seems necessary to study people's perceptions of religious/spiritual beliefs. Therefore, considering this gap in the literature, we aimed at conducting a phenomenological analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on existential, religious, and spiritual beliefs.

This study was to phenomenologically examine whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulted economic, social, and cultural challenges have led to changes in people's beliefs about existence, nature, and especially God and if yes, we aimed at examining the direction of the effects. On the other hand, the present study aimed at discovering and analyzing people's experiences and religious/spiritual coping strategies in the face of COVID-19.

Methods

The present study has a qualitative, descriptive-phenomenological approach. This systematic approach is used to describe subjective experiences and their meanings [14]. The sample included 18 individuals, including ten women and eight men, who were selected using a convenience, purposeful sampling method with maximum variation. Sample individuals were selected from [Alzahra University](#) students and staff. Nine members (33.33%) of the sample group were a student. The age range of subjects was 27-65 years, and education level ranged from bachelor's degree to PhD. Most of the samples (n=26; 86.66%) were married. The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The subjects were contacted, given information on the study objectives, and included in the study after presenting their informed consent. The exclusion criterion was a history of mental illness. The duration of each interview was 30-60 minutes, and the subjects were interviewed online and in person.

The main study questions were as follows: "What are your experiences of God, religion, and existence during the COVID-19 pandemic? Has there been any change in your beliefs regarding God, religion, existence, dying, and creation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? Did your spiritual experiences have been changed during this period? In what areas the changes have occurred?"

After collecting the data, they were analyzed using the Colaizzi method. After analyzing each interview and shaping the organized concepts, the next interview was conducted. This method continued until the completion of all interviews.

The interviews were first read to understand the interview space and participants several times and in the next step, the main codes and the important phrases of each interview were extracted. In the third stage, the meaning of each expression explicitly and with the concept of it was summarized. Then, in the fourth stage, they were organized into categories of codes. At the fifth stage, the categories associated with each other in a more general group and then clusters were obtained, from which the axial concepts were obtained. In the sixth stage, the findings were discussed and ultimately answered to the phenomenon structure.

In order to ensure the credibility of the results, member checking and self-monitoring methods were used. Immersion in the data was also used to confirm the credibility of the findings. The sample had the maximum variation. The following measures were taken to address ethical considerations: informed consents were acquired, subjects were allowed to leave the interview at any time, personal information remained confidential, and time and place of the interview were determined by the interviewees. The study was approved by the research center of the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology of [Alzahra University](#).

Results

Analysis of interviews and extraction of codes resulted in 175 important statements, of which two main categories and six subcategories were extracted (Table 1).

Belief in God and religion

In multiple instances, the participants stated that no change had occurred in their belief in God. The semantic themes supporting this subcategory included strong pre-established beliefs, having the beliefs for a long time and lack of a sudden change in them, change in minor aspects of beliefs not in general ones, believing in the function of religion in explaining phenomena, believing in the supportive role of God and religion in difficult times, believing in God, believing that everything happens for a reason, and believing in the separation of the good and evil sources or attributing goodness to God and evilness to things other than God. According to the participants, belief in God and religion are formed during childhood;

therefore, they are not easily changed. In addition, religious people tend to believe that during a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, God and religious beliefs can provide them with support and change their views on events by answering their questions. Moreover, believing in the wisdom of God and the belief that God is the source of all good things prevents a change in one's belief in God.

Some of the participants believed that the current difficult times and human's lack of ability to overcome COVID-19 indicated the need for a savior, and the current condition paved the way for the coming of the savior.

Some of the statements made by the participants about the aforementioned categories are presented here.

Participant 1: "No. There was no change. Philosophical beliefs had been created in mind adequately, and I had previously figured out those concepts."

Participant 19: "Since I am a religious person, I experienced no significant change in my beliefs about existence, God, and creation. Because I believe that God is above all things and that everything is under God's control. However, human beings, as God's representatives on earth, have free will in what they do and can influence the universe with their actions."

Participant 10: "On the other hand, based on end-time prophecies encoded in our minds since childhood, I looked at it as an end time pandemic as told by Hadith."

Participant 24: "I thought how complex was the universe and creation. I wondered strange things that could happen that we'd never been able to imagine. Human beings are unable to understand many things, while previously, I thought they could do many things."

Participant 23: "No change happened in my belief in God, because I believe everything that happens to me is a blessing, and everything occurs according to God's will, and bad things happening to us are not from God and they surely happen for a reason. In addition, in such a condition, the only one who can do anything is God".

Disbelief in God included the following supportive themes: unfamiliarity with the concepts of God and religion before and after COVID-19, believing in scientific methods and the inability of religion in explaining phenomena, considering religion only a spiritual thing, and believing in its lack of impact on the material world, and the belief that nature is God. Participants who were unfamiliar with religious concepts before the start of the

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of phenomenological perception of religion, God, and existence

Belief in God and Religion	
Subcategories	Supportive Semantic Themes
Stability in belief and lack of belief in God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong pre-established beliefs - Having the beliefs for a long time and lack of a sudden change in them - Change in minor aspects of beliefs, not in general ones - Function of religion in explaining phenomena - Belief in the supportive role of God and religion in difficult times - Believing that everything happens for a reason - Believing in the separation of the good and evil sources or attributing goodness to God and evilness to things other than God - Believing in the importance of preparation for the coming of a savior - Unfamiliarity with the concepts of God and religion before the outbreak of COVID-19 and after that. - Believing in scientific methods and inability of religion in explaining phenomena - Considering religion only a spiritual thing and believing in its lack of impact on the material world - Believing that nature is God
Perception of God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reconsidering one's own beliefs - Amazed by the power of God - Amazed by the knowledge of God - Expecting miracles from God - Increased sense of spirituality or closeness to God - Needing God's help more than before - Seeking help from God - Believing that it is only God who can end a crisis
Beliefs about Existence	
Subcategories	Supportive Semantic Themes
Stability in the world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong pre-established beliefs - Change in minor aspects of beliefs, not in general ones
Thinking in humans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belief in human disability - Thinking about complexities of the world - Thinking about the causes of phenomena
Being thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thinking about the cause and nature of COVID-19 as part of nature - Considering quarantine an opportunity to spend more time thinking - Considering quarantine an opportunity to read more and increase one's own awareness of different subjects
The nature of thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retention to the importance of nature - The necessity of changing behavior with nature

COVID-19 pandemic reported no change in their beliefs during the pandemic. These percipients considered no special scientific or explanatory function for religion, and at the same time, distinguished between religious and material issues. Some of the participants regarded nature as God and believed that the pandemic was a result of our abuse of nature and a reaction of nature to human actions.

Participant 1: “Before and after the outbreak of COVID-19, I was unfamiliar with God, religion, or concepts, such as creation, etc. I have always believed in cause and

effect. The spiritual feelings people experience in terms of realigning, existence, etc. are found in my mind in terms of nature and the earth.”

Participant 19: “The prevalence of COVID-19 and the resulting prolonged, forced quarantine, closure of religious sites, the inability of clerics in controlling it, lack of direct influence of religious recommendations on controlling the crisis, and finally, the fact that the clerics complied with medical recommendations made me believe that spirituality is a just a subjective feeling that

helps your soul transcend, but for controlling material things, material methods should be used.”

Participant 23: “After the outbreak of COVID-19, for the first time in my life, I spent two months in quarantine without seeing my family and friends. In such conditions, a revision in my thoughts about God, existence, and creation would be expected.”

Being amazed by the power of God was another experience of God reported by the participants. A sudden change in the order of the world and life of human beings had reminded the participants of the power of God in changing phenomena and people’s beliefs. In addition, God’s ability to create such creatures amazed the participants.

Participant 26: “These days I believe in God’s power more than ever. These days I have felt God’s forgiveness and kindness with all my heart, and I have realized that everything is under God’s control”

Being amazed by the knowledge of God was the fourth subcategory. Confusion about the origin and cause of COVID-19, the feeling that the pandemic would stay forever, and the belief that God is the beginning and the end of this phenomenon made the participants astonished by the knowledge of God.

Participant 10: “We imagined that God was the greatest, that all aspects of our life were under his control, and that it was only God who was aware of everything.”

When it is believed that God is the source of absolute power and knowledge, the fifth subcategory is expected to be expecting miracles from God. Participants stated that it was only God who could save them from challenges caused by COVID-19.

Participant 18: “In the early days of the outbreak of COVID-19, I expected God to solve this problem. In other words, I expected a miracle from God that would help human beings out of this crisis. It was only God who could do something to end the crisis.”

Increased sense of spirituality and closeness to God was described by the following themes: needing God’s help more than before, seeking help from God, and believing that it is only God who can end a crisis. When people believe that power only belongs to God and that they can get rid of problems only with the help of God, they need God more, and as a result, they feel closer to God.

Participant 14: “However, I again realized the role of religion in helping me emotionally, and of course, I regretted why I didn’t have any more such a spiritual relationship with God and religion. But, in the current conditions, I feel more connected to God. I had no choice but to trust in God, and it is only God who can change this situation.”

2. Beliefs about existence were the second main category, and included the following subcategories: No change in beliefs about existence, believing that human abilities are limited, thinking about the universe, and believing in the importance of changing our behavior towards nature.

No change in beliefs about existence included the following themes: Strong pre-established beliefs and change in minor aspects of beliefs not in general ones. Beliefs about existence are deeply ingrained in our minds and are not easily changed even as a result of a big crisis. In addition, people tend to analyze and explain events according to their beliefs; therefore, these beliefs can be strengthened through experiencing different events.

Participant 2: “I didn’t consider the world’s system fair even before the pandemic; therefore, it did not change any of my beliefs about the universe.”

Experiencing an event that was out of human control had strengthened the belief in the participants that human knowledge and power was very limited. At the same time, seeing that human efforts were not much successful in controlling the disease caused the participants to consider the situation beyond the power and knowledge of human beings.

Participant 8: “The truth is that COVID-19 changed my previous predictable routine life; therefore, it helped me develop a deeper understanding of God and of my inability as a human being. The unpredictability of situations provided me with a more realistic picture of man and its abilities and inabilities.”

Thinking about existence is another subcategory of beliefs about existence. The outbreak of COVID-19 throughout the world and its dominance over human life had presented the participants with a lot of questions about different aspects of existence. Thinking about the complexities of the world, thinking about the causes of phenomena, and thinking about the cause and nature of COVID-19 as part of nature were among the important themes in this subcategory. In addition, the quarantine had provided the participants with a greater opportunity to spend time thinking and reading in order to increase their knowledge on

different subjects. Therefore, in different ways, they were more able to ponder about different subjects.

Participant 21: "I have always had a lot of questions about religious matters, but studying in a master's program did not allow me to spend time on finding answers. But, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could review three books by Yuval Noah Harari, and this influenced my religious beliefs. Now, I want to obtain a master's degree in philosophy and religious studies so that I can find answers to my questions."

The last subcategory was believing that we should change our behavior towards nature. Many participants stated the belief that the outbreak of COVID-19 was related to human behavior, and that human beings needed to change their behavior towards nature. According to the participants, some of the consequences of the pandemic, such as reduced abuse of nature, reduced waste production, reduced use of vehicles, and reduced air pollution were in favor of nature.

Participant 20: "Nature was created as a result of a natural incident, and over time, our irresponsible behavior and abuse of nature have led to these diseases and destruction of nature and ourselves. I believe that given our abuse of nature, COVID-19 is the least important disaster that can happen to us, and that if we don't change our behavior towards nature, we should expect disasters worse than COVID-19 because manipulation and abuse of nature is a very irresponsible act."

Discussion

The first main category was Belief in God and Religion that included the following subcategories: No change belief in God, No change in lack of belief in God, Reconsidering one's own beliefs, Amazed by the power of God, Amazed by the knowledge of God, Expecting miracles from God, and Increased sense of spirituality or closeness to God.

According to the study results, No Change in belief in God was revealed as the main category. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting problems had no impact on the beliefs of God believers. This finding can be explained according to the concept of Sense of Coherence (SOC) proposed by Antonovsky [15-17]. He defines a sense of coherence as one's personal orientation in life. He maintains that through a sense of coherence, we can explain why a person can cope with high levels of tension and stay healthy. According to this theory, sense of coherence consists of three elements, including compre-

hensibility (Finding meanings in life and events and ability to understand a situation as a whole), meaningfulness (life makes sense emotionally, problems are perceived as a challenge, not a heavy burden), and manageability (ability to use accessible resources to cope with stressful life events). Research has shown that sense of coherence has a strong correlation with mental health and predicts psychological well-being [18]. According to this theory, highly perceptive individuals can perceive and interpret situations as a whole and in a consistent manner. Therefore, they tend to see special meanings in life events and consider them as challenging situations that need to be dealt with using appropriate solutions obtained through accessible resources.

Challenging life events may initially lead to psychological distress, even question one's religious or existential beliefs, and lead to an existential preoccupation about life events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; however, psychological distress and existential preoccupation are eventually resolved through a personal orientation towards religion/spirituality and in the context of belief in God.

Some of the participants considered God and religion a refuge during hard times. While some people tend to use strategies, like remaining silent, seeking isolation, or even victimization in the face of a crisis, religious people use strategies, such as getting support from religion/spirituality, seeking help from professionals or friends and relatives, or findings advice in literature to cope with stressful events [19]. For many people, faith is an important source of psychological health and well-being [20].

Religious scholars believe that there is a direct association between suffering and illness with religious tendencies and that illness, threats, and worries encourage people to pay more attention to God and spiritual forces [21, 22]. Therefore, we often see that people with no apparent religious tendencies become more religious during stressful situations. For example, research studies have shown that people with cancer, even those who do not consider themselves religious, often report spiritual preoccupations [23]. Religious beliefs help people better cope with stressful life events, and the positive relationship of religiosity with lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of hopefulness in life has been shown by research studies [22]. Previous studies have shown that during natural disasters, the use of religiosity as a religious coping strategy increases [11, 24].

Pargament maintains that religious coping may equip us with proper reactions to situations where limitation in human power and control is more highlighted [25].

Religious beliefs and actions may reduce the risk of helplessness and loss of control, and provide us with a framework that can reduce our suffering and improve our sense of meaning and goal-directedness in the face of stressful and uncontrollable life events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, religion/spirituality can provide us with a worldview that can help in finding meaning in suffering in addition to improving our sense of hopefulness and motivation in life. Moreover, by providing us with supportive resources in a more indirect way and through influencing hopefulness, religion/spirituality can lead to better psychological adjustment [26].

The belief stated by religious scholars that during stressful life events, people tend to seek help from religion/spirituality to achieve peace and explain the crisis they are faced with has been confirmed by findings of research studies. For example, a study using daily Google search data from 95 countries showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, searching for prayer increased to the highest level ever recorded. In other words, more than half of the world's population resorted to prayer to end the pandemic [23].

According to some of the subjects, religion/spirituality can provide a comprehensive explanation for the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported that their religious/spiritual beliefs had helped them find answers to their questions about the cause and nature of COVID-19.

According to Gutek, religion influences one's answers to basic questions about the creation of the world and humankind, determines one's relationship with social, political, and education systems, and also influences one's identity [27]. Religious/spiritual beliefs are important elements in all cultures, and religiosity/spirituality is heavily dependent on one's personal efforts to understand ultimate questions about meaning and metaphysical and spiritual sources [28]. Religious frameworks may have an important impact on the way we interpret different phenomena and on our coping with stressful events and phenomena that are beyond human knowledge. For many people, religion/spirituality can provide a powerful philosophy for life, a strong framework for the interpretation of life challenges and explaining phenomena beyond human control, and answers to important questions about suffering, grief, illness, etc. Religious beliefs can help people cope with the negative effects of stressful life events, and assist them in finding meaning in events even when they seem meaningless [21].

In terms of the use of religious/spiritual beliefs in explaining life events, it must be noted that there are two

types of religious coping strategies in the face of negative events, including positive and negative strategies [21, 29]. Positive coping strategies, such as benevolent religious reappraisal, the reappraisal of God power, collaborative religious coping, seeking religious support, religious focus, religious purification, spiritual connection, seeking support from clergy, religious helping, and religious forgiving [21] have an essential role in explaining life challenges and interpreting the universe. In negative religious copings, such as punishing god reappraisal, active and passive deferring religious coping, and spiritual discontent, one has an avoidant and uncertain relationship with God; for example, the belief that God leaves us alone in hardships [21, 29] or negative events are punishments from God. Such an attitude may lead to helplessness, despair, distress, or guilt [30]. Therefore, the way we use religion to find explanations for and answers to our questions about life and human suffering is of high importance. Even in religious people, the type of religious coping (positive vs. negative) is important in the interpretation of phenomena and personal and social events.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, god-believers and even atheists again asked questions on how god's benevolence can be justified considering the creation of an evil thing like COVID-19. This paradox becomes even more challenging when considered in the light of God's omnibenevolence, a concept mentioned in religious texts. In positive religious coping strategies, one believes that no act of God is meaningless and that we are unable to explain many phenomena due to our limited knowledge. What is clear is that in positive religious interpretations, reference to spiritual forces affects one's reappraisal, and provides one with meanings and possible explanations for events.

Those who use positive religious coping strategies to reduce tension and stress resulting from negative life events can facilitate their transcendence process and reduce helplessness and despair symptoms through positive appraisals and believing in God's wisdom, believing that each event is based on a goal, and distinguishing between goodness and evil sources (attributing goodness to God and evilness to things other than god). Therefore, the way religious people see COVID-19 and attach an objective to it is assumed to be a determining factor in their flexibility and hopefulness during the pandemic. In the face of a virus that has affected the whole world, a lot of people believe that we should pray to God and expect divine intervention to solve this problem, because this challenge is so big that makes us believe in God's knowledge and power, surrender to his will, and expect a miracle from him. In these tense conditions, believing in a God who controls situations and watches human

beings, events, and the world's system can significantly reduce our stress and anxiety [21].

In terms of the increased sense of spirituality and closeness to God, based on Gansevoort's multidimensional theoretical model (1998), religious experience has an essential role in comforting people. Needing God more, seeking help from God, believing that it is only God who can end a crisis are positive religious strategies that reflect a safe relationship with God, trusting him and a powerful sense of spirituality. Also, examined religious coping strategies used by individuals, and identified five functions of religion, including finding meaning, achieving a sense of control, spiritual comfort, facilitation of intimacy and spirituality, and facilitation of deep life changes [21].

Therefore, based on the results of previous studies, it can be argued that religious/spiritual coping strategies are an internal source of seeking meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic that leads to comfort and a deeper intimacy with God. Having a goal in life and finding meaning in life events, feeling belonged to a higher power, hoping for god's support in challenging situations, and seeking social and spiritual support are among strategies used by religious people to cope with a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the experience of the increased sense of spirituality and closeness to God that was reported by some of the participants can be explained according to the theory of post-traumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun define post-traumatic growth as "experiencing positive psychological changes as a result of stressful life events". People who are faced with stress may experience meaningful changes in different domains of life, such as the increased capacity to understand life and increased perception of religious/spiritual concepts [31]. Post-traumatic growth shows that experience of stress can lead to meaningful cognitive reconstruction. During this process, people question their basic assumptions about themselves, the world, and the relationships between the two, and because older assumptions may not be helpful in new situations, people try to review their previous assumptions and replace them with more functional ones [32]. Given the results of previous studies and according to the post-traumatic growth theory, it appears that many people have experienced deep perception of life, universe, and also psychological transcendence during the COVID-19 pandemic that has led to religious/spiritual coping and a greater sense of closeness to God. Living hopefully and trying to be a better person and having new choices to create a better life are opportunities provided for us by our religious/spiritual beliefs about COVID-19.

Another result of the present study showed that those who were unfamiliar with God and religious concepts before the outbreak of COVID-19 had maintained their previous beliefs during the pandemic. They had materialistic beliefs about the universe and believed in nature's intelligence. In contrast to this approach, different religions maintain that nature is not intelligent in itself, but is managed by a higher power that is extremely intelligent (i.e., God). People who believe in nature maintain that nature is God and has a self-created order, and tend to be against talking about creation and related subjects in different domains of science because they consider creating a religious subject, not a scientific one [33].

Participants reported that the quarantine had provided them with greater opportunities to think, read, and increase their awareness of different subjects. According to Heidegger, our routine life causes us to forget an unavoidable reality in our life i.e. death, and our daily activities do not allow us to adequately think about existence, human nature, and the universe. If we can separate ourselves from our hectic life, find peace, and think more about death, then we will be able to truly understand the reality of our existence [34].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people saw the reality of death, and this encouraged them to think more about existential issues. On the other hand, during the pandemic, many people developed a deeper understanding of existential issues, such as thinking about the complexities of the universe, causes of different phenomena, and the cause and nature of COVID-19 as part of the universe. Questions, such as "Was the new virus knowingly created and distributed by man?" "If yes, why the conscience of humanity has dropped to such a low level?" "If the new virus is not man-made but a product of nature, why does nature sometimes behave like that?" "Why is the empirical science unable to efficiently fight the new virus?" "What is the meaning of human life?" "How does it feel to think about life and death?" It is here that a philosophical attitude and thinking about existential issues become a major part of human life.

Another subcategory found in the present study was believing in the importance of changing our behavior towards nature. Regarding this subcategory, reports from different parts of the world have shown that along with major changes in social, economic, and health domains, COVID-19 has had significant effects on the environment [35]. Most of the participants stated that the outbreak of COVID-19 warned both authorities and the general public to rethink the way they treated nature, natural resources, and the environment. According to the participants, as we have experienced the outbreak of COVID-19, we can take a closer look at our attitude towards nature, and

convert this threat into an opportunity to reduce abuse of nature and promote a healthy relationship with the light of Heidegger's viewpoint. According to Heidegger, when we are stuck at home, things are no longer mere sources of exploitation, but in this breaking away from modernity, the true identity of phenomena is revealed [34].

Conclusion

Overall, the results of the present study indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on attitudes towards and beliefs about religion/spirituality, God, nature, existence, and the universe; in most cases, it had strengthened people's previous beliefs. On the other hand, it can be concluded that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, religion/spirituality has an important role in achieving positive outcomes for those with religious/spiritual beliefs. It must be noted that religion is an unavoidable element of every culture, and because religion/spirituality is closely connected to cultural factors, one's use of religious/spiritual coping strategies in the face of negative life events, such as the prevalence of a life-threatening disease, seems to be related to the number of coping strategies available in one's culture. When religion constitutes a major part of a culture, religious/spiritual coping strategies and also stronger and deeper religious/spiritual beliefs will play an essential role in coping with different life events. Based on the study results, it can be concluded that religion/spirituality has been able to help believers in today's hectic world through improving their belief in themselves and also in a higher power.

One of the limitations of the present study is related to its cross-sectional design that did not allow us to examine changes in religious or nonreligious attitudes over time and after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, future studies are suggested to examine these changes over time using longitudinal studies. It is also suggested that the variables examined in the present study should be assessed along with other variables; for example, identification of different types of positive and negative coping strategies or internal and external religious orientation and examination of the role of gender or education in the way people cope with COVID-19.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this article.

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