

The Confrontation of Religious Beliefs and Covid-19 from Iranian People's Viewpoint: A Qualitative Study

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One of the recently growing debates is the outcomes of COVID-19 pandemic on religion and religious people. The virus has not only created serious challenges to Iranian societies health, but also, even more seriously, created challenges for Iranian people's religious beliefs. These challenges highlight the latent challenge between science and religion in this Muslim society. The study was carried out as a qualitative study based on content analysis method in March 2021. Data gathering was through semi-structured group interviews with 30 citizens in Kermanshah City. The participants were selected through purposive method. Totally, four focused group interviews were carried out and to increase richness of the collected information, the highest diversity in the participants in terms of economic, social, cultural, religious, education, and gender was observed. The interviews took 90min on average. Data analysis was performed continuously along with data gathering based on a conventional content analysis method. Based on content analysis, the collected data were categorized into 26 categories and two themes including opportunities and challenges. The challenges contained eight subcategories including expansion of COVID-19 from Qom city in Iran (a key religious city), closure of religious sites and bans on religious gatherings (e.g. Friday Prayer, mosques, religious sites, bans on Rajabieh Eteqaf, bans on Haj ritual, and bans on other religious rituals), decrease of visits between relatives (which is recommended by religious trainings), irrational religious bigotries (kissing and licking shrine and religious site gates to prove that these buildings are holy and cannot be infectious), opportunists who claimed being Islamic medicine experts (prescribing camel's urine and viola oil for preventing and treating COVID-19), religion/science duality (healing), and accepting the pandemic as God's will and punishment. The specifications under opportunities category constituted 18 sub-categories including repent for probable sins in the past, settling due debts, supplication, avoid being arrogant, practicing patience, having trust in God, progress towards Riza status (being satisfied with life), reading the Holy Quran, reading prayers (Faraj, and 7th prayer of Sahife Sajadieh), feeling death closer than ever following the pandemic, sacrifice, donating to charities, increase of sympathy among people, contentment, prayer, chanting God's names, finding proofs for religion's health training, and the role of religious leaders in Iran during the crisis (total support of society health, medical staff, and decisions of Corona National Command Center). It appears that Iranian people have used spirituality as an approach to attenuate their anxiety and stress during COVID-19 pandemic. However, following the closure of religions sites and ban on holding religious rituals, concerns were raised about degradation of believe in

religion. Preparing the ground for virtual pilgrimage and revising Islamic Fiqh about natural disasters can attenuate the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic in Iranian religious society.

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