COVID-19 and its effect on religious beliefs
5 August 2021, by Shamim Quadir

Published in the Journal of Religion and Health, a recent study surveyed Christian and irreligious people online at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It suggests that those with strongly held convictions in their Christian faith, or who held no-religious belief, strengthened belief in their positions following the pandemic's onset.

Christian respondents who reported weak to moderate belief reported no change in their strength of belief in response to the crisis.

The study, led by Dr. Francesco Rigoli, Lecturer in Psychology at City, University of London, surveyed 280 adults online on the 30th March 2020. Half of the respondents were UK citizens and half US citizens, and pre-screened for belief in Christianity or having no religion.

Participants answered a series of questions to rate how much they agreed with a variety of positions.

For example, one question was 'How religious are you?' to which respondents answered with one of the following numerical responses: 1 = not at all religious, 2 = a little religious, 3 = moderately religious, 4 = quite religious, 5 = very religious.

Other similarly framed questions included asking how much religious belief had changed since COVID-19 started (if at all), personal feelings of control associated with the coronavirus pandemic, trust in authorities' ability to manage the crisis, and anxiety elicited by the crisis.

No links were found between any change of religious belief since the onset of the crisis and personal feelings of control, or ability of authorities to handle the crisis.

However, the study does suggest that respondents' level of anxiety caused by COVID-19 may be mediating the change in their strength of belief following the onset of the crisis. The higher the anxiety level, the more respondents with strong belief in Christianity appear to have strengthened their belief, and people with no religious belief strengthened their irreligious position.

Reflecting on the study, Dr. Rigoli says that "the implications of this study are twofold. First, our findings contribute to research investigating the impact of stress on religiosity, supporting the idea that, at least in some circumstances, stress and anxiety bolster the commitment to prior belief systems, namely the Christian faith for strong believers and skeptic belief systems for non-believers. Second, our study contributes to broaden our knowledge on the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to its medical implications, the coronavirus crisis represents also a dramatic challenge for the psychology and culture of many communities; hence, shedding light on these aspects represents an important research endeavor."

The study was published in the Journal of Religion and Health.
