

## Spirituality to cope with COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and future global challenges

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### Abstract

Spirituality refers to a set of values of connectedness with the self, others and the entire universe that is guided by a connection with the Transcendent and Superior. In today's times of the COVID-19 pandemic, spiritual skills can be a resource to address mental health issues, both among the general population, especially the most vulnerable, including the elderly, sick, marginalised and those affected by psychiatric conditions, and certain categories of workers, including healthcare professionals. All of these mentioned are at a high risk of mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorders. During the current pandemic, higher levels of spiritual distress have been associated with lower mental health levels in the population. Therefore, to address the spiritual needs and religious beliefs of patients and families, public health stakeholders should ensure the continuity of spiritual and religious activities during the pandemic as well as the training of healthcare professionals on this topic. At the global level, spiritual resources and values could be decisive skills for coping with the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the short and long term, for example, the socioeconomic inequalities generated by the current pandemic. However, they could also be important in addressing post-COVID-19 pandemic climate change and other emerging challenges, such as advancing global health security and reaching sustainable development goals.

**KEY WORDS:** Climate change; COVID-19; global health; mental well-being; spirituality; holistic health; religiosity.

## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and policymakers have faced unprecedented challenges regarding public health because social and economic disruption caused by lockdown measures have produced devastating effects on the physical and psychological well-being of the population at a global level [1]. There is growing interest in the scientific community regarding religiousness and spirituality, as they have been found to be resources and coping skills that may positively impact physical and mental health worldwide [2]. Spirituality refers to a morality-oriented intellectual connectedness with the self, others and the entire universe that is guided by a connection with the Transcendent and Superior [3]. It includes the concepts of meaningfulness, completeness and connectedness, which provide coherent meaning, love and happiness [3]. There is no universally accepted definition of spirituality, but spirituality and religiousness are considered two different concepts [4]. Religiousness has been defined as a set

of beliefs and practices associated with a religious tradition [5]. Spirituality, however, is a larger construct, without confessional constraints, which encompasses concepts such as transcendence, connection, wholeness and compassion [6]. Even though it is possible to be religious without being spiritual and spiritual without being religious [7], they are interconnected and difficult to separate. In the literature, they are both considered personal resources or coping strategies that are suitable for handling crisis situations, such as the death of a child for parents [8] or long-term stress [9]. Religiousness and spirituality have positive effects on an individual's mental and physical health and promote higher levels of well-being, life satisfaction, sense of purpose, meaning of life, hope and optimism and lower rates of anxiety, depression and substance abuse [10]. In this commentary, therefore, I discuss the role of spirituality before and during the current COVID-19 pandemic as well as in the post-pandemic era, when humankind will face climate change and other future global challenges.

### TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

*Spiritual resources and skills will allow us to effectively tackle COVID-19 as well as future challenges in a changing world.*

**Competing interests** - none declared.

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## DISCUSSION

### *Spirituality before the COVID-19 pandemic*

Religion can influence all social phenomena. For this reason, pathological religiosity has been considered a major feature in some historical and recent conflicts and has played a central role in modern terrorism [11]. It has been argued that radicalism, malignant nationalism, pathological religiosity and violent extremism and terrorism, along with war conflicts, can produce and perpetuate huge mental health problems in populations around the world. In contrast, healthy spirituality and sound religiosity may contribute significantly to public and global mental health and promotion of an empathic civilization [12]. In my opinion, the deviant use of religion has been triggered by the violent separation of religion and spirituality, characterised by lower expressions of a belief in God among young adults and a higher engagement in extreme forms of spirituality outside of the framework of religion [13]. In this technological and globalised world, little attention has been given by some governments to global public health issues, such as global warming and climate change, which has played a role in increasingly frequent worldwide natural disasters, such as devastating earthquakes, wind and ice storms, floods, draught and famine, which in turn have contributed to ongoing conflicts and wars between and within countries. The emergence of new forms of contagious and deadly infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, the 2003 SARS epidemic, pandemic strains of influenza (e.g. the 2009 H1N1 influenza), the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the Zika virus and the 2014 Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS CoV) outbreak, are likely the result of the abusive power of man over nature. Anthroponoses (i.e. diseases transmissible from human to human), zoonoses (diseases transmissible from living animals to humans) and sapronoses (human diseases transmissible from abiotic environments to humans) are new emerging infectious diseases [14] which are impacting natural ecosystems at unprece-

dent rates in response to increases in human mobility, climate change and the creation of new habitat conditions [15]. Religion has been found to possibly influence people's attitudes and behaviour towards climate change [16] and is helpful for institutions in constructing the meanings of climate change [17]. Climate change, indeed, is primarily a cultural issue [18]. However, research on how spirituality may impact climate change has been overlooked by scholars. It is likely no coincidence that a society with little or no attention to spiritual values has facilitated the acceleration of the climate change phenomenon. Climate change is reducing natural resources and biodiversity. The suffering of the Earth is likely to affect our way of life and our spiritual needs.

### *Spirituality during the COVID-19 pandemic: Tackling socioeconomic and psychological issues*

The COVID-19 pandemic is having and will have in the near future important consequences on the population's physical and mental health [18, 19]. According to Rogers et al, COVID-19 will have both short- and long-term psychiatric implications, with an increasing prevalence of anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia and post-traumatic stress [20]. Lockdown measures, which, in absence of vaccination and effective therapies, were the only weapons against the pandemic, seem to increase mental health problems [21]. Certain categories of workers, such as healthcare professionals, have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, as many became infected and sick and reported high work burdens and huge emotional loads resulting from watching people die without the support of their loved ones. This led to increased levels of anxiety, depression, insomnia and burnout [22–29]. Among the population, the interruption of funeral rituals and practices due to lockdown and social-restriction measures has aggravated the experience of grief because the ability to connect with the deceased was compromised [30]. This threatened the mental well-being of the bereaved [31].

The experience of social isolation, fear of death, socioeconomic difficulty and uncertainty of the future have all been conditions capable of intensifying the grief experience, thus increasing the risk of complicated grief [32]. Lower mental health levels of the population have been, therefore, associated with higher levels of spiritual distress, which is a condition characterised by a sufferance connected with the impossibility of feeling meaning in life [31].

In a time when regular religious participation, which is normally associated with better emotional health outcomes, has been prohibited for safety reasons, faith and spirituality have nonetheless represented the main strategy of emotional survival in the face of death and fear of death. This has been confirmed by studies carried out among the Catholic population [33] and healthcare professionals [34, 35]. Religious and spiritual beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic have also been associated with higher levels of hopefulness and lower levels of fear, worry and sadness [9], which suggests that spiritual and religious coping can be used by individuals in a positive (i.e. finding meaning, spiritual connection and benevolent religious reappraisals) and not in a negative (i.e. religious struggle, punishment and reappraisal of God's power) way [36]. Therefore, to address the spiritual needs and religious beliefs of patients and families, public health stakeholders should ensure the continuity of spiritual and religious activities during the pandemic as well as the training of healthcare professionals on this topic [10]. In particular, special attention should be given to the most vulnerable, namely the elderly, the sick and the marginalised, who have to deal with this sudden major stressor event along with other pre-existing major life stressors [37].

### *A 'new' spirituality in the post-COVID-19 era to combat new global challenges*

According to findings presented by an independent panel of international scientists designated by the World Health Organization [38], division and inequality between and

within countries have been exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic, and their impact has been more severe on people who are already marginalised and disadvantaged. As of 28 April 2021, 148 million people were confirmed infected by the SARS-CoV-2, and more than 3 million have died in 223 countries, territories and areas. It is the worst combined health and socioeconomic crisis in living memory, with 115–125 million people being pushed into extreme poverty—the deepest shock to the global economy since the Second World War. A great reason for concern is the persistent transmission of SARS-CoV2 due to the development of new virus variants and the uneven access to vaccination at the global level. Developing countries are also more disadvantaged in this fight, as unequal resources for tackling the pandemic have left those working in the informal sector, migrants, refugees and displaced people with little or no access to testing services and health facilities [38].

At the individual level, spirituality is a recognised source of comfort, support and meaning [39]. Spiritual well-being has been associated with higher levels of physical and mental health [40, 41]. Therefore, spiritual resources can be an effective source of resilience to manage and cope with the consequences of stressful events like this pandemic [41, 42], particularly in older people [43], who are also the most involved in religious and spiritual activities [44], but also in the most vulnerable. Spiritual initiatives could be implemented at the workplace [45–47]. However, everyone should receive spiritual care and assistance in times of a pandemic, atheists and believers alike, to avoid spiritual distress that may have implications on mental well-being.

Nevertheless, at the global level, spiritual resources are not less important. To tackle this and new pandemics, international cooperation and better coordination among countries are essential to ensure more economic resources, better healthcare facilities for developing countries and equal opportunity to get vaccinated and receive effective treatments against COVID-19 infections in all countries [38].

Health inequity and socioeconomic inequality between developed and developing countries are likely the main challenges that global health stakeholders must address in the near future. In a broader sense, an individual's spiritual well-being does depend upon the Earth's state of well-being. However, as suggested by the 'One Health' Initiative, an important yet complex concept to understand is that we, and thus our health, are 'one' with the Earth, as this interconnection encompasses physical, psychological, social, economic and spiritual aspects of our well-being [48, 49]. Spiritual resources are a requisite for better cooperation among the human, animal and environmental sciences and suggest new cultural and philosophical principles to combat climate change and other emerging public health threats [50]. Only this new deeper un-

derstanding will allow us to effectively tackle COVID-19 as well as future challenges in a changing world.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to find new ways of living. The moment is decisive for creating more international cooperation and coordination to end the current COVID-19 pandemic. Spiritual resources are decisive skills for coping with the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the short and long term. Spirituality encompasses philosophical and cultural aspects that may contribute to tackling climate change and other emerging challenges, such as the migrant emergency, wars and conflicts, advancing global health security and reaching the Sustainable Development Goals [51].

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