

An Exploration for the Post-Pandemic Period of the Religious Lives of Individuals in Turkey Who Had Severe COVID-19 and Death Anxiety

Türkiye'de Ağır Kovid-19 Geçiren ve Ölüm Kaygısı Yaşayan Bireylerin Pandemi Sonrası Dini Yaşamlarına İlişkin Bir İnceleme

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ABSTRACT

Religion has emerged as a strong coping mechanism that has been employed by many people around the world during the chaotic atmosphere of the pandemic, and numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between religion and COVID-19. However, there is need for more studies examining how COVID-19 and death anxiety impacted individuals' religious lives in the post-COVID-19 period. This phenomenological investigation examines the post-Covid-19 effects on the religious lives of individuals in Turkey who experienced severe Covid-19 and fear of death. The analyses of the research revealed that experiencing severe COVID-19 and death anxiety seem to contribute to strengthen religious commitments among the participants. According to research analyses, due to the severe COVID-19 and death anxiety, the participants reported that they (a) had a better understanding of human helplessness and the power of God, have tended to deepen their religious commitments; (b) gained a more robust understanding of the transient and mortal nature of the world; and (c) experienced a fear of dying as a sinner and considered the rest of their lives as a second chance given by God. All three of these factors appear to contribute to the involvement of religion in participants' lives in the post-COVID-19 period.

Keywords: Psychology of Religion, Sociology of Religion, COVID-19, Religious Life, Death Anxiety, Religious Coping.

Öz

Din, Kovid-19 salgınının kaotik atmosferinde dünya genelinde pek çok insanın başvurduğu güçlü bir başa çıkma mekanizması olarak kendini göstermiştir ve din ile Kovid-19 arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaya yönelik çok sayıda akademik çalışma yapılmıştır. Ancak Kovid-19 ve ölüm kaygısının, bireylerin dini yaşamlarını Kovid-19 sonrası dönemde nasıl etkilediğini inceleyen daha çok çalışmaya ihtiyaç bulunmaktadır. Bu fenomenolojik çalışma, Türkiye'de ağır Kovid-19 geçiren ve ölüm korkusu yaşayan bireylerin Kovid-19 sonrası dönemde dini yaşamlarının nasıl etkilendiğini araştırmaktadır. Araştırmanın bulguları, şiddetli Kovid-19 geçirmiş ve ölüm kaygısı hissetmiş olmanın katılımcıların dini bağlılıklarını güçlendirme yönünde katkıda bulunduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Araştırma bulgularına göre, şiddetli Kovid-19 ve ölüm kaygısı nedeniyle katılımcılar, (a) insanın acizliğini ve Allah'ın gücünü daha iyi anladıklarını ifade etmişler ve dini bağlılıklarını derinleştirme eğilimi göstermişlerdir; (b) dünyanın geçici ve ölümlü doğasına dair daha sağlam bir anlayışa ulaşmış gözükmektedirler; ve (c) Kovid-19 geçirdikleri dönemde günahkâr olarak ölme korkusu yaşadıkları için hayatlarının geri kalanını Allah'ın verdiği ikinci bir şans olarak görme eğilimi sergilemektedirler. Bu faktörlerin her üçünün de Kovid-19 sonrası dönemde katılımcıların yaşamlarında dinin daha fazla yer almasına katkıda bulunduğu görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Psikolojisi, Din Sosyolojisi, Kovid-19, Dini Yaşam, Ölüm Kaygısı, Dini Başa Çıkma.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on a global scale. The very first surge of the pandemic had an enormous impact worldwide, with a rapid increase in the number of infected individuals and death tolls (Wu et al., 2020). These led governments to implement strict measures such as national lockdowns and travel restrictions, which significantly affected various aspects of people's lives, including employment, businesses, education, general well-being, and other mental health outcomes. One of the most notable adverse outcomes of the pandemic was the substantial worsening of mental health worldwide. For instance, in the USA, people living in states that enforced lockdown measures reported poorer mental well-being in comparison to those residing in states that did not enforce such restrictions (Adams-Prassl et al., 2022). Similarly, in the UK, research revealed that COVID-19 had significant impacts on mental health throughout the whole population, with young people and women experiencing the most significant declines in mental well-being (Banks – Xiaowei, 2020).

Religion has emerged as a strong coping mechanism that has been employed by many people around the world during the pandemic, and numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between religion and COVID-19. Several studies around the world (e.g., Bentzen, 2021; Kowalczyk et al., 2020; Iyer et al., 2024) and in Turkey (e.g., Kalgı, 2021; Eryiğit and Başak, 2021; Bulut and Koç, 2022; Kızılgöçit and Yıldırım, 2022) (these studies will be discussed comprehensively in the next sections) have clearly revealed that religion has been employed to cope with the negative impacts of COVID-19. However, there is still need for more inquiries that examine how COVID-19 and death anxiety impacted individuals' religious lives in the post-COVID-19 period.

This qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach to delve deeply into how COVID-19 affects the religious lives of people in Turkey who have experienced severe COVID-19 along with a fear of death. In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants, ten individuals were interviewed in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to analyse the resulting data. The research aims to enhance the existing literature by offering comprehensive analyses of the lived experiences of individuals in Turkey who had severe COVID-19 and a fear of death. Additionally, policymakers and social workers may find the study beneficial.

I. Covid-19 and Religion

Throughout the pandemic, religion continued to play a significant role in shaping social life in a broad variety of circumstances, ranging from the most private and personal to the most public and worldwide (Baker et al., 2020). Hart and Koenig (2020) depict the initial days of COVID-19 as individuals confronting an ambiguous future with little control over forthcoming events. They explain that *"the only certainty for many now is their religious faith, which is a rock that they are now needing to hold onto"* (Hart - Koenig, 2020, 1141). However, in the first days of the pandemic, some churches were criticised for holding in-person gatherings, prohibiting the use of health masks, engaging in physical contact during prayers, and withholding their membership lists from health authorities. Some health experts drew attention that religious groups, services, and practices can influence the spread of viruses, either by slowing down or accelerating social transmission, depending on the related religious organisation (Wildman et al., 2020). On the other hand, during the pandemic, members of various religious groups displayed different degrees of anxiety, social isolation, and compulsive buying. For instance, Muslims in the UK expressed more anxiety about COVID-19 than Christians and non-religious individuals (Jaspal et al., 2020).

During this pandemic period, religion and spirituality emerged as a prominent coping strategy against the adverse effects of COVID-19 on mental health, being recognised as a crucial factor bolstering mental well-being (Bahal et al., 2023). According to Fardin (2020), spirituality may have the potential to assist individuals in experiencing mental calm during times of crisis and severe diseases, and furthermore, some of the religious remedies would present beneficial sources to combat the predominance of COVID-19. Bentzen (2021) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in the frequency of prayer, with over half of the global population prayed to stop the spread of the virus and manage its negative impacts. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, many individuals appear to have become more receptive to faith and prayer because engaging in religious practices during the pandemic seems to provide a sense of control, help in understanding the situation, and offer hope (Kowalczyk et al., 2020). However, the limitations of online religious participation during the lockdown period should also be considered. Due to the importance that sacred places frequently place on inner religious and spiritual experiences and the possibility that online services have failed to deliver the same quality of faith teachings and communal religious and spiritual experiences as their in-person services, online religious participation is unlikely to provide the same advantages as in-person services (Koichiro et al., 2023). Nevertheless, religion and religious life seem to have played a crucial

role in coping with the negative impacts of COVID-19.

II. Religiosity as a Coping Mechanism for the Negative Impacts of Covid-19

Religiosity may help individuals overcome crises by providing coping strategies. Religious inclination is seen as a fundamental security need since it may provide a structured and secure environment that helps individuals cope with life challenges and disturbances (Maslow, 1943; Griffin 2006). When faced with a threat, individuals would employ many survival techniques, with religion serving as one option that enables them to maintain hope and a sense of security (Kowalczyk et al., 2020). Through the process of meaning-making and stress-buffering, having the ability to interpret one's own stressful events through the lens of one's religious beliefs may bring some measure of comfort (Iyer-Rosso, 2022). Pargament (2001) reported that individuals with life-threatening illnesses (such as COVID-19 in this case) may employ spirituality as a coping mechanism, finding relief from the psychological stress linked to the danger. During times of crises like a pandemic or lockdown, religious individuals may exhibit stronger coping mechanisms. In the early stages of the pandemic, Koenig (2020) brought to people's attention the fact that numerous systematic scientific studies had reported a positive association between religious involvement and indicators of healthy immune function. He then continued by providing six recommendations that would assist individuals in maintaining their spiritual, mental, and physical resilience during the anxious times of the COVID-19 pandemic; one of them was to 'deepen your religious faith' (Koenig, 2020).

Research in the UK has demonstrated that religious people seem to have stronger coping mechanisms during the pandemic and lockdown conditions, especially in a society like the United Kingdom, which is not highly religious as compared to other countries worldwide (Iyer et al., 2024). Interestingly, Bahal (2023) demonstrated that additional socioeconomic factors do not mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on mental well-being when compared to religion. There was an increase in prayer searches across all continents among all demographics, including those with higher degrees of religiosity, economic position, inequality, and insecurity, indicating that religiosity appear to have risen globally due to the pandemic (Bentzen, 2021). In the context of Turkey, as demonstrated by Kalgı (2021), COVID-19 has caused several psychological issues in Turkish society, including anxiety, frustration, and feelings of isolation; however, many individuals have effectively resorted to religion as a coping mechanism. Eryiğit and Başak (2021) revealed that 51.5% of the participants reported an increase in their levels of religiosity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Bulut and Koç (2022) point out that religious beliefs have been essential to the Turkish population's understanding, interpretation, and response to COVID-19. This includes perceiving the virus as a predetermined destiny and a test from God, as well as employing religion to manage the adverse effects of the pandemic. Furthermore, Kızılgeçit and Yıldırım (2022) demonstrated the significance of religious coping methods and their moderating functions in the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and death anxiety in young Turkish individuals. However, the literature still needs more inquiries on if COVID-19 has permanently increased the use of religion among people or if it was just a short-term reaction to deal with the first shocking impacts of the pandemic.

III. Covid-19, Death Anxiety, and the Role of Religiosity

The World Health Organisation reports that the health, social, and economic effects of COVID-19 have widely affected mental health. Many people grew more worried, but others had more serious mental health issues. Many suffer psychological distress, despair, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Increasing suicide thoughts and behaviours, notably among health care workers, and fear of death are concerning (WHO, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the physical and psychological well-being of individuals worldwide, leading to increased fear of death (Kızılgeçit - Yıldırım, 2022; Menzies - Menzies, 2021; Lăzăroiu, 2020). Death anxiety is a remarkable driver of human behaviour, as exemplified by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Death anxiety could be interpreted as a constant reminder of mortality that influences individuals' behaviour (Menzies - Menzies, 2021). Death anxiety is characterised by a continual, irrational, and intense fear of death (Bala - Maheshwari, 2019). Death anxiety may lead to adverse health effects, including reduced physical capabilities, psychological strain, compromised ego integrity, diminished religious convictions, dissatisfaction with life, and low resilience (Dirik - Gunay, 2009). Death anxiety was inevitably generated among communities because of the high death toll caused by COVID-19 during the first few months of the pandemic (Le Couteur et al., 2020). Research indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, females exhibited greater levels of anxiety and fear of personal death; anxiety was predicted by extraversion, neuroticism, fear of personal death, and gender; and among males, fear of personal death mediated the association between neuroticism and anxiety (Pérez-Mengual et al., 2021). This fear was usually fostered by spreading despair because of the virus.

On the other hand, death anxiety may foster people's religious commitment because religious beliefs and practices may offer a multifaceted approach to coping with existential concerns, providing meaning, support, comfort, and hope in the face of

mortality (Rigoli, 2021). In terms of COVID-19, for instance, research conducted in the eastern part of Turkey revealed that COVID-19 patients had a high level of religious coping, and the patients' levels of death anxiety increased in correlation with their employment of positive and negative coping mechanisms (Özer et al., 2023). Similarly, Rigoli (2021) contends that during the coronavirus pandemic, pious people showed a tendency to intensify their dedication to religious beliefs, whereas non-believers expressed heightened scepticism towards religion. Furthermore, he (2021) claims that the correlation between anxiety induced by the coronavirus and a shift in religious convictions was contingent on the degree of religiosity: anxiety strengthened religious convictions among devoted believers, but it diminished religious beliefs among non-believers. The majority of the elderly participants in Rababa's (2021) study showed low levels of religious coping and spiritual well-being, along with significant levels of death anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a comparison between older adult males and females in the study revealed that females demonstrated higher levels of religious coping and lower levels of death anxiety (Rababa, 2021).

While religion may have functioned as a robust and efficacious coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic, a more comprehensive analysis of the role of religion among individuals before, during, and after the pandemic is needed. Therefore, this current study augments by exploring, in the post-COVID-19 period, how COVID-19 has affected the religious lives of individuals in Turkey who have experienced severe COVID-19 and death anxiety. Employing qualitative research methodology and a phenomenological approach, this research aims to explore how the participants' religious lives change in the post-COVID-19 period. However, the objective of this current study is not to measure the religiosity of the participants. Instead, the main purpose is to shed light on the lived experiences of the participants in terms of their religious lives. There are numerous compelling arguments in favour of conducting a qualitative study to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the religious lives of individuals in Turkey. First and foremost, the profound and individualistic aspect of religious beliefs and coping processes necessitates an extensive understanding that quantitative methods may not completely capture. Qualitative research enables the examination of complex and nuanced experiences, as well as the interpretations individuals attribute to their religious practices and beliefs. This is essential for comprehending the multiple implications of the pandemic for their religious lives. Secondly, the phenomenological approach is highly appropriate for this study because it emphasises individuals' subjective experiences as well as their interpretation and understanding of these experiences. Given the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's views on death and existential concerns, employing a phenomenological approach could yield an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how the severity of COVID-19 and the resulting fear of death have affected their religious beliefs and rituals. This approach is in line with the study's objective, which is to investigate individuals' religious experiences during the post-COVID-19 period rather than simply measuring their levels of religious commitment. Lastly, qualitative research may allow for a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of participants' experiences, enabling researchers to capture the emotional and psychological aspects of their religious coping methods in a more empathetic and holistic manner. By employing qualitative methods, this study seeks to illuminate the profound and varied impacts of the pandemic on individuals' religious lives, thereby contributing to a deeper comprehension of the interplay between health crises, death anxiety, and religious life.

1. METHOD

1.1. Research Design

The study seeks to examine how individuals' religious lives have been impacted due to COVID-19 and fear of death by focusing on their lived experiences, as well as how they evaluate their prior and current religious lives. Therefore, the research adopted herein qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach to explore and shed light on the experiences of the individuals who had severe COVID-19 and fear of death. Qualitative research seeks to examine and acquire an understanding of the level of importance that individuals or groups attribute to social or human issues (Creswell, 2009). It involves investigators and respondents collaborating to identify and interpret pertinent information to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Typically, this is accomplished via one-on-one interviews, which foster rapport-building and motivate participants to engage in profound personal reflection and communication (Reid, 2005). For the purposes of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with them, and the resulting data were analysed employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The core principles of IPA involve comprehending the participants' life experiences and their own ways of constructing meaning within this framework. Considering these two important integrals, IPA is both phenomenological and psychological. This approach is phenomenological, as it aims to comprehend and explain human conscious experiences of issues, and

psychological, as it focuses on analysing meaning-making and interpretive processes (Smith, 2015).

1.2. Research Questions

This research aims to explore the impact of severe COVID-19 and fear of death experiences on people's religious lives in the post-COVID-19 period in Turkey. In line with this purpose, main research questions were formed as:

1. How have the severe COVID-19 and death anxiety impacted the lives of individuals in Turkey?
2. What impact have the severe COVID-19 pandemic and death anxiety had on the religious lives of the people in Turkey?
3. In what ways have the severe COVID-19 pandemic and death anxiety changed people's religious lives?

1.3. Data Collection Process

Participants in phenomenological research are chosen based on two criteria: they must have experienced the phenomena being studied, and they must possess the ability to articulate their own experience (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, a nonprobability sampling method was employed. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected depending on specific criteria defined by the research questions. The interviews were conducted in Turkey with Muslim Turkish people. The pre-selected criteria for this study were that the participants had severe COVID-19 (e.g., high fever, difficulty breathing, persistent chest pain, extreme fatigue, loss of taste and smell, etc.) and experienced fear of death. However, in terms of other variables such as worldview, religion and belief, and culture, the participants were selected randomly (random sample). All the participants suffered from severe COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, at least 2 years prior to the interviews. This was an important factor to explore and examine whether the use of religion among participants was just a short-term reaction to deal with the first shocking impacts of the pandemic or not. The interview data was collected between January 2 and January 30, 2024. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded with a voice recorder, and later transcribed and translated into English verbatim. The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes. The interview consisted of 18 questions as well as few additional follow-up questions. The interview questions explored the experiences of the participants about the challenges faced during the pandemic, the preventive measures taken against coronavirus, fears of contracting the virus, reliance on religious or spiritual practices for protection, experiences post-infection, religious or spiritual strategies for recovery, seeking relief in God during COVID-19, fear of death while struggling with the virus, and changes in worldview and religious beliefs post-recovery.

1.4. Research Participants

Ten participants (five females and five males) were interviewed as part of the research (see below Table 1. Participants' Profiles). The participants' ages range from 22 to 68. While the research did not directly assess the participants' levels of religiosity, there was considerable variation among them regarding the extent to which religion occupies a significant place in their daily lives. One respondent (P-3) expressed that religion occupies an excessive amount of importance in his life, stating that "religion comes first in my life.". Seven of the participants indicated that religion is important in their lives, with various explanations (e.g., "I fulfill my religious practices as much as I can," "I consider religion in my business," "I give importance to religion in my life as much as I can," etc.). Two participants (P-1, P-9) provided explanations that religion has average importance in their lives, stating that "I am not a person who is very religious" and "I cannot describe myself as a religious person.". The participants in the study are referred to as "P".

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Marital Status	Occupation
P-1	Male	22	Undergraduate	Single	Student
P-2	Female	27	Undergraduate	Single	Engineer
P-3	Male	33	Undergraduate	Married	Civil Servant
P-4	Female	54	Undergraduate	Married	Teacher
P-5	Male	38	High School	Married	Business Manager
P-6	Female	42	Secondary School	Married	Housewife
P-7	Female	23	Undergraduate	Single	Student
P-8	Male	68	Secondary School	Married	Retired
P-9	Male	34	Undergraduate	Married	Driver
P-10	Female	67	Primary School	Married	Housewife

1.5. Data Analysis Process

The phenomenological approach necessitates the segmentation of data into distinct parts and units of significance prior to encoding it into categories (Maykut - Morehouse, 1994). Thus, the analytical process in IPA comprises both descriptive and explanatory categories (Lincoln - Guba, 1985). Therefore, the data collected from the participants in this study was analysed manually using content and descriptive analysis methods, which are often used in qualitative research data analysis. To better familiarise myself with the data, I listened to the interviews repeatedly and documented any thoughts, recollections, or reflections that surfaced during that process. In the following stage, the task involved detecting and highlighting exploratory comments, relevant components, expressions, and emotions, as well as the key words and phrases expressed by the participants. The primary research questions served as the framework for the coding scheme. Following that, the development and identification of emergent themes proceeded. Both participant expressions and the researcher's subjective interpretation of those expressions contributed to the emergence of themes. Subsequently, the task involved identifying the emerging themes and reviewing visual patterns in order to establish potential connections among them. During the final phase of the analysis, patterns across the cases were identified, and the final themes were determined, which involved renaming or modifying certain themes.

2. RESULTS

Based on the accounts provided by the participants, the dataset revealed three main themes that occurred most frequently. These themes will be examined in depth.

2.1. Understanding Human Helplessness, the Power of God, and Deepening Their Faith

Although all participants in the study expressed the importance of religion (Islam) to them, they differed in regard to the extent to which religion occupies a significant place in their daily lives. However, all the participants clearly indicated that they experienced a change in their religious commitments and practices after having severe COVID-19 and death anxiety. One of the predominant interpretations of COVID-19 among the participants was that they gained a profound comprehension of the helplessness of human beings in the world. Furthermore, they declared that they once again fully comprehended the fact that God is the most powerful and omnipotent one.

I felt human weakness and inadequacy a little more. I mean, I thought we were helpless, and I thought I was helpless, so we had no way to do anything else. There was nothing we could do. I just prayed to God and wanted health and wellness. During COVID-19 days, we prayed all the time; we had nothing else to do. Only God could help us. ... I felt that I might die. I feel now that I have become a little more focused on religious issues; that is, I have become a little closer to God. I can say that COVID-19 and surviving death have encouraged me to be more thankful to God and to consider fate and the afterlife more. (P-8).

P-8 expressed that during pandemic period, he felt fear of death, mostly due to his age and pre-existing health condition. He emphasized that he felt very helpless and constantly prayed to God for help. P-8 seems to effectively employ religion as a coping mechanism for the adverse effects of COVID-19. He explicitly expressed that his religious activities and conviction strengthened due to COVID-19 and death fear.

Since it was difficult times, I constantly felt the need to seek help from God. Because there's not much you can do in those times. There was no solution to the virus, they give you a few medications and tell you to overcome it on your own at home. ... We have witnessed a period in which people were truly helpless and unable to do anything. That's why I prayed to God as often as I could. I couldn't do anything else. In general, I can say that I have become a little more connected to God due to those difficult times. Yes, I have. Which of us did not pray? Everyone prayed during this period and asked God for help for themselves and their families. The medical world's helplessness against the virus prompted people to seek help from the Creator. ... Of course, the fear of death makes people more connected to God. When people feel the fine line between life and death, they begin to feel the need to connect to God a little more. Before Covid, I did not care much about religion such as the afterlife and the day of judgement. Because I didn't think much about the fact that we would die one day. When I inevitably experienced the fear of death with Covid, I became more accepting of the fact that our life in this world is a test. I can say that now I take religion more seriously than before. I try to practice my prayers more often and thank God more. (P-1).

In the beginning of the interview, P-1 characterised himself as not being a particularly religious individual, but he elaborated

on how his religious life has changed in conjunction with his fear of death and exposure to COVID-19. He began his explanation by emphasizing the helplessness of humans in the face of the virus and then continued to describe religious devotion (prayer to God) as the sole coping mechanism. More specifically, his death anxiety seems to influence his religious perspective and cause him to think about the afterlife and the day of judgement with greater seriousness; these processes appear to contribute to his increased religious commitment and practices.

P-9 is another participant who identified himself as not very religious. During the initial months of the pandemic, he mentioned that his wife was pregnant with their first child and was particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to her previous heart surgery. He expressed the extent of his fear and concern for his family's safety. He then described how his religious life changed:

So, like they say, it's about realizing who the boss is. In fact, this was exactly what happened. We realized who the boss is. Everyone, even the great superpowers of this world, have never been able to prevail against this disease. An invisible virus has affected all humanity. ... This disease has reminded us of our helplessness as human. In other words, God has brought everyone down and says, "listen to reason, shake yourself up, your boss is here." ... I had severe COVID-19 for 20-25 days and I felt deep fear of death. ... So, now I can say that it is as if I have been given a reward, a second chance. Now I am grateful for all my circumstances, my perspective on fate, the afterlife, and the day of judgment has significantly changed. ... Before Covid, I could not fully fulfil the duties of religion properly. But with this lesson, I do them as much as I can now. Because I have come face to face with something like death, and since there is no guarantee of tomorrow, of course, I started to fulfil more of the Islamic duties that the religion of Islam commands and that we must do. As I just said, the Covid period was a milestone for me in a religious sense. (P-9).

As a result of experiencing numerous significant difficulties, challenges, and responsibilities during the pandemic's turbulent atmosphere, P-9 appears to have been profoundly affected mentally. It seems that his anxiety had been particularly elevated due to his masculine responsibilities since he regarded himself as the head of the family, which include ensuring the safety of family members, and also due to the fact that he had just become a father. Furthermore, suffering acute COVID-19 for three weeks and facing deep death anxiety seems to have profoundly changed his religious understanding and involvement. P-9 indicated that he coped with all those troubles mostly by employing religious commitments and specifically by making more and more prayers to God. He claimed that he strongly believed that the prayers he performed at this time helped in his recovery and enabled him to overcome the adverse effects of the pandemic. According to his account, each of these experiences appears to have been a turning point in his religious life, strengthened his religious convictions, and increased his religious activities and rituals.

An additional crucial aspect underscored by both participants (P-1, P-9) and numerous other research participants is the inadequate efficiency of health systems during the initial stages of the pandemic. Most participants in the study highlighted the inadequacy of health services in dealing with COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic, which led them to reaffirm their belief in the supreme might of God. Inglehart (2020) asserts that societies that progress through modernization—ideas that include technological advancements, economic growth, and improvements in healthcare and education—tend to endure a secularization trend. Societies characterized by high levels of existential security, wherein fundamental needs are fulfilled, and members experience a sense of relative stability and protection, generally demonstrate greater degrees of secularism (existential security theory) (Inglehart, 2020). However, the research participants posit that modernization and technological progress might not consistently provide comprehensive protection against unforeseen dangers. Consequently, individuals might continuously turn to religion as a coping mechanism when confronted with shocking and unexpected threats from the world. This also appears to contribute to the participants' increased religious commitments.

2.2. Understanding the Transient and Mortal Nature of the World

Death, as an unavoidable aspect of existence, is a phenomenon that all individuals contemplate at some point in their lives, and it also provokes thoughts on the transience and mortality nature of the world (Park et al., 2021). Millions of people have died so far because of the COVID-19 pandemic; globally, over seven million people have passed away (World Health Organization, 2024). Almost everyone has experienced the loss of a loved one within their social, familial, or personal circles due to COVID-19. According to research findings of this current study, most of the respondents perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as an important reminder of the transient and mortal nature of existence—tenets that align with the teachings of Islam concerning the world. The increased significance that the participants attribute to religion in their lives seems to be significantly influenced by their heightened awareness of the transient and mortal nature of this world, which has been

brought about by COVID-19.

Along with the pandemic period, I realized that life in this world is very transient and that our lives can suddenly face a completely different situation. I also realized that we couldn't do anything about it, that we were very helpless. ... I can say that instead of always being attached to the world and tending to live for worldly things, there has been a positive change in my life, such as thinking a little more about the other world and living our lives in this world within that framework. I realized that the world is not a place to be overly dependent on. We saw that many people lost their lives in the pandemic. Now, I have started to allocate a more careful place to my religious life. I started to say my prayers more often. I started to do my supererogatory prayers more. I have become more grateful for all the opportunities I have. I started to live by integrating my world more with the afterlife. In short, I have failed to fulfil my religious responsibilities fully, and now I am looking for ways to compensate. (P-5).

When I experienced COVID-19 in my family, I started to have a greater fear of death. As I experienced this, I began to understand that this world was transient, and that real life was in the afterlife. So, I realized how many things in this world we should not postpone, such as my religious practices. I realized that this world is mortal, and the other world is more important. (P-7).

COVID-19 caused complete psychological trauma for myself and my family. It was a very difficult process. It was a period that made people regret living and made our lives miserable. When I first got it, I had a serious psychological breakdown. ... The thing I learned most from COVID-19 was to understand the value of the endless blessings God has given us. I realized that worldly life is temporary, and the afterlife is a reality. Now I started to understand life a little more. I think this world is empty (transient). In the past, I had a more flexible religious life. I now have a more conscious religious life. I appreciate God's blessings more. I try to include prayer in every part of my life. I have taken my relationship with the Creator to a completely new level. Now I have a more religiously sensitive and organised life. I am more grateful for everything God has given me. (P-3).

The participants seem to perceive COVID-19 and death as genuine reminders of the transitory and mortal essence of this world, which appears to provoke them to ponder the true purpose of their lives in this world. These interpretations of the participants seem to inevitably prompt them to consider the afterlife and religion; consequently, they appear to have intensified their religious devotions and practices. Although several participants recounted how the COVID-19 pandemic and death made them aware of the transient and mortal nature of this world, P-6's experience appears as if it deserves further examination.

P-6 is a 42-year-old housewife and the mother of three daughters, the youngest of whom is 14 years old. She disclosed that she and her husband have long desired to have a son and have been praying to God for this purpose. When she finally got pregnant in 2020, she was infected with COVID-19 at the same time. Sadly, because of the virus, she lost her unborn baby. She explained her quarantine days in her house and then shared the changes in her life:

I mean, one thinks about everything between those four walls. For example, I realized that this world is empty—that is, nothing is worth anything. So it was like the end of everything between those four walls. When I lost my baby and had severe COVID-19, I felt like everything had come to an end. I felt like everything, this world was temporary. ... Some of our relatives and neighbours lost their lives. The more I saw them, the more grateful I became, of course. So I thanked God, as we are still alive. I mean, this is a lesson for us. I told my children, my husband, and all of my family. Nothing is worth anything because this life is a test. Now I have become more aware of some things. I did not perform prayers continuously. I pay much more attention now. ... The fear of death seriously changed my perspective on life and religion. I'm turning more to my God. I'm more focused. I started to fulfil my religious duties more properly. The more I do these, the better I feel. I don't want to die in debt to God. ... In my family life, for example, I have three daughters, so this transformation I experienced also affected my children. They did not use to wear headscarf. I warned them about the headscarf, and they paid attention. Thank God, now all three of them have headscarves, and they respect their parents. (P-6).

P-6 indicated that the difficulties she faced during the pandemic had a significant psychological impact on her, and she sought solace primarily in her religious beliefs. Confronting death and the loss of her unborn child due to the virus appears to have had a profound impact on her life, worldview, beliefs regarding the transient nature and mortality of existence, religious convictions, and more. However, P-6 appears to have managed this turbulent period by applying positive religious coping mechanisms. Moreover, she seems to have developed a stronger religious conviction that influences both her personal life and her familial relationships.

According to the participants' narratives in the research, almost all of them seem to have employed positive religious coping mechanisms towards the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They stressed that they understood more comprehensively the transient and mortal nature of the world, human helplessness, and the power of God, which appeared to lead to an inclination to strengthen their faith. They seem to have successfully employed positive religious coping mechanisms for the challenges they faced due to COVID-19 and death anxiety.

2.3. Fear of Dying as a Sinner and Considering Their Rest of the Lives as a Second Chance by Given God

Fear of dying as a sinner (including failure to fully fulfil religious responsibilities) may refer to anxiety over the possibility of facing punishment or negative consequences in the afterlife due to perceived sins or transgressions. Failure to complete all required religious obligations before death may also create a fear of dying as a sinner. The Quran has many verses that describe those who wish to return to earth on the Day of Judgement (or when death arrives) to perform virtuous deeds. For instance,

"If you could but see when they are made to stand before the Fire and will say, 'Oh, would that we could be returned [to life on earth] and not deny the signs of our Lord and be among the believers.' But what they concealed before has [now] appeared to them. And even if they were returned, they would return to that which they were forbidden; and indeed, they are liars." (surahquran.com, al- Anam 6/27-28).

"[For such is the state of the disbelievers], until, when death comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, send me back. That I might do righteousness in that which I left behind.' No! It is only a word he is saying; and behind them is a barrier until the Day they are resurrected." (surahquran.com, al- Muminun 23/99-100).

These divine warnings of the Quran seem to be reflected among the participants in the research, who tend to consider their lives after COVID-19 as a second chance to perform righteousness deeds. Several respondents underscored the sense that after having severe COVID-19 and fear of death, they were allowed to have an opportunity to fulfil their religious obligations once more; consequently, it appears that their religious devotions and practices increased.

While we are running around in the rush of the world, we have actually forgotten death. This disease has reminded us of our helplessness as human beings, reminded us of death, that this world is not eternal, and that we must be prepared for anything, at any time, in any way. ... I felt regret. Because I lived my past periods in vain. This is because I couldn't do my prayers completely. Now, since I came face to face with death, it was like... God gave me another opportunity, and I started to make sense of it like, "I won't be like this in my next life." (P-9).

When I got COVID-19, I was very scared, and I was alone in the room. I was afraid, God forbid, that I might have died. I thought I was unprepared for the afterlife. I was not a person who prayed enough. Now I do it as much as I can, but at that time, I thought I wasn't ready. I always had things to do in the world, but I wasn't ready to die. (P-7).

I thought I would die suddenly, unprepared for the afterlife. These were the first things that came to mind, and fear gripped me. Now, I am more conscious of my religion, and I try to prepare more properly for the afterlife (P-10).

I was thinking in my mind that I regretted my mistakes and that if I got better from now on, I would become a more responsible person and a more religious person. It was as if I were talking to God silently and deeply and making a promise to Him. I was kind of asking Him for a second chance. ... Now I pay more attention to my prayers and try to comply with my religious duties. I try to pray more and give alms. I am trying to make my contact with God more regularly and consciously. I try to keep the afterlife in mind all the time. I always try to keep in mind that death is very close to me. (P-4).

While death is a constant potential for humans, COVID-19 seems to have instilled a worldwide fear of death due to its rapid transmission and high mortality rate. Death anxiety is certainly a highly probable outcome for individuals who suffer from severe COVID-19. All the participants indicated that they had a fear of death, more or less, during the pandemic period. Several participants highlighted that surviving COVID-19 seemed like a second opportunity to properly prepare for death from a religious perspective. The participants' beliefs may suggest that they hold a firm conviction in the existence of an afterlife and the Day of Judgement. Consequently, their strong intention to properly prepare themselves for death (in their life after COVID-19) appears to have increased their religious commitment and practices.

3. DISCUSSION

This current study investigated the ways in which COVID-19 influences the religious lives of individuals who have experienced severe COVID-19 combined with fear of death in Turkey. The research, in general, sought answers to the question of how the

severe COVID-19 pandemic and death anxiety have changed people's religious lives, specifically in the post-COVID-19 period. The findings of the research revealed that severe COVID-19 and death anxiety seem to strengthen religious commitments and increase religious involvement among the participants. According to research findings, due to the severe COVID-19 and death anxiety, the participants seem to have had a better understanding of human helplessness, the power of God, and deepened their faith; have gained a more robust understanding of the transient and mortal nature of the world; and have experienced a fear of dying as a sinner and considered the rest of their lives as a second chance given by God. It appears that all three of these factors inevitably contribute to the strengthening of religious commitments and a rise in religious sense among participants.

Based on the research findings, it appears that almost all of the participants utilised positive religious coping strategies in response to the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They emphasized that their increased understanding of the world's temporary nature and mortality, humanity's helplessness, and God's omnipotence appeared to inspire them to bolster their faith. Positive religious coping mechanisms appeared to have been effectively implemented in response to the challenges they encountered as a result of COVID-19 and death anxiety. The results of this investigation align with prior research which revealed that the participants depended extensively on positive religious coping mechanisms in response to the adverse effects of COVID-19 (e.g., Kalgi, 2021; Eryiğit and Başak, 2021; Kızılgöçer and Yıldırım, 2022; Bulut and Koç, 2022; Iyer et al., 2024; Bahal, 2023). Similarly, the research findings are consistent with the study of Rigoli (2021), which asserts that the variety in religious commitments of people might lead to different interpretations of COVID-19, such as considering the pandemic as a form of divine punishment or a test from God. Most of the participants in the present study appear to perceive COVID-19 as a test from God, wherein God tests people's beliefs. Consistent with prior research, which asserted that death anxiety promotes adherence to an individual's pre-existing belief system, the results of this study demonstrated that participants experience a reinforcement of their current religious commitments (Rigoli, 2021). However, it should be clarified that although 2 participants (P-1, P-9) identified themselves as not too religious, it does not mean that they are non-believers (Rigoli's (2021) study discusses the "non-believers"). Moreover, the purpose of the present study was to provide a comprehensive explanation of the underlying factors of people's strengthening religious behaviours and to demonstrate why and how individuals have experienced religious life changes because of COVID-19 and death anxiety. This may be considered as one of the genuine contributions of the study to the literature.

In a more general perspective, when combined with the outcomes of the previous studies and the findings of the current research, it could be interpreted that religion seems to have played a very crucial role in the whole COVID-19 pandemic period. First, religion emerged as a very confident actor to explain and respond to the chaotic situation in the first period of COVID-19, while modern health systems failed to successfully respond, which reaffirmed the powerful ability of religion in societies to respond to crises. Second, since the beginning of the pandemic, religion has served as a strong coping mechanism for individuals to manage the negative impacts of COVID-19, such as for those who experienced severe COVID-19, loss of loved ones, or mental health issues. Last, in the post-pandemic period, religion seems to have strengthened its position in societies due to the crucial role it played during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had extensive implications on a worldwide level. Religion has become a powerful coping technique utilized by many individuals worldwide amongst the turbulent conditions of the epidemic. Numerous studies have been undertaken to explore the correlation between religion and COVID-19. This research examined the effects of severe COVID-19 and death anxiety on the religious lives of individuals residing in Turkey. In general, the research aimed to provide responses to the question of how death anxiety and the severe COVID-19 pandemic have affected the religious lives of individuals, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era.

According to the research findings, almost all of the individuals employed positive religious coping methods to deal with the negative consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic. The detailed data analyses revealed that due to the severe COVID-19 and death anxiety, the participants seem to have had a better understanding of human helplessness, the power of God, and deepened their faith; they also have gained a more robust understanding of the transient and mortal nature of the world; and have experienced a fear of dying as a sinner and considered the rest of their lives as a second chance given by God. All three of these elements seem to naturally contribute to the reinforcement of religious commitments and an increase in religious awareness among participants.

This research has some significant implications. The research findings may provide valuable insights for policymakers, social workers, health professionals, public services, and healthcare practitioners. These individuals can utilize the research findings to develop more focused and efficient policies to address crises caused by natural disasters, including but not limited to COVID-19 and pandemics, floods, earthquakes, landslides, and others. The tendency of individuals to enhance their religious dedication following crises or natural disasters should be considered in the recovery process. This study, of course, has some limitations. The interpretations in this article are limited to the participants and cannot be generalized. This study focuses on adults in Turkey only, thus its findings may not be applicable to people in other countries. However, further studies could be conducted in other nations and made comparisons with Turkey.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Kovid-19 salgınının küresel ölçekte geniş çaplı etkileri olmuştur. Kovid-19 salgınının ilk dalgası dünya çapında çok büyük bir etki yaratmış, virüs dünya genelinde hızla yayılmış ve virüs kaynaklı ölümlerin sayısında hızlı bir artış yaşanmıştır. Din, Kovid-19 salgının kaotik atmosferinde dünya genelinde pek çok insanın başvurduğu güçlü bir başa çıkma mekanizması olarak kendini göstermiştir ve din ile Kovid-19 arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaya yönelik çok sayıda akademik çalışma yapılmıştır. Ancak Kovid-19 ve ölüm kaygısının, bireylerin dine dair bakış açılarını ve dini pratiklerini Kovid-19 sonrası dönemde nasıl etkilediğini inceleyen çalışmalar yetersiz kalmıştır. Bu fenomenolojik çalışma, Türkiye'de ağır Kovid-19 geçiren ve ölüm korkusu yaşayan bireylerin dini yaşamlarının Kovid-19 sonrası süreçte nasıl etkilendiğini araştırmaktadır.

Bentzen, Kovid-19 salgınının insanların dua etme sıklığında önemli bir artışa yol açtığını, küresel nüfusun yarısından fazlasının virüsün yayılmasının durması ve pandeminin olumsuz etkilerini yönetmek için dua ettiğini belirtmektedir. Pandemi sırasında dini uygulamalara katılmak bir kontrol duygusu sağladığı, mevcut durumu anlamaya yardımcı olduğu ve en önemlisi de insanlara umut verdiği için Kovid-19 salgını nedeniyle birçok kişi inanç ve duaya daha açık hale gelmiştir. Dindarlık, bireylere krizlerle baş etme stratejileri sunarak üstesinden gelmelerine yardımcı olma potansiyeline sahiptir. Örneğin, İngiltere'de yapılan araştırmalar, özellikle dünya çapındaki diğer ülkelerle karşılaştırıldığında çok dindar olmayan İngiltere gibi bir toplumda, dindar kişilerin salgın ve karantina koşulları sırasında daha güçlü başa çıkma mekanizmalarına sahip olduğunu göstermiştir. Ancak Kovid-19'un insanlar arasında dinin geçerliğini kalıcı olarak mı artırdığı yoksa bunun salgının ilk şok edici etkileriyle başa çıkmak için verilen kısa vadeli bir tepki mi olduğu ise hâlâ belirsizliğini korumaktadır. Bu sebeple din, Kovid-19 salgını sırasında sağlam ve etkili bir başa çıkma mekanizması olarak işlev görmüş olsa da pandemi öncesinde, sırasında ve sonrasında bireylerin yaşamlarında dinin rolünün daha kapsamlı bir analizine ihtiyaç vardır.

Kovid-19 salgını dünya çapında bireylerin fiziksel ve psikolojik sağlığı üzerinde derin bir etki yaratmış ve ölüm korkusunun artmasına yol açmıştır. Ölüm kaygısı, özellikle mevcut Kovid-19 salgını sırasında da görüldüğü gibi, insan davranışının önemli bir motivasyon kaynağı olup, bilinçli olarak farkında olmasalar bile insanların davranışlarını etkileyen, ölümün sürekli bir hatırlatıcısı olarak görülebilir. Türkiye'de yapılan bir araştırmada, Kovid-19 hastalarının dini başa çıkma düzeylerinin yüksek olduğu, olumlu ve olumsuz başa çıkma mekanizmalarını kullanmalarıyla bağlantılı olarak hastaların ölüm kaygı düzeylerinin de arttığı ortaya konulmuştur. Öte yandan ölüm kaygısı, dindar insanların dini bağlılığını artırmaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu mevcut çalışma, Türkiye'de şiddetli Kovid-19 geçiren ve ölüm kaygısı yaşayan bireylerin dini yaşamlarını, Kovid-19'un nasıl etkilediğini araştırmaktadır ki bu, çalışmanın literatüre en özgün katkılarından biridir.

Bu çalışma, bireylerin yaşam deneyimlerine odaklanarak, Kovid-19 ve ölüm korkusu nedeniyle dini yaşamlarının nasıl değiştiğini, önceki ve mevcut dini yaşamlarını nasıl değerlendirdiklerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu araştırmada, şiddetli Kovid-19 geçirmiş olan ve ölüm korkusu yaşamış bireylerin deneyimlerini araştırmak amacıyla nitel araştırma yöntemleri ve fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. Bu bağlamda araştırma kapsamında beşi kadın, beşi erkek olmak üzere on katılımcıyla derinlemesine mülakat yapılmıştır.

Araştırmanın bulguları, şiddetli Kovid-19 ve ölüm kaygısının katılımcıların dini bağlılıkları güçlendirdiğini ve dini pratikleri yapma oranını artırdığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Araştırma bulgularına göre, şiddetli Kovid-19 ve ölüm kaygısı nedeniyle katılımcılar, (a) insanın acizliğini ve Allah'ın gücünü daha iyi anlamış ve imanlarını derinleştirme eğilimi sergilemiş görünmektedirler; (b) dünyanın geçici ve ölümlü doğasına dair daha sağlam bir anlayışa ulaşmış gözükmektedirler; ve (c) Kovid-19 geçirdikleri dönemde günahkâr olarak ölme korkusu yaşadıkları için hayatlarının geri kalanını Allah'ın verdiği ikinci bir şans olarak görme eğilimi sergilemişlerdir. Bu faktörlerin her üçünün de beklendiği üzere katılımcıların dini bağlılıkların güçlenmesine ve dini uygulama ve ritüellerinin artmasına katkıda bulunduğu görülmektedir.

Daha genel bir perspektiften bakıldığında ise, önceki çalışmaların sonuçları ve mevcut bu araştırmanın bulguları birleştirildiğinde, dinin tüm Kovid-19 salgını döneminde çok önemli bir rol oynadığı yorumu yapılabilir. İlk olarak, modern sağlık sistemleri ilk etapta pandemiye başarılı bir şekilde yanıt vermekte başarısız olurken, din, Kovid-19'un ilk dönemindeki kaotik durumu açıklama ve yanıt verme konusunda kendinden emin bir aktör olarak ortaya çıkmıştır ki bu, toplumlarda dinin, kriz durumlarına hızlı yanıt verme konusundaki güçlü yeteneğini yeniden doğrulamıştır. İkinci olarak, salgının başlangıcından bu yana din, ağır Kovid-19 deneyimi yaşayanlar, sevdiklerini kaybedenler veya ruhsal sıkıntı yaşayan bireyler için Kovid-19'un olumsuz etkilerini yönetmede güçlü bir başa çıkma mekanizması olarak hizmet etmiştir. Son olarak, salgın sonrası dönemde din, salgın sırasında oynadığı önemli rol nedeniyle toplumlardaki konumunu daha da güçlendirmiş görünmektedir.