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To what extent has religion been affected by Covid-19?

While the entire world came to a stop during the pandemic, religious belief and faith heightened through believers and non-believers. Covid-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China in 2019, negatively affecting the whole world. The economy of the UK was hugely impacted because of the spreading disease; the country-wide lockdown causing a downfall in a mass number of companies, leading to one in four people being on furlough at some point during the pandemic.¹ In addition, a quick incline of mental health issues arose, including anxiety. This anxiety led to the increase of religious belief as people sought religion as a safety net, worried for their health as well as their jobs. Believers had to adapt to this new way of living as their normal worshipping usually involved praying in a specific building to show their faith, such as a church or temple. However, this did not stray them away from religion but rather strengthen their belief, encouraging them to keep loyalty to God while staying within Government guidelines. This essay will firstly discuss the extent religion has been affected by Covid-19 and the changes that religious believers in the UK had to face due to it. It then will argue whether the pandemic has motivated a rise in faith; and subsequently it will explore the variety of affects the pandemic has had on universal religion and whether particular faiths had more trouble in keeping their devotion.

It can be argued that religion had been negatively affected by the coronavirus as, around March of 2020, many religious institutions were closed due to the pandemic: The Church of England, temples and synagogues closed while mosques cancelled their Friday prayers. As expected, this led to an uproar as believers felt immoral for not carrying on their regular religious procedures; people were desperate for comfort, hurt at the loss of routine in their worship. Priests around the country had to discover new ways to seek out the worshippers to ensure their faith in religion and therefore religion turned to the internet, the new way of living. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, broadcasted an Easter Sunday service from his own home as he urged people to stay within Government Guidelines despite their need for prayer. It was broadcasted on the news as well as the Church of England Facebook page, trying to make it as accessible as possible. Welby stated "But this is not about us, it's about example and service. Church buildings are closed – and I love the church buildings – but the church is emphatically not closed, it's probably busier than it's ever been."² There was a substantial amount of people watching the sermons that were given virtually, proving that although the churches were closed, faith had not yet disappeared. This implies that while the religious institutions closing was a hard change for worshippers, the religious leaders managed to turn it around and keep morals high. This won't stay a temporary change either: during Covid-19, many priests and clergies are considering keeping zoom broadcasts post-pandemic. Perhaps not replacing real life services but combining the two for people who can't attend the sermon in person. A parish priest in Scotland spoke about his first-hand experiences and answered on whether he would continue live streaming with "you start to think well, if we're having a service with people present at 10 and then a service on Zoom at 11, couldn't we sort of combine the two?". In my opinion, this only proves that the pandemic really pushed people to prove their loyalty to God

1

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/anoverviewofworkerswhowerefurloughedintheuk/october2021>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/03/keeping-the-faith-religion-in-the-uk-amid-coronavirus>

which, in the end, actually heightened their faith all together and consequently positively affected religion.³

Further proving this, during the pandemic, a surge of searches for 'prayer' was found to be record breaking. In March of 2020, the searches were found to be 50% higher than what they were during the previous month, before the flood of panic that came when it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11th.⁴ Professor Bentzen found this was a global discovery through masses of data, the escalation of hysteria and alarm being a worldwide sensation but especially within poorer countries like Nigeria and Columbia because of their lack of adequate healthcare, putting them more at risk for serious consequences if diagnosed with Covid-19 compared to first world countries like England or the USA.⁵ This could suggest that the rise in interest of religion shows how detrimental the pandemic was for mental health as it led to people putting religion on a metaphorical pedestal, seeking condolence and protection through faith. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a positive for religious belief due to the rise in people turning to God for reassurance. In my opinion, this surge of searches proves an increase of religious believers and therefore demonstrates how positively covid-19 has affected religion.

The pandemic positively affected Islamic belief as Muslims turned to faith in times of need pre-pandemic, so it isn't too surprising that cultures within Islamic belief continue to do this through the pandemic. Muslims had to adjust to this new way of living too, suddenly being asked to avoid their traditional prayers and culture that were millenniums old. Their Friday prayers were cancelled by the mosques, they were recommended not to spend time with family they didn't live with and to not visit the elderly; this raised questions on how it could change Islamic faith. However, many Muslims mentioned enjoying this extra time spent at home as they had so much time to read the Quran and pray. They could also avoid the busyness of the crowds at the Mosque and could now spend their time on Allah rather than focusing on their overbearing anxiety caused by the pandemic. As well as this, there were more opportunities than usual to be charitable and perform Zakat. Another religion that didn't allow the pandemic to crush their faith is Buddhism. Since the appearance of the fast-spreading disease, Buddhism has inspired people to take up meditation to ease their 'coronavirus anxiety'; they have motivated the world to enter a spiritual world of mindfulness, stress reduction and joy. Buddhist leaders have also taken it upon themselves to create a range of ritual apotropaic to protect their fellow religious believers from the disease of Coronavirus. As a result, Coronavirus actually helped strengthen spirituality and faith instead of discouraging it. Faith has not only lifted in previous/current religious believers but people who had first believed themselves to be agnostic or even atheist. In my opinion, this proves that the pandemic has ultimately positively affected religion despite people's hesitant views of it.

Overall, it may be said that the pandemic has vastly affected the population of Earth, but it has not quite been a negative change. As previously stated, some religious leaders have allowed their temporary way of worship during the pandemic to bleed into their normal routine, recognising it can be a revolutionary way of veneration rather than something to leave in the past. Religion seems to

³ <https://libguides.ncl.ac.uk/c.php?g=683215&p=4884593>

(Bottom of the page, 'first-hand account, 25 August 2020')

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/03/keeping-the-faith-religion-in-the-uk-amid-coronavirus>

⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/pandemic-prompts-surge-interest-prayer-google-data-show/#:~:text=The%20coronavirus%20pandemic%20has%20resulted,hopelessness%2C%20new%20research%20has%20found.>

have only established a stronger faith and ethos; research has shown that religions such as Christianity and followers of Islam used Covid-19 as motivation to find new ways of faith, new ways to prove their belief in their God. Religion has been affected greatly due to Coronavirus as proven - religious institutions closing which supplies no safe space to pray and worship as well as disconnecting people from their age-old traditions. There is a high expectation for religious believers to continue their faith throughout their struggles/obstacles and therefore the pandemic strengthened a multitude of people's faith with the incentive to go out of their way and find new ways to support their reverence.