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### The Theological Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic among Theology Students: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** In this qualitative study, we will examine the theological challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic among the graduate students of theology in a university in Tehran. This pandemic has been a potential source of theological challenges. The present study aims to identify these potential challenges and their responses from the perspective of our respondents. The results of this study show that this group of students has not faced an insurmountable challenge in this field due to their religious education and also the degree of their religiosity, and have provided a theological explanation of this pandemic following their background beliefs. We have classified their responses and the way they have tackled this pandemic.

**Key words:** Covid-19 pandemic, theological challenge, Divine attributes, Divine wisdom

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### Богословские проблемы пандемии Covid-19 среди студентов-теологов: пример из практики

**Аннотация.** В данном исследовании рассматриваются богословские проблемы пандемии Covid-19 среди аспирантов богословия в университете в Тегеране. Пандемия стала потенциальным источником богословских проблем. Настоящее исследование направлено на выявление потенциальных проблем и ответов на них с точки зрения наших респондентов. Результаты данного исследования показывают, что рассмотренная группа студентов не столкнулась с непреодолимыми проблемами в этой области из-за своего религиозного образования, а также уровня своей религиозности, и дала теологическое объяснение пандемии, исходя из собственных религиозных убеждений. Мы классифицировали их ответы и способы, с помощью которых они справились с пандемией.

**Ключевые слова:** пандемия Covid-19, богословский вызов, божественные атрибуты, божественная мудрость



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### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic can be studied from different perspectives, such as medical and health sciences, policymaking, social relations, psychology, and theology. In this study, we will examine the pandemic from a theological perspective. This pandemic can pose theological challenges, including in the field of evils, justice, and Divine mercy. Given the religious nature of the Iranian society, deep religious challenges are expected to arise as a result of this pandemic. The purpose of this study is to investigate these potential challenges and our participants' reactions to them.

The first city in Iran wherein the pandemic was reported was Qom, the most religious city in Iran and the cradle of religious scholars and authority. There were many criticisms in the media for not restricting the travel of foreign religious students to this city. There were many oppositions to the religious and pilgrimage restrictions by religious extremists in the city. In their opinion, visiting these places can control and eliminate this disease<sup>2</sup>.

Given the widespread presence of religious authorities and scholars in this city, the occurrence and spread of this pandemic could pose profound theological challenges. Throughout the Shiite history, there has been a lot of narrations about the role of the ulema and the effect of their prayers in healing the sick and removing plights such as droughts. The question may arise why this time our prayers and the prayers of great religious scholars have not been answered? Or if they have been answered, what are their effects?

On the other hand, natural evil has been one of the most controversial topics in theology and has attracted the attention of theists and atheists. Atheists have raised the issue of evil as one of the strongest challenges against the existence of God and Divine attributes such as knowledge, mercy, and mercy, and theists have sought to provide answers in defense [Plantinga, 1977]. As we will see, this issue has been one of the subjects that have occupied the minds of our respondents.

Most of the studies conducted so far on the Covid-19 pandemic and religion have concerned the impact of restrictions imposed on the performance of religious rites and the reaction of religious communities to these restrictions, and their role in controlling or intensifying this pandemic [Dein, 2021, 7].

Excessive attention to the examination of such restrictions on religious rites may yield a superficial understanding of the role of religion in this pandemic. Such studies may not consider the profound role of religion and faith in dealing with this issue. On the contrary, by empathetically studying the responses of religious people to this pandemic, a deeper understanding of the role of religion in the face of this pandemic can be achieved. This study is a step in this direction.

In this article, we intend to understand how some practicing and believing students who are familiar with the theological issues, which are potentially subject to natural challenges, perceive this pandemic. Given that pandemics have historically been understood both naturally and religiously [Dein, 2021, 6], in this article we want to examine how this pandemic is perceived by this group of students. Are their religious concepts and frameworks sufficient for a religious understanding of this pandemic? Have they been able to explain this pandemic in line with their religious beliefs, or have they faced a serious challenge in this regard?

#### **Literature Review**

Zamirrad (2020) believes that this pandemic has been more than a health challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran and has led to a legitimacy crisis for the country and marginalized religion. The government has been forced to close mosques and shrines and impose restrictions on religious rites. The closure of the holy shrines, which have been considered a safe and healing place for centuries, in her view, has meant the demystification of the long-held Shiite beliefs.

In contrast, Mohammad Ali Fardin (2020) has reviewed the psychological functions of religion and its role in critical situations. He believes that religion has the capacity to be used in these situations to help the mental health of human beings. He has reviewed 11 articles about the role of religion in improving mental health during crises.

An article on the effect of this pandemic on the practice of religious denominations in Poland shows that although churches have reduced their religious activities, they have kept in touch with their followers using modern technologies and have not backed down from their religious principles [Sulkowski, Ignatowski, 2020].

A survey of countries with advanced economies shows that in almost all of these countries, those who believed that religion was important in their lives were more likely to say that as a result of the pandemic, their own and their countrymen's faith was strengthened [Pew, 2021].

In the United States, approximately 28% of those interviewed in this study stated that their faith has strengthened as a result of the pandemic. The same percentage said that

the faith of their compatriots has strengthened. In Italy, 15% of the respondents responded that their faith has strengthened as a result of this pandemic, and 19% responded that the faith of their compatriots has strengthened. This number was 3% and 15% for Sweden, respectively [Pew, 2021].

According to Kowalczyk et al. [Kowalczyk, 2020, 2674], in times of illness and suffering, even in the modern European society, where a kind of secularism and indifference to religion prevails, major changes in favor of religion and spirituality occur. In these circumstances, religious faith contributes significantly to coping with and conferring meaning on these events. Faith or spirituality, generally, helps people overcome the intellectual crises that occur in these situations. In their study of 327 people in Poland, 67% of respondents said that faith or spirituality was an important issue for them in the face of this pandemic.

A survey conducted by the Iranian Student Opinion Polling Center (ISPA) about the status of religiosity during the Corona outbreak in April 2020 shows that 47% of the respondents said that religion has become more important for them during this period. 48.4% reported no change in this regard, and 3.5% said that religion has become less important for them than before [Chitsaze Qomi, 2020, 160].

Chitsaze Qomi (2020) in his article *Corona and Religiosity: Challenges and Analyzes*, has examined the challenges posed by the prevalence of Corona in the field of religion and religiosity. The closure of mass services and religious sites has been cited as the most controversial effect of the Corona outbreak on the religious life of people.

In recent years, attention to the role of spirituality and faith in health has increased. Spirituality helps sick people cope with illness, recover after hospitalization, and gain a positive attitude in difficult times [Lunder et al., 2011]. In the discussion of palliative care, a great deal of attention has been paid to the role of spirituality [Vivat, 2008]. However, insufficient qualitative study has been conducted on the role of religion, faith, and spirituality in individuals in difficult socio-individual contexts associated with an pandemic. The occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic has paved the way for further studies in this area.

The present study is a qualitative case study for a deep understanding of the religious understanding and experience of theology students in a university in Tehran during this pandemic. The purpose is to examine whether these students according to their religious beliefs and teachings have faced any religious challenge in this pandemic; and if so, what answers have they provided for themselves? How did these students understand this pandemic? Is their explanation of this pandemic a religious explanation or a natural and secular one? And how has religion helped them explain and deal with this pandemic?

This group of students, as we know them, have a higher level of religiosity than other university students. Some of them have a record of seminary education or are seminarians. Thus, the study's population is a good example of how religiously educated people have faced this pandemic as a potential source of religious challenges. Obviously, we do not intend to generalize the research findings to all students of the University, but it seems that the results can be generalized to students or people with high religiosity and similar religious education, which, of course, requires further studies of this kind.

The reason for choosing this group of students is that religious challenges typically arise for those who believe in God. The reason for choosing theology students is that according to their educational background, they are more likely to face and engage with such challenges, and a kind of uniformity is created in the audience in terms of their educational background.

In this research, we used the qualitative phenomenological method to understand the attitude of the theology students towards this pandemic. We have made our best to avoid leading their thoughts to a specific answer. For this purpose, it was necessary to use open-ended questions. The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Allameh Tabataba'i University, with the approval number IR.ATU.REC.1400.008.

#### **Methodology**

In this study, the qualitative research method was employed using open questions. The research was conducted with a purposive sampling method until reaching theoretical saturation. With a survey of about 25 participants, we reached theoretical saturation;

however, we continued the survey up to 29 respondents. Due to the closure of the University and restrictions on communication with students, the surveys were conducted virtually.

The questionnaire was designed using the Parsa platform, which is supported by the IranDoc Organization<sup>3</sup> affiliated to the Ministry of Science of Iran, and its link was given to the students through virtual course groups. Before completing the questionnaire, the consent form was completed by the students and they were assured that their participation in this survey is voluntary, confidential, and without any effects on their educational process.

To assess the trustworthiness of the questionnaire, the research process, and the results, we used three of Croswell's eight evaluation criteria: peer review, member-checking, and external audits. According to Croswell (1998), any qualitative research should employ, at least, two of these eight procedures.

To assess the trustworthiness of the questionnaire, the questions were given to three disinterested university colleagues who were not involved in the research, and the questions were revised several times based on their feedback. Their main emphasis was to maintain our neutrality in the design of the questions and to avoid leading questions.

To maintain our neutrality, we even refrained from using the word religious or theological challenge, and simply asked the respondents if they were faced with any question in this pandemic. By doing so, we wanted to see if they have encountered any religious questions impromptu.

Conducting the test on the pilot group, we realized that religious questions were not their priority, and their minds were more engaged with medical and health policy issues. None of the respondents in the pilot group referred primarily to a religious question or challenge.

Therefore, we found it necessary to change the design of the questions to turn their minds to the subject of research while maintaining our neutrality. Thus, we asked the respondents if they faced a religious question in this pandemic; and in the next question, we asked, if any answer has come to their minds.

Therefore, we found it necessary to make the audience aware of the research questions without directing them to a specific answer. We also avoided using the term "challenge" because of its negative connotation and used the word "question", instead.

The new questionnaire was presented to external experts and the pilot group before being used in the main group. After receiving their approval, it was sent to the main group. The questionnaire consisted of six open-ended questions. In the first question, we asked about their major. In the second question, we asked about the year they entered the university, and in the third question, we asked about their earlier educational background. In the fourth question, we asked them if they or their relatives were infected with this virus, and if so how severe it has been. With this question, we wanted to assess the extent of their engagement with this disease. In the fifth question, we asked about their religious questions, and in the sixth question, we asked about the answers that came to their minds in the face of this pandemic. We avoided asking about their religious beliefs and the degree of their religiosity, as these are sensitive issues and directly asking about them might not produce reliable responses. However, due to our prolonged engagement with them, we know that they are more religious than other students of the University, and have chosen this discipline for religious causes.

After collecting the answers of the 29 respondents, we coded them. The coding process was performed by the three collaborating researchers separately and then was agreed on a single pattern presented in the flowcharts below. The coding results along with the answers were given to 3 respondents as well as to two external colleagues for validation and were confirmed by them with some minor changes.

### **Findings**

We analyzed the resulting data and performed open and axial coding on them. We analyzed the results in three steps and extracted the codes, categories, and themes. Before presenting the results of the analysis, let us mention some of the participants' answers.

Respondent A had faced with the following religious question: "What is the wisdom of this disease and why did not God show mercy to Islam, so that the Muslim countries suffer less to make non-Muslims interested in Islam?"



In response to this question, the respondent has answered: “none of God’s deeds is without a wisdom, and if He had wished, He could eradicate this virus, but this virus has had a wisdom, including to make people more aware of God and express their helplessness to Him”.

Respondent B has raised the question: “What will happen in the end?” And he has given the following answer: “My personal opinion is that everything is under the command of God, and if human factors play a role in it, it is God who finally governs it”.

Respondent C asked, “I feel it’s like a multi-unknown equation. It’s very strange to me. Yes, I studied Islamic philosophy about the issue of evils”. And he has given the following answer: “Yes, if we consider this disease as a relative evil, it has caused the flourishing of talents and scientific development of human beings”.

Respondent D asked, “Despite all this progress and science and technology, why do not we still have a solution to prevent this pandemic? Has this made people more inclined to pray and closer to God, or has it taken them away from these inclinations?”.

In response to this question, he said: “I came to the answer that science and religion are not in opposition to each other, and they progress in parallel with each other; thus there definitely will be a way for eradicating the virus”.

The results of the coding and qualitative analysis process are presented in the following flowcharts (Figs. 1–3).

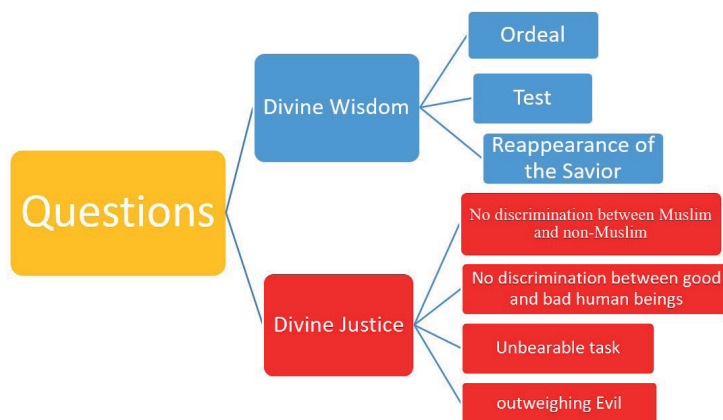


Fig. 1. Flowchart of Religious Questions.

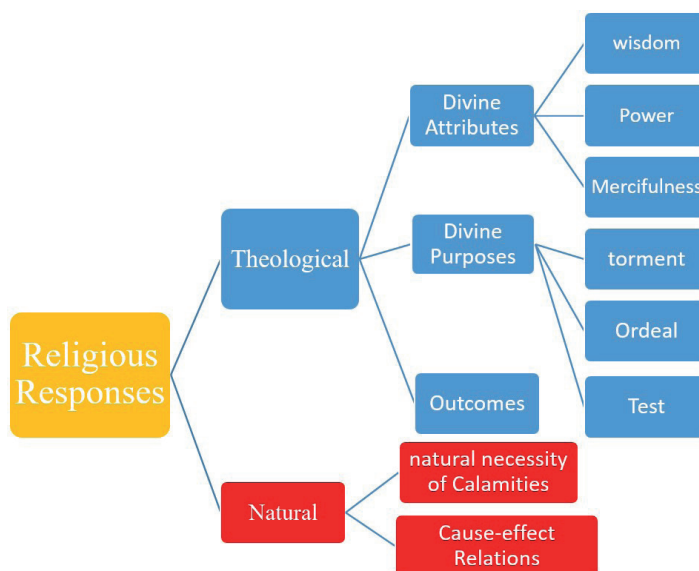


Fig. 2. Flowchart of Religious Responses.

**Analysis and interpretation of the results**

The coding of the questions shows that these questions can be organized around two main themes: Divine wisdom and Divine justice. In other words, the questions posed by this pandemic for our respondents have been mainly about Divine wisdom and justice.

Questions such as the following can be placed in these two themes: What is the wisdom of this disease? Is it a test for believers? Is it an ordeal for all people? Does it pave the way for the reappearance of the savior? Is it a sign of the imminent emerging of the savior? Is this pandemic compatible with Divine justice? Why did not God make any difference between Muslims and non-Muslims and between good and bad people, and all of them were tarred with the same brush? What God has burdened people with an unbearable task? And does not the evil of this pandemic outweigh its good? Therefore, the two Divine attributes of wisdom and justice are the two main themes of the questions.

The Analysis of the participants' responses shows two approaches: the theological approach and the natural approach. The theological approach is employed much more than the natural approach. The pandemic in the theological approach is attributed to God, and in the natural approach to natural causes. The natural approach has been taken by a very small number of respondents. There was no difference between the responses of the students who had a direct engagement with the disease, i.e. they or their close relatives were inflicted with the disease, and those who did not. We also did not notice any difference in responses between different disciplines of theology.

The three main themes in the theological approach are the Divine attributes, the Divine purposes, and the outcomes. All theological answers can be placed under these three main themes. Divine attributes include the categories of Divine wisdom, Divine power, and Divine mercy. This shows, although respondents faced questions about Divine wisdom and justice, they openly invoked one of the attributes of God, i.e. wisdom, power, and mercy, and interpreted this pandemic in terms of these attributes. This means that, in their view, this pandemic surely has a wisdom, God has the power to control, and is not in conflict with Divine mercy.

The theme of the Divine purposes includes categories such as torment, test, and ordeal. God's purpose in this pandemic has been to torment sinners, and test and improve the sinless.

As the flowchart above shows, the largest amount of responses is devoted to the outcomes. The theme of the outcomes includes moral, insights, and civilizational results. The moral outcomes include rectification, improvement, gratitude, endurance, appeal to God and Imams, and repentance. Many respondents have pointed out that this pandemic has led to the rectification of sinful human beings, the improvement of good human beings, and a strengthened sense of gratitude towards God for His blessings, repentance to God, and a stronger appeal to God and the infallible Imams.

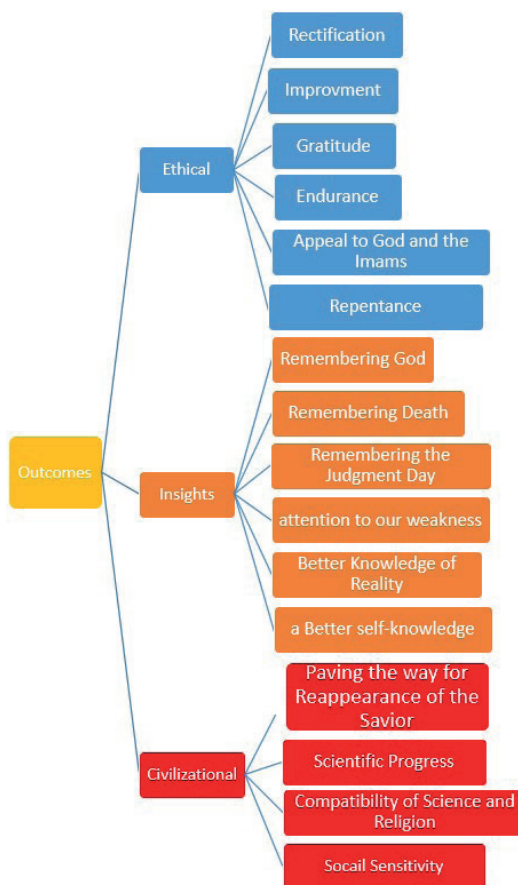


Fig. 3. Flowchart of Outcomes.

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The theme of insights includes all the categories related to the correction or improvement of our attention; such as remembering God, remembering death, remembering the Judgment Day, paying attention to one's weakness, paying more serious attention to reality, and better self-knowledge.

The civilizational theme includes items with social and institutional consequences, issues such as paving the way for the emergence of the final Imam, the compatibility of science and religion, scientific growth, and social sensitivity. Several respondents considered this pandemic as a sign of the imminent advent of the savior. The growth of the medical sciences and the compatibility of religion and traditional medicine and modern medicine have also been among the topics mentioned by the respondents.

Social sensitivity or responsibility has been a recurrent item in the responses. Some respondents have related this pandemic with committing new sins in society and our indifference towards the prevalence of sins. One respondent has pointed to the hadith that when people commit new sins, God will punish them with new diseases. Not enjoining the good and forbidding the evil has been considered as a cause of this pandemic. A kind of collective and social responsibility opposed to modern individualism can be observed in these responses.

Appeal to the Divine wisdom and a purposeful view of the natural world have acted as explanatory and comforting factors for this group of students. The need for religious sensitivity against the spread of sins in society has been emphasized by them. According to them, indifference to sins in society and the spread of new sins in society have led to natural disasters such as this pandemic that do not discriminate between good and bad and affects everyone.

In the natural approach, this pandemic has been introduced as a natural phenomenon and a result of causal-effect relationships. This approach has been quite subsidiary to the theological approach. The major questions and answers that arose for the participants were theological. Testing human beings, the rectification of sinners, sensitivity to the prevalence of sins in society, the remembrance of the Day of Judgment, the remembrance of God, and attention to human weakness have been at the forefront of the theological issues.

The above analysis shows that the respondents have offered a dominantly theological explanation for this pandemic. The kind of questions and answers that arose for them has been theological. They have been able to provide such an explanation based on their beliefs and theological knowledge without being trapped in an intellectual conflict or crisis.

The students' questions and answers at the individual level show that there has been no respondent to face a theological question as a result of this pandemic without being able to provide a theological answer. In other words, the results show that the respondents did not face an unsolvable intellectual crisis. The intellectual and theological challenges raised by this pandemic have not been so devastating to disintegrate the cohesive intellectual apparatus of the respondents.

This theological explanation can be interpreted in the context of the consistency theory in cognitive psychology. According to this theory, individuals tend to reconcile their cognitions, and interpret seemingly existing contradictions in a way that does not disrupt their coherence. Festinger (1957) in his theory of cognitive dissonance has stated that inconsistency and contradiction between beliefs or behaviors cause psychological tensions, and lead people to change one of the conflicting elements to reduce this inconsistency or restore harmony.

We can see the same approach in the students' responses. Although the students encountered questions about Divine wisdom and justice, they still resorted to these religious concepts and were able to understand and explain the pandemic in line with their set of beliefs.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this pandemic has not been a secular phenomenon for this group of students due to their beliefs and educational background; rather, it has been understood in their theological framework, and even in some aspects, has strengthened their theological beliefs. For example, the need for more attention to God, death, and social sensitivity were among the consequences of this religious view.

### Conclusion

Using the qualitative method of phenomenology in the present study, we attempted to know how the theology students understand the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim was to see if these students faced a theological challenge as a result of this pandemic. And if so, what answers did they offer?

The analysis of the answers shows that the predominant approach of this group of students to this pandemic was theological. We divided the answers into three categories: the Divine attributes, the Divine purpose, and the outcomes. Divine attributes were divided into the three attributes of Divine wisdom, power, and mercy. The Divine purpose was explained in the form of categories such as testing, torment, and ordeal, and the outcomes in the form of theological categories such as the remembrance of God, the remembrance of death, attention to human weakness, appeal to God and Imams, and understanding the compatibility of religion and science, and a sign of the imminent reappearance of the savior.

The results of the present study show that the students have been able to respond to the intellectual challenges of the pandemic by relying on their theological concepts. Although the respondents were confronted with religious questions regarding, for instance, the pervasive nature of this pandemic, these challenges were answered based on their religious concepts and did not turn into a strident intellectual crisis.

The results of this study show that this pandemic, contrary to some theories that think it has promoted secularism, has been a theological phenomenon for believers, explained theologically, and in some cases even strengthened their beliefs. For example, it has encouraged religious sensitivity and the need for enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.

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<sup>2</sup> See: <https://bityl.co/6GKS>.

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