

The Role of Religious Faith in Protecting Against the Coronavirus

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Can religious faith make a difference in the lives of people at work during these anxious times of the COVID-19 pandemic? Not only in terms of reducing anxiety and fear, but also in terms of actually preventing the infection or, if infected, helping to ameliorate the symptoms and increase the likelihood of survival? Based on systematic research accumulated over the past half-century, the answer is a likely “yes” based on what we now know. This does not mean, however, that gathering together in large crowds and closed-in spaces during religious services will not put everyone at risk for contracting this novel coronavirus. Nor does it justify throwing caution to the wind. However, given the impact that a strong religious faith and active religious involvement has on immune function, religion can indeed make a difference. I briefly review that research here, having spent the past 35 years studying this topic with over 500 scientific peer-reviewed publications and more than 50 books on this or related topics. For those wishing to look up the scientific references for my review below, I encourage readers to retrieve the following publication: *Journal of Religion and Health*, May 14, 2020 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01035-2>).

The physiological basis by which religious involvement could affect susceptibility to the coronavirus virus is the impact that psychological stress or distress has on immune function. It is immune function that determines susceptibility to this virus (and all external invaders of any type that enter the body) and the consequences it may have. There is an enormous and growing body of systematic research demonstrating that religious involvement helps individuals to cope with life stressors (including the stress that the coronavirus is causing) and to recover from depression, anxiety, and other distressing emotions that are known to adversely affect immune function. Thus, it makes perfect logical sense that devout religious faith and active involvement in a religious community can help to strengthen immune function and thereby increase resistance to infection (and speed recovery for those who become infected). This does not mean that the religiously devout will not become infected nor does it mean that they will always recover from those infections, particularly deadly infections such as the one we are now facing. It does mean, however, that religious faith can help to reduce that infection risk and boosts the body’s ability to recover from it. What kind of religion? The answer is the “devout kind” that influences thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, resulting in a life that is centered on one’s religious faith. That is the kind of religious faith that makes a difference -- whether you are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist.

What exactly does the research examining the relationship between religiosity, immune system functioning, and susceptibility to infection actually show? As I indicated above, many systematic scientific studies show a positive relationship between religious involvement and healthy immune function. These studies have often been conducted among individuals with compromised immune systems, since most healthy individuals have a tremendous reserve in their immune functioning. This makes it difficult in observational studies to show an effect of psychosocial and behavioral factors on immunity. However,

among older adults (due to the senescence of the immune functions with aging), among those with infections that adversely affect immune function or indicate immune system susceptibility (e.g., HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and herpesvirus), and among those with certain types of cancer, positive effects of religious faith through effects have been identified, usually acting through psychosocial and behavioral pathways. Immune functions affected in this regard include concentration of pro-inflammatory cytokines, T cells, natural killer cell activity, and antibody levels in the blood or saliva. Likewise, among those with life-threatening infections, research has shown that concentration of viruses in blood is lower among those who are more religiously active. Even in healthy individuals, religious involvement may make a difference, as research for example on periodontal infections rates has shown. Finally, at least one randomized controlled trial, the gold standard of scientific research, has shown that spiritual interventions may positively impact immune functions among those with serious viral infections.

This research has been convincing enough for me as a clinician to recently prescribe not only anti-anxiety medications for those who come to see me with severe anxiety problems, but also along with the medication (for those who are religious), I've encouraged my patients to recite allowed Psalm 91 each time after immediately after taking their medication. In no fewer than three places does Psalm 91 talk about protection from pestilence or the plague, exactly what we are now facing:

Psalm 91

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”

Indeed, God is a refuge and fortress for those who believe. And many are needing that refuge now.