Article

'When the Waves Roll High': Religious Coping among the Amish and Mennonites during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Religious beliefs, practices, and social support facilitate coping with psychologically distressful events and circumstances. However, COVID-19 and governmental mandates for social distancing and isolation make in-person communal forms of religious coping difficult. While some congregations began holding virtual rituals, this was not an option for Amish and conservative Mennonite groups that restrict communication and media technologies as a religious sacrament. Governmental mandates placed a disproportionate burden on these groups whose members could not conduct rituals or interact virtually with other members and family. What religious coping strategies did the Amish and Mennonites use to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic given their restricted ability to participate in in-person rituals? We collected data from *The Budget* and *The Diary*, two Amish and Mennonite correspondence newspapers, which provide information on the experiences of community members. We content analyzed all entries from March 2020 to April 2020 and identified several themes related to religious coping focused on the positive benefits of the pandemic, specifically how it helps and reminds the Amish and Mennonites to refocus on the simple and important things in life, including God, spirituality, family, tradition, gardening, and other at-home hobbies, all of which reflect their religious commitment to a slower pace of life.

Keywords: religion; well-being; COVID-19; religious coping; Amish; Mennonite; pandemic

1. Introduction

"God is still good when the waves roll high; God is still good all through the night; He'll bring me through and I'll stand and say God is still good!" With the various hard experiences we see and hear people are facing, this song is becoming a family favorite", 11 March 2020, Amish scribe for *The Budget* newspaper.

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus, garnered widespread attention in January of 2019 (Pan et al. 2020). Two months later, on March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta and Vanelli 2020). One month after that, 546,875 Americans had been diagnosed with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 (Hong and Handal 2020). Quarantine limits contagion by restricting interpersonal contact. Governments imposed behavioral safeguards even in locations without quarantine, such as limiting the number of unrelated people who could gather in one place. Quarantine and isolation negatively affected the mental health of many people. Studies show positive associations between social distancing, isolating, and other experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and fear and anxiety (Koenig 2020) and a variety of mental health problems (Hossain et al. 2020).

Some have turned to religion for coping mechanisms. Religious beliefs, rituals, and communities help individuals cope with psychologically distressful events and circumstances (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 1997). Churches and other religious congregations help people manage by delivering essential direct welfare services, such as food and shelter (Baker et al. 2020; Borell and Gerdner 2011; Cnaan et al. 2004; Harris 1995).

They also establish supportive communities supplying satisfying interpersonal relationships (Collins 2010, 2014; Cornwall 1987; Durkheim 1965; Stroope 2011). Social distancing mandates impede these functions, which typically build upon in-person interaction.

While some congregations adapted to COVID-19 restrictions by moving their rituals online, this is not an option for all communities. The so-called "digital divide" prevents some rural and poor congregations from using online technologies (Baker et al. 2020). Moreover, Amish and conservative Mennonites were unable to move their rituals online due to religious prohibitions restricting the use of "worldly" communication and media technologies (e.g., cell phones, internet, computers, radios, and televisions). Governmental mandates to isolate and maintain social distance impose enormous burdens on these groups, which have few other means to socialize.

The Amish and Mennonites are tradition-bound religious groups that restrict communication/media and other technologies of modern culture. How do they draw on religion to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, given the restrictions placed on face-to-face worship? As Pargament et al. (2000, p. 521) identified, it is vital to understand how religion helps individuals cope with stressful events: "it is not enough to know that an individual prays, attends church, or watches religious television. Measures of religious coping should specify *how* the individual is making use of religion to understand and deal with stressors." In this study, we examine how Amish and Mennonite religious beliefs shape cultural meanings of the pandemic and help these believers cope with the pandemic.

1.1. Religious Coping

Religion can help people find meaning and purpose in situations that they believe to be beyond their control (Pargament 1996). By directing attention to the sacred, believers find meaning in life's trials (Pargament and Raiya 2007). Scholars find evidence of religious coping in various contexts across multiple cultures, spiritual traditions, and periods (Peres et al. 2007). Some scholars argue that religious coping is a defensive construct reducing anxiety by deflecting personal responsibility (Pargament et al. 1988, 2005). Several empirical studies support this premise (Pargament 1997; Peck 1988; Tix and Frazier 1998). While religious coping may indeed serve a defensive purpose, it is not limited to only this role. Religious coping also helps believers find meaning in life's trials (Paloutzian 1981; Park and Folkman 1997), identify positive implications of difficult situations (Pargament et al. 2000; Talik and Skowronski 2018), treat stressor(s) as opportunities to grow and develop (Park and Cohen 1993), establish intimate social relationships with others (Johnson and Mullins 1989), and illuminate the presence of the sacred in their day-to-day lives (Pargament et al. 2005). Religious coping simultaneously serves multiple roles, increasing its value (Pargament et al. 2005).

In taking on different roles, religious coping provides both positive benefits and negative consequences (Pargament et al. 1998). On the positive side, religious coping draws on the sacred to manage life's stresses and travails. Spiritual investment can forge strong connections with other believers, secure in their relationships with others and God (Pargament et al. 2005). In surveys, devout believers consistently report higher degrees of life satisfaction and lower degrees of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and guilt (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005). Research also finds correlations between religious coping strategies and better physical health outcomes (Koenig et al. 2001). On the negative side, negative religious coping strategies reflect weaker, more insecure relationships with other religious individuals and God, such as blaming or doubting God and struggling with one's faith (Pargament et al. 1998). Negative religious coping strategies tend to be associated with outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and spiritual injury (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005). These strategies can be counterproductive.

There are three different ways religion may be employed as a means of gaining control and solving problems (Pargament et al. 1988): (1) a deferring approach, where one absolves oneself of the responsibility to solve the problem and turns it over to God; (2) a self-directing approach, where one believes that God gave them the skills and abilities necessary to solve

the problem, acting independently from God; and (3) a collaborative approach, where one believes that God is a partner to be worked with, who shares in the responsibility for solving the problem.

Religious communities and congregations also play an important role in the coping process. Intimate social interaction with others, usually in person, is a core aspect of most religious traditions (Baker et al. 2020). Social interaction builds community and commitments through services, rites, and informal interactions. Congregations establish support networks emphasizing religious beliefs as a coping mechanism that individual members may draw upon in dealing with their struggles (Collins 2010, 2014; Durkheim 1965; Kanter 1972). Thus, while not all elements of religious coping directly involve the religious community, the religious community nonetheless plays a salient role.

Religious coping has been studied in a variety of contexts. Religious coping is present in different faith traditions: Christianity (Pargament et al. 1988, 1998, 2000, 2001; Rosmarin et al. 2009a), Judaism (Bettelheim 1979; Frei-Landau 2020; Krysinska and Corveleyn 2013; Palgi et al. 2011; Pargament et al. 2001; Pirutinsky et al. 2020; Rosmarin et al. 2009a, 2009b), Islam (Aguilar-Vafaie and Abiari 2007; Ahmadi and Rabbani 2019; Feder et al. 2013; Hasan et al. 2018; Uysal 2019), and Hinduism (Pargament et al. 2001; Pulla and Woods 2016). Geographic locations of study include the United States and North America (Cacciatore and Ong 2012; Cacciatore and Thieleman 2014; Pargament et al. 1988, 1998, 2000; Rosmarin et al. 2009a, 2009b), the Middle East (Aguilar-Vafaie and Abiari 2007; Ahmadi and Rabbani 2019; Frei-Landau 2020; Mahamid and Bdier 2021; Rosmarin et al. 2009b), Europe (Ahrenfeldt et al. 2018; Rosmarin et al. 2009b), Asia (Ahmadi and Rabbani 2019; Chow et al. 2021; Feder et al. 2013; Rosmarin et al. 2009b; Roystonn et al. 2021), and Australia (Pulla and Woods 2016). In locations with limited religious freedom, religious coping has been found to be an effective means of dealing with high-stress situations. As Uysal (2019) found, religious coping helped Turkish Muslim women overcome negative psychological trauma resulting from the hijab ban. Religious coping has also been found to be one of the means that Jewish Holocaust survivors used to process their experiences (Bettelheim 1979; Krysinska and Corveleyn 2013; Palgi et al. 2011). Marginal religious communities also engage in religious coping, including Hutterites (Cacciatore and Ong 2012; Cacciatore and Thieleman 2014), Old Order Amish (Fisher et al. 2013), and Hasidic and Orthodox Jewish people (Krysinska and Corveleyn 2013; Pirutinsky et al. 2020). With regards to age, religious coping has been found to be a coping strategy employed in all age groups, from adolescents and the middle aged (Aguilar-Vafaie and Abiari 2007; Benore et al. 2008; Van Dyke et al. 2009) up to the elderly (Bosworth et al. 2003; Pargament et al. 2001).

1.2. Religious Coping and Health Benefits

The relationship between religion and health, both physical and mental, has been studied extensively. Generally, the relationship between the two is positive (Ahrenfeldt et al. 2018; Ellison and Levin 1998; Oman 2018; Peres et al. 2007, 2018; Stark 2006). Religion and religious coping reduce stress (Pirutinsky et al. 2020). Spirituality and participation in church communities also promote recovery from acute health conditions (Ellison and Levin 1998; Frei-Landau 2020; Rosmarin et al. 2009a, 2009b). Active involvement in religious congregations often translates to better health outcomes (Ellison and Levin 1998; Foege 2019; Koenig et al. 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Shapiro and Sharony 2019; Strawbridge et al. 1997). Measures of depression and anxiety decrease in line with increased religious activity and congregational participation (Ahrens et al. 2010; Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Areba et al. 2018; Ellison and Levin 1998; Koenig 2020; Rosmarin et al. 2013; Rosmarin et al. 2009b; Shapiro and Sharony 2019; Viladrich and Abraído-Lanza 2009; Williams et al. 1991; Yeary et al. 2012). In short, religious coping reduces stress, improves mental health, and helps people recover from acute health issues.

People often use or turn to religion during crises (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Koenig 2018; Pargament 2001). When everything feels out of one's control, regardless of what is causing it, religion can help one cope with the situation, such as by accepting that

what is happening is God's will and through trusting in God (Pargament 1996; Simonic and Klobucar 2017; Talik and Skowronski 2018). Religion is one of the most commonly reported forms of coping during crises across religious affiliations (Peres et al. 2007). Following Hurricane Katrina, positive religious coping strategies reduced PTSD, indicators of depression, and increased perceptions of the respondent's quality of life (Henslee et al. 2015). Evidence is mounting that people invoke religious coping to deal with the stresses generated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahamid and Bdier 2021; Pirutinsky et al. 2020). As Bentzen (2020) identified, Google searches for "prayer" skyrocketed in March 2020 and the search rates followed the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 likely increased the demand for religious coping for many, governmental restrictions on in-person gatherings reduced the supply of religious services, one of the foundations of religious coping (Baker et al. 2020). Some religious congregations adapted to these restrictions by transitioning to virtual services, but this was not possible for all religious affiliations, such as the Amish and Mennonites who restrict the use of communication technologies as a sacrament. How did the Amish and Mennonites cope during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person rituals were prohibited?

1.3. Amish and Mennonites

The Amish and Mennonites emerged as part of the Christian Anabaptist movement in 16th century Europe. Amish today live primarily in North America, while the Mennonites reside in countries worldwide. The Amish and Mennonite worldview emphasizes separation of church and state (Nolt 2016); however, definitions on where to place the boundary separating the outside world from the church vary from one community to the next (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Traditional practices of Amish groups vary by affiliation. Kraybill et al. (2013) indicate that there are over forty different Amish affiliations in North America. The four main affiliations in the Holmes County Ohio settlement, include, for example, New Order, Old Order, Andy Weaver, and Swartzentruber groups. Each of these affiliations also have subgroups. For instance, the New Order affiliation includes New Order, New Order Tobe, and New Order Christian Fellowship groups. The Swartzentruber groups are the most conservative, while the New Order groups are considered more progressive (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Mennonite groups are similarly diverse. Some traditional Old Order Mennonite groups use horses and buggies as their primary mode of transportation, while assimilated Mennonites are likely to engage more freely with larger society and use automobiles for transportation. However, assimilated groups participate differently in mainstream society dependent on church guidelines (Kraybill 2010; Kraybill and Hostetter 2001). While the general categories of "Amish" and "Mennonite" might mask important differences within each group, the groups share many cultural practices that classify them into the broad categories. Additionally, the church remains the central component of all Anabaptist communities (Hurst and McConnell 2010).

Anabaptists believe that "the true church" must align with God's plan. Their separation from mainstream Protestants in the 16th century was, in part, driven by their need to separate from the "fallen church", which they considered corrupt and no longer connected to God's plan (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill et al. 2013). Anabaptist doctrine emphasized that the true church maintains its purity by separating from the world and worldly things, including communication and media technologies (e.g., cars, computers, cell phones, and televisions). This separation from the world forced Anabaptist groups to rely on the land. As the Amish struggled to survive, they learned how to live off the land, produce crops, and raise livestock. The closeness to nature is Biblical, as God called his people to care for the living things, plants, and animals (Hostetler 1993; McConnell and Loveless 2018). This way of life persisted as the Anabaptist groups migrated to America. The traditional occupation of farming amongst the Amish allowed families to stay home and work together. While trades have more recently shifted away from agriculture due to land availability and cost, many Amish and Mennonite families still plant extensive gardens to remain connected to the land (McConnell and Loveless 2018). As a result of the occupational shift away

from farming, Amish men are likely to hold jobs in manufacturing, construction, or service (Greska and Korbin 2002; Lowery and Noble 2000; Meyers 1994). These outside jobs remove men from the home, impacting the ability to be involved in daily family life. Even so, many men work in jobs located within their communities, allowing for interaction with other men in their congregation and surrounding communities (Corcoran et al. 2020).

Relationships are a cornerstone of Anabaptist communities. Amish and Mennonites rely on community members for material and social support in addition to fellowship (Nolt 2016). Amish hold church services in members' homes, blurring boundaries across the sacred and commonplace. Services in the home emphasize family and community connections (Kraybill et al. 2013; Nolt 2016). Reliance on fellow community members diminishes the need for interaction with the non-Anabaptist world. The ability to stay separate from non-Amish culture allows the Amish to lead a slower pace of life, evident in their use of horses and buggies for travel and their tendency to remain off the electrical grid. While some Mennonite groups also adhere to restrictive practices, other groups assimilate values from the broader non-Anabaptist culture. Furthermore, while most Mennonites hold religious services in a church building instead of in members' homes, both the Amish and Mennonites emphasize face-to-face interaction and relationships (Nolt 2016). Interactions take place in many contexts, from the formal rituals of church services to the more informal visiting practices.

The emphasis on in-person interaction amongst the Amish and Mennonites has resulted in a mixed response to COVID-19 mitigation strategies. Two COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in Amish and Mennonite communities in Holmes County, OH (Ali et al. 2020), and Elkhart County, IN (Duran et al. 2020). Several interviewees indicated a reluctance to comply with COVID-19 mitigation strategies. Some noted that family and friends complied with some of the measures, whereas others reported that they did not. Some work on U.S. Amish communities suggests variation in compliance with social distancing guidelines, with a majority holding in-person church services at least once within the first two months of the pandemic (Stein 2021). Still, some communities did comply, particularly within the first weeks of the pandemic (Stein 2021). We use *The Budget* and *The Diary*, correspondence newspapers that represent an important means of communication across Amish and Mennonite communities (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill et al. 2013; Nolt 2008), to examine how Amish and Mennonite communities in Ohio and Pennsylvania used religious strategies to cope with the pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

The Budget and *The Diary* are international correspondence newspapers that primarily report on Amish and Mennonite communities in the U.S. *The Budget* was first published in 1890 as a local newspaper for a small town in Ohio by an Amish Mennonite man. The newspaper grew into a correspondence newspaper as the editor published the correspondence from his friends who had moved away from the community (Yoder 1966). A group of Amish men started publishing *The Diary* in 1969 in Lancaster County, PA (Hostetler 1993). Both correspondence newspapers are currently published by a non-Amish publisher, but the publisher has maintained a relationship with the Anabaptist community. *The Budget* has a circulation of over 18,000 and is a popular publication among Amish and Mennonite groups (Carey 2012; Nolt 2008). *The Budget* is "the second most important text after the Bible to the Amish and Mennonite community" (Adkins 2009, p. 59). *The Budget* "reflects the values of the community", which scholars can use to learn about "those who create and consume it" (Adkins 2009, p. 56). Given the restrictions on technology use among the Amish and Mennonites, *The Budget* is "an important institution, serving as the major means of communication among all Amish settlements" (Hostetler 1993, p. 377). *The Diary*, distributed like *The Budget*, focuses exclusively on Old Order (i.e., more theologically conservative) Amish. *The Budget* is published every week, while *The Diary* publishes monthly. *The Budget* is typically between 40–60 pages long with at least 600 entries per edition. *The Diary* is usually between 130–160 pages with at least 400 entries per edition. The papers

print dispatches written by scribes—members of Amish and Mennonite communities across the U.S. and the world who report on local events and details about community members (Adkins 2009; Galindo 1994; Nolt 2008; Stein et al. 2019). Scribes construct and validate meaning for Anabaptist readers through their submissions, engaging in topics with shared interest, while largely avoiding controversial issues (Nolt 2008). Scribes often write with a tone of familiarity; they assume the reader knows the people they refer to in their column (Adkins 2009). These writers take their duty as representatives of the community seriously and strive to maintain a solid reputation in their role (Scott 2004).

We read and analyzed the content for all scribe entries from Ohio and Pennsylvania for March and April of 2020. These states include the two largest Amish settlements in the world (Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies 2020) and make up between 25 and 35% of the entries in *The Budget* and *The Diary*. Content analyzing newspaper entries from March and April allowed us to examine how the Amish and Mennonites coped with the beginning of the pandemic and the adjacent period when most state governments restricted in-person gatherings. Most *Budget* entries address events occurring at least one week before the date of publication. Therefore, we analyzed *Budget* entries from the March 11th through May 6th editions, encapsulating all of March and April. Since *The Diary* is published at the beginning of each month, we analyzed the April and May editions of the paper. We collected 1733 entries from *The Budget* and 224 entries from *The Diary* for a total of 1,957 entries. Approximately 24% of entries (469 entries) mentioned, either directly or indirectly, religious coping related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We restrict our analysis to these entries.

2.1. Coding

We gathered and categorized content, both inductively and deductively. First, we identified possible examples of religious coping using six different inductive themes with 21 subthemes related to religious coping. Second, we focused on religious coping as a form of problem solving and categorized the examples found according to how religion was employed.

We coded for "engagement in religious coping" if two criteria were met: (1) COVID-19 was mentioned in the entry, either expressly or indirectly (e.g., reference to the current tough times, times like these, government restrictions, etc.) and (2) the entry invoked religion, spirituality, or supernatural themes as a tactic for coping with problems attributable to the pandemic (we did not include instances of religious coping triggered by accidents or other illnesses in this sample). Table 1 provides a complete list of the different themes used and their prevalence. We discuss each theme and subtheme further in the results section.

Second, we focused on religious coping to solve concrete problems. Pargament et al. (1988) suggested three variants on this theme—deferring, self-directing, and collaborative. We coded religious coping as "deferring" when the entry noted that "God is in control" or expressed a sentiment of deriving comfort from God's providence, absent any reference to personal action. In contrast, entries describing personal actions in response to COVID-19, such as being prepared or enjoying time at home with family, absent of any direct mention of God, were marked as "self-directing". Finally, entries that combined personal action and drawing comfort from God were labeled as "collaborative". Ambiguous cases where we could not assign the entry to one of these mutually exclusive categories were separated from other entries. These entries were ambiguous according to (Pargament et al. 1988) framework because they involve passive problem solving; they do not attempt to directly solve the problems associated with COVID.

We present excerpts to illustrate these coded themes and categories. For each excerpt we indicate the newspaper and edition along with the location of the scribe and whether they are Amish or Mennonite. *The Diary* only publishes letters from Amish scribes. Thus, any scribe publishing in *The Diary* was coded as Amish. *The Budget* publishes both Amish and Mennonite scribe entries. The Amish hold their Sunday church services in member's homes and Amish scribes typically indicate the location of the last and next service. Most

Mennonites meet in church buildings and their scribes typically include their congregation's name in their entry. Based on this, we coded any entry as Amish if they indicated church services were or would be held in a household. We coded entries as Mennonite if they provided their congregation's name or reported that services had or would occur in a church building or reported on their church building in any way.

Table 1. Six inductive themes of religious coping among the Amish/Mennonites.

Themes	Subthemes	% of Entries	Distribution of Subthemes
God		51.81% (243)	
	God is in control/Trust God		66.26% (161)
	God saw a need for change/General need for change		17.28% (42)
	Need God/Jesus		10.70% (26)
	God is always there		6.58% (16)
	God and peace		4.94% (12)
	God knows		4.12% (10)
	God's providence		4.12% (10)
Time and pace of life		24.09% (113)	
	More time for hobbies		62.83% (71)
	Enjoy home and family		35.40% (40)
	Slow down/quiet		28.32% (32)
	Enjoy others		15.04% (17)
Religious behaviors		29.85% (140)	
	Pray		55.00% (77)
	In-person services		24.29% (34)
	Remote services		12.86% (18)
	Reading *The Budget*		12.86% (18)
Life moves on		23.88% (112)	
	Life continues/Nature		79.46% (89)
	Shall pass		25.00% (28)
Amish		5.76% (27)	
	Faith		66.67% (18)
	Prepared		33.33% (9)
Evangelism and afterlife		5.76% (27)	
	Evangelism/Conversion		88.89% (24)
	Heaven		11.11% (3)
Total Number of Entries		469	

2.2. State Context and COVID-19 Restrictions

On 9 March 2020, Ohio governor Mike Dewine declared a state of emergency regarding COVID-19. On 14 March 2020, all K-12 schools were closed in Ohio, followed by a stay at home order executed on 23 March 2021. This order required residents to stay at home except for essential work and to obtain essential supplies or services. If they had to leave their houses, social distancing was required https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/OHOOD/2020/03/22/file_attachments/1407840/Stay%20Home%20Order.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2021). On 22 March 2020, the Old Order Amish groups in Holmes County, OH, announced that church would be canceled https://amishamerica.com/coronavirus-ohio-amish-church-canceled-news-from-other-states/ (accessed on 6 August 2021). Some Amish churches in Ohio had already canceled churches prior to this announcement; though, there was variation in whether Ohio Amish groups complied (Stein 2021).

On 6 March 2020, Pennsylvania governor Tom Wolf signed a proclamation of COVID-19 disaster emergency for the state to increase support for the state's response to COVID-19.

On 12 March 2020, Governor Wolf strongly encouraged suspending all large gatherings and discouraged non-essential activities. Four days later, Governor Wolf announced that all K-12 schools would close and on March 19th all non-essential businesses were required to close their physical locations. A stay at home order was executed for 7 Pennsylvania counties on 23 March 2020, with additional counties added every couple of days until 1 April, when all counties in Pennsylvania were required to abide by the stay at home order. On 15 April, masks began to be mandated in all public places <03.23.20-Stay-At-Home-Order-Guidance.pdf (pa.gov)> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

The Budget began publishing CDC recommendations on COVID-19 in the March 11th edition and *The Diary* in their April edition.

3. Results

3.1. Themes

Table 1 presents the results of our inductive coding. These categories are not mutually exclusive; more than one theme and subtheme may be present in any given entry. The table reports percentages of entries invoking each theme and the relative distribution of subareas within each theme.

The most prevalent theme, present in 52% of the entries, mentioned God's power to help believers cope. In the most common subtheme, over three-fifths of those reflecting on God's power expressed comfort in God's "control of the COVID-19 situation" or that people should put their trust in Him. A Mennonite scribe from PA stated, "I certainly hope and pray this passes quickly and the world can get back to normal. But God is in total control, and what a comfort that is" (*The Budget*, 4/1). Similarly, an Amish scribe stated:

> "These truly are unprecedented times with never having heard the word COVID-19 a month or so ago. To some it's a scary time, a time of fear and panic, but to us who know the Lord, we have One that we can trust to see us through hard times, and gives us peace in the midst of the storm. When in difficult times, we are often reminded that God is in control." (*The Budget*, OH, 3/25)

The second most frequent subtheme (17% of God theme entries) interpreted the pandemic as a part of God's plan to help people realize they need to change their ways. An Ohio Mennonite scribe wondered "whether we as believers have been slumbering and sleeping as we trusted in uncertain riches, steady jobs, and good health. Could it be that this pandemic is a wake-up call for our people as well as for our nation? Could God be giving us an opportunity to further His cause in a society that has largely turned its back on Him?" (*The Budget*, 4/8). The next most prevalent subtheme (11%) invoked God as a stabilizing force in turbulent times. For example, an OH Amish scribe said: "A sure sign that some things are staying the same in these new, evolving, coronavirus times. I think many would agree it's a crazy time. Made me think of the song, "In times like these we need a Saviour; in times like these we need an anchor" (*The Budget*, 3/25). Of the God theme entries, a smaller fraction mentioned God is always there, God's peace, God's omniscience, and God's providence.

The Amish and Mennonite religious traditions emphasize a slower pace of life and the importance of family and home life (Kraybill 2010; Kraybill et al. 2012, 2013). Guided by this, we coded any mention of these topics used to cope with the pandemic as religious coping, which we report in Table 1. However, we also coded whether these entries explicitly mentioned religious content, such as God and blessings, and we report the prevalence of those entries in text. This represents a more conservative estimate of religious coping for this theme. Of religious coping entries, 24% mentioned having more time and a slower pace of life as a benefit of the pandemic and a means of helping them cope with it. Of these entries, 63% mentioned having more time for hobbies and to-do lists due to COVID-19, and 35% referenced enjoying the time spent at home and with family members due to the pandemic. An OH Amish scribe's entry exemplifies these subthemes:

> "Hubby was off work last week so he got caught up on his to-do list during daylight hours, instead of after work with a headlight to finish. With the children homeschooling these 3 weeks, my days are filled with reading, "riting", 'rithmetic and at times plotting to use the hickory stick. I'm relearning algebra, digging into the history of our forefathers, and listening to a first grader sound out new words. This stay at home order has turned into a blessing for us, and also a time to make some Memories" (*The Budget*, 4/1)

Nearly 30% of these entries suggested that life under quarantine was peaceful, less busy, and more relaxed. For example, a PA Amish scribe noted in the April *Diary* that "this is one way God is slowing us down, and perhaps thinking what life is all about. With the many blessings He does bestow we should still be thankful everyday! We should give Him all the praise and honor, and not grow slack."

Of "Time and Pace of Life" entries, 75% explicitly mentioned religious content. Nearly three-fourths of the slower pace of life entries, 65% of the enjoying others entries, 52% of the enjoy home and family entries, and 42% of the more time for hobbies entries mentioned religious content. Many of these entries either referred to the subthemes as blessings or referred to how God was slowing people down during the pandemic.

Approximately 30% of the coping entries explicitly identified religious behaviors as a means of coping. Prayer was the most prevalent type in this category (55%).

> "We did not have church on Sun, but had "fasht tag," a day of fast and prayer that God will watch over us all through this season of sickness and sorrow. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. When Peter turned his eyes away, he began to sink. Let us keep looking for the rainbow!" (*The Budget*, PA, Amish, 4/8)

Other critical religious behaviors for coping were in-person or remote religious services (e.g., via telephone) and reading *The Budget*.

The fourth theme expressed that 'life goes on' (24% of coping entries) and had two subthemes—"this too shall pass" (25% of these entries) and a reference to life continuing beyond COVID-19 with a focus on nature as a reflection of God's creation (79% of these entries). One OH Mennonite scribe compared the current quarantine to biblical times: "This morning Brett R. reminded us that the quarantine that Noah was in was much more severe than anything we have dealt with. I do believe that this too will pass and that we do well to listen to our government authorities" (*The Budget*, OH, Mennonite, 4/1). Many scribes presented vivid descriptions of nature and its connection to God as a means of coping with the pandemic:

> "Greetings to all, this day the Lord created hope and also the same day spring. These days our eyes, ears and hearts are often inspired by Gods wonderful creations. The beautiful birds sit outside our house chirping and singing, reminding us spring is here. The daffodils, Hyacinths and crocuses keep on blooming. Bright yellow forsythia lighten up the Countryside. The people panic! For some reason they targeted the toilet paper. Don't they realize that God is in control?" (*The Diary*, OH, Amish, April)

> "We are enjoying the beauties of springtime! Blooming daffodils, the scent of fresh-mowed grass, and the picture of little lambs frolicking in lush green pastures. Truly, spring has followed winter ... In the midst of the nation's frenzy and fear of pandemic, our God is still God, and His promises fail not." (*The Budget*, OH, Amish, 4/1)

> "But the grass keeps on growing and the trees are budding, the songbirds are gurgling their usual springtime music and seem very oblivious to the turmoil in the world around them. They live in their own little haven. God's promises will never cease, as long as the earth remains." (*The Budget*, PA, Amish, 4/22)

Many of these entries emphasize nature's permanence. Animals, plants, and seasons continue as they always have "oblivious to the turmoil in the world", implying that humans also should because this too will pass.

The last two themes—Amish and evangelism and afterlife—each represented only 6% of the sample. The Amish theme identified the importance of their faith in general for coping (67% of Amish-themed entries) and that being Amish better prepared them for the pandemic (33% of these entries). For example, a PA Amish scribe for *The Diary* exclaimed: "How blessed we are to have faith in God! Small wonder those who don't are in a state of panic". Their connection to the land and farming established self-sufficiency affirming their pastoral way of life follows God's plan:

> "How can we as Christians do our part and continue to let our light shine for these many struggling people as we try to survive, and so we realize how blessed our heritage is and appreciate our survival skills with a bulging can cellar." (*The Budget*, OH, Amish, 4/1)

> "Even church was canceled last Sunday and will be again this Sunday. We are thankful of being taught to can and freeze. A rich heritage, indeed." (*The Diary*, PA, Amish, April)

Several scribes also encouraged readers to witness to others during the pandemic and to remember that our time on earth is not the end.

For each theme, we also examined whether there were differences in the percent of entries by affiliation (Amish versus Mennonite) and location (Ohio versus Pennsylvania) (results not shown). Most of the themes had a 5% difference or lower for both affiliation and location. The largest discrepancy was for the evangelism and afterlife theme in which Mennonites had 11% more entries compared to the Amish.

3.2. Forms of Problem-Solving

Religious coping as a form of problem-solving falls into three mutually exclusive categories presented in Table 2. Collaboration was the largest category, accounting for nearly half of the entries. Individuals work with God as if a team to solve the problem(s): "If each does his part all will be well. We know who is in control" (*The Budget*, OH, Amish, 4/15). A PA Mennonite scribe wrote, "I'm content at home until this virus thing lets up. In God we trust! But we will also try to do our part" (*The Budget*, 4/1). In *The Diary*, an OH Amish scribe reiterated that God had some control over the situation but called for specific action on the part of the other Amish as well; "Our school is also shut down now. This virus brings a lot of fuss and worries. Let's eat healthy and trust in God" (April).

Table 2. Methods of religious problem solving among the Amish/Mennonites.

Categories	% of Entries
Deferring	17.48% (82)
Self-directive	26.44% (124)
Collaborative	49.25% (231)
Passive problem solving	6.82% (32)

Self-direction was the second most prevalent form of problem solving, accounting for a quarter of these entries: "Can we be thankful enough for our canned goods in the cellar plus our filled freezers during this time. Not everyone has the privilege to have it that way" (*The Budget*, OH, Amish, 3/25). This attitude was visible in both *The Budget* and *The Diary*.

"It is interesting reading the thoughts of other people about the Covid-19. I can understand why a lot of the English people panicked. They did not have the security of our Lord and Saviour. There was not a lot of extra food in the basement, a lot of people ate out. We plain people are so richly blessed by being taught to can and freeze for a year's supply of food. Our mothers taught us well." (*The Diary*, OH, Amish, May)

The deferring approach, wherein the individual entirely relies on God to solve problems, was the smallest problem-solving category, accounting for less than one-fifth of the entries. Some of those who employed this approach focused on the comfort that it brought them: "I certainly hope and pray this passes quickly and the world can get back to normal. But God is in total control, and what a comfort that is" (*The Budget*, PA, Mennonite, 4/1). Others emphasized freedom to ignore the pandemic. As an Amish scribe for *The Budget* from OH noted, "We don't find out much about this virus. We have plenty to eat, plenty of clothes to wear, so why worry? God is in control" (4/22). An Amish scribe from PA addressed concerns over getting sick, using this approach; "Why do they have to be scared about it? If we get sick then we get sick, but then I guess we also can get better again. But one thing, God controls everything" (*The Diary*, April).

A fourth category captures those entries that invoked a passive problem-solving approach. These are ambiguous according to Pargament et al.'s (1988) framework. Of the entries coded, 7% fell under this category. One such example is an entry from an Amish scribe from PA, "Our God is still a mighty God, and His ways are past understanding!" (*The Diary*, May). In this entry, we see reference to God's power, but it is left unclear if God will use that power to solve the problem and whether He will act alone or collaborate with them. Another example comes from an OH Amish scribe, "Nevertheless, this too shall pass, as each spent day lends itself to the promise of the future and the end of COVID-19" (*The Budget*, 4/15). This entry does not specify a problem-solving strategy, just that time will go by and ultimately the pandemic will end sometime in the future.

We further examined whether there were any differences in the percentage of entries for each category by affiliation and location. All differences were less than 10%. Thus, the prevalence of the categories was similar across affiliations and locations.

4. Discussion

Coping strategies are necessary in times of crisis. Yet, the imperative to isolate and maintain social distance reduced opportunities to engage in religious coping. Restrictions on in-person religious gatherings constrained a vital source of religious coping (Baker et al. 2020). Religious traditions that restrict communication technology, such as the Amish and Mennonites, do not have the same flexibility to adapt rituals online as some religious groups have done in response to these guidelines. Constraints on face-to-face encounters also limit sources of informal religious gatherings. Given this, this study examined how the Amish and Mennonites are coping with the pandemic and how their beliefs shape their understanding of it.

We identified six religious coping themes with 21 subthemes representing the forms of religious coping among the Amish and Mennonite communities in our sample. Overwhelmingly, the emphasis was on belief in God as a coping strategy—God is in control, He is always there, He helps and protects His people, put your trust in God, rely on Him, and you will have peace. These strategies are consistent with the Amish and Mennonite belief system that emphasizes fully trusting God who is in control and who should be sought for comfort (Kraybill et al. 2007, 2012; Miller 2008; Nolt 2016)—"God is still good when the waves roll high; God is still good through the night; He'll bring me through and I'll stand and say God is still good" (*The Budget*, OH, Amish, 3/11). However, many of the entries take it a step further in that they emphasize a collaborative problem-solving form of religious coping—trust in God but do your part too; God is in control, but He expects His people to take care of each other as well.

Amish and Mennonites cultivate a slower life pace so that believers can focus on God, family, and one's community (Kraybill 2001; Kraybill et al. 2012). This cultural orientation shaped how they interpreted the impact of the pandemic. Many entries noted the benefits of social distancing guidelines in forcing people to slow down, reflect on their life, spend more time on hobbies, and enjoy more time with their family and others. All of these were described as a means of helping them cope with the pandemic. Some entries suggested that these practices helped Amish, Mennonite, and other plain people cope with the pandemic better than the non-Anabaptists, because their religious heritage taught them survival skills, such as canning, gardening, and making do with less. These skills provide the Amish and Mennonites unique religious coping strategies (Kraybill et al. 2012; McConnell and Loveless 2018). These practices also validate a religious believer's ability to cope with whatever life brings them.

The subtheme regarding how life continues, as evidenced by nature, was striking. There were 89 entries that touched on this subtheme in some way. Many of these entries provided detailed descriptions of nature—flora, fauna, and seasons—to indicate how God's creation is unaffected by the pandemic; it continues, the way it always has and always will. This imagery and sentiment remind community members that there is a larger plan that connects all things. It is reflective of the Anabaptist connection with nature (Kline 1990; McConnell and Loveless 2018). In the same way, we know that the seasons perpetually change. We can know that we will come through this, just as people before us have; this too shall pass.

This study is not without limitations. We only use data from Ohio and Pennsylvania Amish and Mennonite communities that submitted entries to *The Budget* or *The Diary* in March and April of 2020. However, since those states house the two largest Amish settlements and almost half of all U.S. Amish congregations (Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies 2020), they likely provide a solid representation of the U.S. Amish community. Due to Amish and Mennonite restrictions on communication technologies, these correspondence newspapers are a vital means of communication across congregations and settlements (Nolt 2008). In fact, *The Budget* is considered the most important publication to the Amish after the Bible (Adkins 2009). Given this, we expect communities that submit entries to *The Budget* or *The Diary* are representative of the average Amish and Mennonite community. Another limitation is that we consider broad groups of Amish and Mennonites without making within group distinctions across affiliations. Different affiliations of Amish and Mennonite groups might indicate different coping mechanisms; however, we focus on the shared cultural practices that draw the groups into broad classifications (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Future research would benefit from further distinctions across affiliations, recognizing the important differences across more and less traditional groups as related to coping during the pandemic (Kraybill and Hostetter 2001). Finally, we found no entries meeting the criteria for negative forms of religious coping. Scribes are not likely to write about negative coping, as scribe letters focus on ideals within the Amish community (Nolt 2008). In this case, positive coping mechanisms highlight the religious connection to God. Even so, using these newspaper entries as data is advantageous. Since these are closed religious communities, it is often difficult for outsiders to access them during normal times. We cannot interview Amish people virtually and traditional in-person qualitative methods are both impractical and likely unethical during a pandemic. *The Budget* and *The Diary* entries provide a unique lens into the experiences of Amish and Mennonite communities during the pandemic that would otherwise be nearly impossible to achieve.

The religious beliefs and practices of the Amish and Mennonites with a strong belief in God's power and control, the importance of a slower pace of life, and the ability of the community to take care of themselves (Kraybill 2001; Kraybill et al. 2012, 2013; McConnell and Loveless 2018; Miller 2008; Nolt 2016) aided Amish and Mennonite communities in coping with the pandemic and viewing its impacts in a more positive light. We need more research on how religious groups that restrict communication technologies cope with and respond to the pandemic. Some entries noted religious coping through in-person rituals;

the extent to which these types of communities comply with social distancing guidelines is still unknown. We do know that Amish and some Mennonite communities have lower rates of vaccination compared to the rest of the population and thus are high risk sites for vaccine-preventable diseases (Gastañaduy et al. 2016; Grabenstein 2013; Scott et al. 2021; Wenger et al. 2011; Yoder and Dworkin 2006). A recent study found that the Amish and Old Order Mennonites do not intend to vaccinate their children for COVID-19 (Scott et al. 2021), which makes in-person rituals all the more dangerous. Additionally, while religiosity may help some religious people cope with the pandemic, religious beliefs and practices that emphasize an obligation to meet in-person for rituals and communal sacraments may create and amplify the very desire with which individuals need help coping. Future research would benefit from exploring how communal religious traditions may help their members manage, while also potentially contributing to their need for coping strategies.

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