

Research Article

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Denial and Fear: Psychological Analysis of Covid-19 Information in a Czech Fundamentalistic Catholic Journal

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Abstract: The aim of the research was to analyze information about Covid-19 as it relates to religion in a fundamentalist Catholic periodical and to point out places in the articles that are not supported by scientific facts. We also examined whether the Covid-19 information found contained some coping strategies to deal with the pandemic situation. The object of the study was the Czech monthly *Regina* in the year 2020. Thematic analysis was used as a method. Two main themes were found – Trivialization and Combat between Good and Evil. At first, the disease was underestimated, from the September issue it was presented as a sign of the end times. The theme of Trivialization was divided into two subthemes: Exaggerated restrictions and Covid-19 is not the only problem of mankind. This theme was assigned to coping strategy Denial. The theme of Combat between Good and Evil was divided into three subthemes: Sign of the End Times, Evil's quest to establish a new world order, and Vaccination breaks the relationship with God. This theme was assigned to a coping strategy Marking Religious Boundaries. The texts possessed much unfounded information stimulating fear and anxiety instead of active coping strategies to promote the reader's hope of improving the epidemiological situation.

Keywords: Catholic Church, coping, religious coping, disinformation, polarization, apocalypticism

1 Theoretical part

1.1 Religious situation in the Czech Republic

In the last census of 2011, 10% of the population in the Czech Republic identified themselves as members of the Catholic Church, 34% said “no religion,” 7% said “believers – not applicable to any church,” and about 1% identified with other Christian churches or religious groups. The question about religious beliefs was voluntary, and 45% of the population did not answer it.¹ It therefore seems that, for a large part of the Czech population, religious affiliation is not an important part of their identity² and that religion has a relatively ambivalent position in daily life for most people in the Czech Republic.³

1 *Náboženská Víra*, 5.

2 Hamplová, *Náboženství v České Společnosti*, 41.

3 Václavík et al., “Religious Situation in Contemporary Czech Society,” 112.

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In addition to census data, more detailed data from ISSP research are also available.⁴ The Czech Republic is sometimes simply referred to as one of the most atheistic countries in Europe. However, a more detailed analysis shows that “people who do not believe in the existence of God and at the same time strongly reject the existence of other supernatural phenomena, are in an absolute minority in Czech society – they represent only 6 percent of the sample of ISSP 2008, while the existence of at least one supernatural phenomenon was admitted by more than 80 percent of those surveyed.”⁵ The number of real atheists in the Czech Republic is thus comparable to the average in other countries of Western Europe. “The idea of ‘Czech atheists’ usually helps to ‘hide’ other phenomena, such as religious apatheism or individual religiosity which are very common in Czech society.”⁶

From the point of view of religiosity, these people make up a large part of the Czech population. These are people who consider themselves neither believers nor unbelievers and belong to the gray area between faith and unbelief.⁷ Czech theologian Halík states that “even one who declares himself to be an ‘unbeliever’ is far from being necessarily deaf or mute towards the call from the depths of life. Maybe he is not just asking the question of where the induced voice comes from, or maybe he is answering that question differently than, say, a devout Christian.”⁸ In conclusion, “Czech religiosity is characterized by high levels of privatization and individualization as well as strong distrust in traditional religious institutions especially in the mainstream Christian churches.”⁹

Václavík et al. in their study on the current religiosity within the Czech Republic proposed five directions in which any further research into the religious situation could take: (1) Study of Religious communities; (2) Study of compactness, differentiation, and distribution of power of individual religious groups; (3) Commitment to religious activity; (4) Study of key strategies of religious groups; and (5) Study of Czech atheism.¹⁰ In this study, we will try to develop the fourth direction mentioned – we will examine a small sample of fundamentalist Christianity and its strategies to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. That is why, in the following section, we will devote more time to Christian fundamentalism.

1.2 Religious fundamentalism

Czech theologian Halík defines fundamentalism as “a disorder of a faith that tries to entrench itself within the shadows of the past against the disturbing complexity of life. Fanaticism, with which it is often linked, is simply a peevish reaction to the resultant frustration, to the (unadmitted) bitter realization that it is a false trail.”¹¹ In difficult life situations (as is the case of the Covid-19 pandemic), the number of people asking for certainty and clear answers from religion is growing. “They want something eternal and immutable, and their desire for reliable immobility is so great that they do not realize that only dead religion can perfectly fulfill these demands.”¹² These people often fear their own doubts. Instead of confronting them and acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity of different life situations, they prefer to “‘turn back’ in the direction of the expected safety of their beginnings – either the ‘childish phase’ of their own faith or some imitation of the Church’s past.”¹³ At first sight such a faith seems to be great and firm but in reality is “simply leaden, solidified, and bloated. Often the only great and firm thing about it is the ‘armor plating’

⁴ ISSP – International Social Survey Program.

⁵ Hamplová, *Náboženství v České Společnosti*, 67.

⁶ Václavík et al., “Religious Situation in Contemporary Czech Society,” 111.

⁷ Halík, “Religion and the Spiritual Seeker,” 105.

⁸ Halík, *Divadlo Pro Anděly*, 29.

⁹ Václavík et al., “Religious Situation in Contemporary Czech Society,” 101.

¹⁰ Ibid., 112–3.

¹¹ Halík, *Night of the Confessor*, 33.

¹² Halík, *Divadlo Pro Anděly*, 152.

¹³ Halík, *Night of the Confessor*, 32.

that frequently conceals the anxiety of hopelessness.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, a truly living faith supposes that it will be confronted with doubt repeatedly, “exposed to crisis, yes, sometimes ‘killed’. There are times when our faith (or to express it gently – its present form) dies – so that it can be resurrected.”¹⁵

Christian fundamentalism often endeavors to interpret the Bible literally. The apocalyptic literature (especially the Book of Revelation in the New Testament) has attracted the attention of Christians, especially in times of crisis. For some Christians, the Covid-19 crisis seems to be an appropriate time to focus on the apocalypse. Therefore, we mention the primary aspects of this phenomenon. Apocalyptic literature flourished from the second century BC to the first century AC.¹⁶ The texts deal with the future of the world and the question of what will happen to a person after death. The speech is full of symbols and speculation on figures.¹⁷ One of the hallmarks of apocalyptic literature is the division of mankind into a camp of the righteous and a camp of the wicked.¹⁸

Harrington presents four concepts of interpretation of the biblical Book of Revelation. The Non-historical or “idealist” interpretation is generally devoted to the struggle of good and evil and does not pay much attention to the historical background of the book’s creation. By contrast, the World-historical (Church-historical) interpretation reveals in the book several events from the history of the Church and the world. According to the End-historical (“futurist”) interpretation, the book deals exclusively with events that occur just before the end of the world. The Contemporary-historical (“preterist”) interpretation focuses primarily on the time at which the book was written.¹⁹ Mrázek emphasizes a dynamic description of catastrophic events in the Book of Revelation in which readers in various historical eras can find a figurative description of what they are experiencing.²⁰ The Book of Revelation becomes a kind of projection screen. One of the most important messages of the Book of Revelation is a consolation to Christians in need – despite the evil that people experience, God still holds everything firmly in his hands.²¹

On the contrary, interpretations of the Book of Revelation referring to the current historical situation may also indicate a narcissism (self-centeredness or fantasy of omnipotence)²² of the author of the text. The interpreter can develop his narcissism by thinking of his excessive importance – it is he who lives in a time that is crucial to the history of the world.

From another point of view, the Book of Revelation can develop one of the basic emotions – fear – which can be defined as “a proximal alarm reaction to an immediate real or perceived threat.”²³ As other emotions, fear could be realized as an adaptive response to a perceived threat (e.g., driving on a snowy road), or as a maladaptive response leading to serious psychological disorders.²⁴ Beier, in his commentary on Eugen Drewermann’s work, demonstrates the power of Christian fear: “Christianity has inadvertently been domaining violence to people by using fear as one of its prime motivators for faith: fear of hell, fear of being excluded from the (dominant) social group, fear of losing one’s status, and most of all, fear of God – all have been and are being instrumentalized to keep people in line with the interpretations of Christian beliefs formulated by Church officials.”²⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Halík, *Dotkni se Ran*, 229.

¹⁶ Harrington, *Revelation*, 1.

¹⁷ Tichý, *Úvod Do Nového Zákona*, 256–7.

¹⁸ Harrington, *Revelation*, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14–7.

²⁰ Mrázek, *Zjevení Janovo*, 12.

²¹ Harrington, *Revelation*, 14.

²² Zondag et al., “I Just Believe in Me,” 71. The authors mentioned that narcissism is not only a personality disorder, but rather a personality variable. Everyone has narcissistic traits and only in the case of antisocial behavior can we speak of disorder.

²³ Taddio et al., “Introducing a Practical Tool to Reduce Fear and Anxiety During COVID-19,” 26.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ Beier, *A Violent God-Image*, 12.

1.3 Catholic media in the Czech Republic

The official website of the Catholic Church, www.cirkev.cz, presents a list of Catholic media in Czech Republic. *Katolický týdeník* (*Catholic Weekly*, 33,000 copies²⁶) is the official periodical of the Catholic Church. On the official list are a noncommercial Television Noe (which “emphasizes healthy spiritual values and general tolerability among people”)²⁷ and a Czech redaction of *Vatican News*.²⁸ The list mentions an ecumenical internet magazine for the young, website *Signály*.²⁹ There are also religious broadcasts on Czech Television and Czech Radio.³⁰ On the official list there are ten printed magazines, half of them are for children or youth (*Duha*, *Nezbeda a Cvrček*, *Tarsicius*, *IN*, and *Milujte se*).³¹ The printed magazines for adults are *Cesty katecheze* (review for catechesis), *Salve* (review for theology), *Světlo* (weekly from the Cyril and Methodius company), *Immaculata* (Marian bimonthly), and *RC Monitor* (published biweekly).³²

Of course, there are more media that represent interest in the Catholic Church. We can mention, for example, Christian Radio Proglas³³ and the website Christnet.eu.³⁴ As a liberal printed periodical, we mention *Universum* (review of the Czech Christian Academy)³⁵ and, as a fundamentalist based magazine, *Regina*, which was the subject of our research.³⁶

1.4 Religion and difficult life situations

When people are confronted with a difficult situation, as Covid-19 surely is, they use distinct strategies to manage it. In psychology, this activity is known as coping.³⁷ An essential point in coping is the appraisal of the situation – “the psychological stress response is based on an evaluation or ‘appraisal’ by the person of what the person’s circumstances imply for his or her well-being.”³⁸

One of the most popular scales to examine coping strategies is the COPE of Carver et al.,³⁹ later shortened to Brief COPE with 14 strategies.⁴⁰ Meyer divides them into adaptive (Active coping, Planning, Positive reframing, Acceptance, Humor, Religion, Using emotional support, Using instrumental support) and maladaptive (Self-distraction, Denial, Venting, Substance use, Behavioral disengagement, Self-blame).⁴¹ A description of the strategies is presented in Table 1.

Pargament et al. described 21 different ways in which religion helps people to cope with difficult situations. The authors presented a 5-item scale for each strategy (altogether the questionnaire has 105

²⁶ “Inzerce.”

²⁷ “Televize Noe.”

²⁸ “Vatican News.”

²⁹ “Signály.”

³⁰ “Další.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ “Basic Facts on Radion Proglas.”

³⁴ “Co je Christnet.eu?”

³⁵ “Časopis Universum.”

³⁶ *Regina* magazine doesn’t have an official website. The website of the publisher, Vérité, lists only some advertisement for selected articles in the news section.

³⁷ Smith and Kirby, “The Role of Appraisal and Emotion in Coping and Adaptation,” 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 1–2.

³⁹ Carver et al., “Assessing Coping Strategies,” 267–83.

⁴⁰ Carver, “You Want to Measure Coping,” 92–100.

⁴¹ Meyer, “Coping with Severe Mental Illness,” 268.

Table 1: Coping strategies (taken over Carver et al.);⁴² the division of positive and negative strategies is made by Meyer⁴³

Adaptive coping

- *Active coping* – taking active steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressor or to ameliorate the stressor
- *Planning* – thinking about how to cope with the stressor
- *Positive reframing* – emotion-focused coping aimed at managing distress
- *Acceptance* – functional coping response and engagement in the attempt to deal with the situation
- *Humor*⁴⁴
- *Religion* – turning to religion in times of stress
- *Using emotional support* – seeking out for moral support, sympathy, or understanding
- *Using instrumental support* – seeking advice, assistance, or information

Maladaptive coping

- *Self-Distraction* – using alternative activities to take one's mind off the problem
- *Denial* – refusal to believe stressor exists or trying to act as though the stressor is not real
- *Venting* – tendency to focus on whatever distress
- *Substance use*⁴⁵
- *Behavioral disengagement* – reducing one's effort to deal with the stressor
- *Self-Blame* – poor adjustment under the stress

items).⁴⁶ These strategies are grouped into five categories according to the five basic functions of religion – search for meaning search for mastery and control, search for comfort and closeness to God, search for intimacy and closeness to God, and search for life transformation.⁴⁷ The 21 strategies are presented in Table 2.

Pargament et al. later presented a reduced model of religious coping. The 21 categories mentioned above are grouped into two main categories. *Positive religious coping* methods “reflect a secure relationship

Table 2: Religious coping (taken over from Pargament et al.)⁴⁸

Religious methods of coping to find meaning

- *Benevolent religious reappraisal* – redefining the stressor through religion as potentially beneficial
- *Punishing God reappraisal* – redefining the stressor as a punishment from God for the individual's sins
- *Demonic reappraisal* – redefining the stressor as an act of the Devil
- *Reappraisal of God's power* – redefining God's power to influence the stressful situation

Religious methods of coping to gain mastery and control

- *Collaborative religious coping* – seeking control through a partnership with God in problem solving
- *Passive religious deferral* – passive waiting for God to control the situation
- *Active religious surrender* – active giving up control to God in coping
- *Pleading for direct intercession* – seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intervention
- *Self-directing religious coping* – seeking control through individual initiative rather than help from God

(Continued)

⁴² The names of the strategies are taken from Carver, “You Want to Measure Coping,” 92–100. The description of the strategies is from the author's earlier work, Carver et al., “Assessing Coping Strategies,” 267–83. In his later work (“You Want to Measure Coping”), he omitted strategies Restraint coping and Competing activities. He renamed the scale Positive reinterpretation and growth as Positive reframing, he renamed the scale Focus on and Venting emotions as Venting, and he renamed the scale Mental disengagement as Self-Distraction. He added the strategy Self-Blame (the definition is taken over from the later article “You Want to Measure Coping,” 95).

⁴³ Meyer, “Coping with Severe Mental Illness,” 268.

⁴⁴ Carver does not present a definition for this strategy in either of his two works presented above.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Pargament et al., “The Many Methods,” 521–5.

⁴⁷ Pargament et al., “The Religious Dimension of Coping,” 563.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 564.

Table 2: Continued

Religious methods of coping to gain comfort and closeness to God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Seeking spiritual support</i> – searching for comfort and reassurance through God’s love and care • <i>Religious focus</i> – engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressor • <i>Religious purification</i> – searching for spiritual cleansing through religious actions • <i>Spiritual connection</i> – seeking a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the self • <i>Spiritual discontent</i> – expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God’s relationship to the individual in the stressful situation • <i>Marking religious boundaries</i> – clearly demarcating acceptable from unacceptable religious behavior and remaining within religious boundaries
Religious methods of coping to gain intimacy with others and closeness to God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Seeking support from clergy or members</i> – searching for intimacy and reassurance through the love and care of congregation members and clergy • <i>Religious helping</i> – attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others • <i>Interpersonal religious discontent</i> – expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with the relationship of clergy or members to the individual in the stressful situation
Religious methods of coping to achieve a life transformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Seeking religious direction</i> – looking to religion for assistance in finding a new direction for living • <i>Religious conversion</i> – looking to religion for a radical change in life • <i>Religious forgiving</i> – looking to religion for help in shifting from anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense to peace

with transcendent force, a sense of spiritual connectedness with others, and a benevolent world view.”⁴⁹ *Negative religious coping* methods “reflect underlying spiritual tensions and struggles within oneself, with others, and with the divine.”⁵⁰ A 14-item scale for measuring these two strategies was presented as Brief RCOPE.⁵¹

1.5 Pandemics and disinformation

Agley and Xiao noted that conspiratorial thinking emerges more frequently in times of crisis and can be influenced by other factors, such as education level, political orientation, or religiosity.⁵² Cornell University’s Alliance for Science submitted a list of the Top 10 conspiracy theories appearing in April 2020: blaming 5G, Bill Gates as a scapegoat, the virus escaped from a Chinese lab, COVID was created as a biological weapon, the US military imported COVID into China, GMOs (genetically modified crops) are somehow to blame, COVID-19 does not actually exist, the pandemic is being manipulated by the “deep state,” COVID is a plot by “Big Pharma,” and COVID death rates are inflated.⁵³

The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic gives examples of patterns of disinformation on their website. These include, for example, simplifying the description of reality, polarizing society (dividing it into “we = good” and “they = bad”), distracting attention through the creation of pseudo causes, appealing to emotions and repeating lies that thus begin to appear to be true.⁵⁴ Polarizing society is strongly present in the apocalyptic literature, as mentioned above.⁵⁵ The concept of the negation of pluralism and effort to divide mankind in polarities, such as “us” versus “them,” followed by a friend-enemy pattern is one of the

⁴⁹ Pargament et al., “The Brief RCOPE,” 51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁵¹ Ibid., 51–76.

⁵² Agley and Xiao, “Misinformation About COVID-19,” 2.

⁵³ Lynas, COVID: “Top 10 Current Conspiracy Theories.”

⁵⁴ “Pět Nejčastějších Manipulativních Metod.”

⁵⁵ Harrington, *Revelation*, 4.

bases of populism, which can be connected to religion.⁵⁶ The emotion of fear is very often used in religious manipulation.⁵⁷ As a guide to analyze the credibility of the presented information, the Czech Ministry of the Interior mentions, for example, the presentation of the author of a text or the presentation of the sources used (and the possibility of their verifiability).⁵⁸

2 Goal of the research and research questions

The aim of the research was to analyze information about Covid-19 related to religion in a fundamentalist Catholic periodical and to point out places in the articles that are not supported by scientific facts. Because this was a qualitative research project, we tried to analyze a specific periodical and did not intend to generalize the data obtained to the Catholic press in general or to fundamentalist Catholic periodicals in general. We also examined whether the Covid-19 information in the periodical contained some coping strategies to deal with the pandemic (we used the coping strategies by Carver et al.⁵⁹ and religious coping strategies by Pargament et al.⁶⁰ presented above in the theoretical part of the article).

In the analysis, we primarily applied a psychological approach. The theological approach was applied only if it was necessary to explain the basic idea of the dates given in the text (this was mainly related to the information regarding the biblical Book of Revelation, which was widely cited in the periodical).

RQ1: Which psychological topics of Covid-19 related to religion can be found in the 2020 edition of Regina magazine?

RQ2: How do the psychological topics describe the pandemic situation?

RQ3: Does the pandemic information include some coping strategies⁶¹ suggesting to change past habits, including religious ones?

3 Sample of analyzed articles

The object of our research was the monthly issues of the journal *Regina* with the subtitle *Journal of Spiritual Revival through Marian Revelations and Eucharist*.⁶² The printed magazine does not contain any more detailed information about the history or wider mission of the magazine. The publisher is Věrité, a publishing house based in Prague. In 2020 was the 23rd edition, so we can infer that the magazine has been published since 1997. The National Digital Library has been archiving editions since 1999.⁶³ The magazine publisher's website contains a section for "Periodical," but the concrete link contains a blank page with no text.⁶⁴ On the front page of the website, in the section "News from Věrité," there are advertisements for selected articles from *Regina* magazine about Covid-19.⁶⁵

We were interested in the 2020 edition (23rd edition), consisting of 8 issues and 2 double issues (7–8 and 11–12). The magazine is published by the Věrité Centre in Prague and is registered by the Ministry of Culture. Since June 2020, the Czech Bishops' Conference has issued a prohibition on the distribution of this

⁵⁶ Palaver, "Populism and Religion," 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸ "Dezinformace."

⁵⁹ Carver et al., "Assessing Coping Strategies," 267–83.

⁶⁰ Pargament et al., "The Religious Dimension of Coping," 564.

⁶¹ Carver, "You Want to Measure Coping," 92–100; Pargament et al., "The Religious Dimension of Coping," 564.

⁶² In origin: "Časopis pro duchovní oživení prostřednictvím mariánských zjevení a eucharistie."

⁶³ "Regina."

⁶⁴ "Periodika."

⁶⁵ "Důležité články v Regině: Covid-19."

Table 3: Quantity of articles analyzed in each issue (first issue with information of Covid-19 was nr. 5)

Issue	Number of articles analyzed	Page number(s)
5	2	6; 17
6	2	7; 13
7–8	0	
9	4	2; 12–14; 15–17; 19
10	4	1; 13–15; 16; 17–19
11–12	1	2

magazine in Catholic churches due to the publication of false and misleading information about the life of the Church.⁶⁶ None of the 2020 issues included information regarding the editorial board of the magazine. Some articles do not cite the author (or their abbreviation). When accepting foreign articles, precise references to the original sources or name of the translator are often missing.

This specific magazine was chosen for the analysis of the text because we were interested in how information about Covid-19 is presented in a magazine that was banned from distribution in Catholic churches during the pandemic.

4 Data collection

We were interested in information related to Covid-19 and religion in the issues published in the year 2020. In this edition (especially from number 6), there was also medical information about Covid-19 (disparaging the seriousness of the disease, deception of results of examination of Covid-19) and information supporting Donald Trump in his attitude to the disease. We did not analyze these articles unless there was a direct link between Covid-19 and religion (otherwise the number of topics would increase disproportionately and our main focus – its connection with religion – would disappear).

The first mention of Covid-19 in the journal was in issue 5 (issued April 27). There were two marginal references in two articles. Starting with issue 6, a column dedicated exclusively to Covid-19 (especially from a medical point of view) regularly appeared in the journal. These were mostly transcriptions of interviews published on YouTube, but there was no exact information about the data source. Starting with issue 9, the number of articles related to Covid-19 increased. The last analyzed issue was the double issue, 11–12 (issued October 22). Table 3 presents the quantity of articles analyzed in each issue.

5 Method

To analyze the data, we used Thematic analysis.⁶⁷ The “theoretical” approach we used was based on the specific interest of the researcher.⁶⁸ We did not analyze all topics of the journal, but we were interested in topics about Covid-19 related to religion. Our approach was semantic – the themes were identified within the explicit meanings of the words (in contrast to the latent approach, where the researcher also looks for a latent dimension of the data, e.g., ideology).⁶⁹

⁶⁶ “Rozhodnutí ČBK,” 39.

⁶⁷ Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis,” 77–101.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 84.

Table 4: Overview of found themes, subthemes, and assigned religious coping strategies⁷³

Theme	Subtheme	Examples	Coping strategy
Trivialization	Exaggerated restrictions	“Jesus said, ‘[...] your limitations are excessive, as many deaths with a different cause of death are attributed to the virus.’” (19/9)	Denial
	Covid-19 is not the only problem of mankind	“There has been considerable uncertainty in our country for the first time now in connection with the coronavirus. We had never considered before that thousands of people die in wars, famine, genocide, and thousands of believers undergo martyrdom” (17/5)	
Combat between Good and Evil	Sign of End Times	“When will this difficult period begin? [...] Since February 2020, quarantines have been declared in various countries and it is not possible to serve Christ’s Mass there.” (13/9)	Marking religious boundaries
	Evil’s quest to establish a new world order	“[...] there are two very contradictory trends that are preparing for a specific conflict. One trend is carefully formed, especially in the last 50–100 years. Leaders in this trend strive to build a New Social Order, which would be characterized by the union of the three main religions [...]” (2/11–12)	
	Vaccination breaks the relationship with God	“[...] it is a DNA transformation that occurs immediately after application [...]. People with transformed DNA are lost to heaven forever, they cannot be redeemed. That is what Jesus himself said” (19/10)	

The authors propose the following six steps.⁷⁰ By describing these steps, we present our approach to the analysis.

1. Familiarizing with the data (at least one concentrated reading of the entire text for analysis). First, we gradually read all issues of the magazine from 2020.
2. Generating initial codes (preparation of a list of interesting features). By rereading all issues, we selected all units for analysis (i.e., all information in the articles that dealt with Covid-19 and at the same time were related to religion). Each unit has been given a separate code (by page number and issue number).⁷¹
3. Searching for themes (sorting and composing units into potential themes). We created the first drafts of themes. Using a table, we endeavored to classify the units to the corresponding themes.
4. Reviewing themes (clearing boundaries between found topics). We reread all units and considered whether their division into the proposed topics had missed an important aspect of the data.
5. Defining and naming themes (“identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about”⁷²). We endeavored to capture the essence of each topic by naming it. We have divided these themes into subthemes to make the list clearer.
6. Producing the report. We presented the results.

To check the reliability, the analysis was done by two researchers separately. Later, the common points were connected. The results were created as an agreement between both researchers.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 87–93.

⁷¹ There was no case in which there would be two different units on one page, so we could use the number of pages, which was clearer for orientation of the issues.

⁷² Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis,” 92.

⁷³ Carver, “You Want to Measure Coping,” 92–100; Pargament et al., “The Religious Dimension of Coping,” 564.

6 Results

RQ1: Which psychological topics of Covid-19 related to religion can be found in the 2020 edition of Regina magazine?

Two main themes were found – *Trivialization* and *Combat between Good and Evil*. Both themes were divided into several subthemes. The results are clearly displayed in Table 4. If we cite specific examples of statements, we always indicate the page and issue numbers (e.g., 19/9 means an article from page 19 of issue 9).

Chronologically, the magazine first published information that downplayed the danger of Covid-19. The first theme we have identified is *Trivialization*. We have further divided this theme into two subthemes. The subtheme *Exaggerated restrictions* was expressed by the statement “[...] your limitations are exaggerated, as many deaths with a different cause of death are attributed to virus death” (19/9). It is “the message of Jesus Christ received by John Leary, Thursday, April 23” (19/9). No further details are given in this text. The journal reported more frequently on the exaggeration of pandemic measures. Nevertheless, these statements are always given in articles that deal with Covid-19 from a medical point of view and do not mention the connection with religion. The presented statement was analyzed because the journal presents it as Jesus’ statement.

The second subtheme of *Trivialization* is *Covid-19 is not the only problem of mankind*. The first two mentions of Covid-19 were included here (both themes were published in the issue of May). It was a transcript of priest Knezović’s homily on Sunday, March 29. He stressed that there are worse problems in the world than Covid-19: “[...] if Jesus had stopped the coronavirus with his miraculous intervention, stopped all hardships and problems around this provocative virus, what would have happened? Would mankind believe in Jesus Christ? I guarantee you do not” (6/5). Neither the source of the homily nor the translator’s name was given. Another statement can be found in the introduction to the article “From the present revelations”: “The world is in a disastrous situation. In our country, there has been considerable uncertainty for the first time now in connection with the coronavirus. We have never considered before that thousands of people are dying in wars, famine, genocide, and thousands of believers are undergoing martyrdom” (17/5). The name of the author was not published.

We have called the second theme that appeared in the periodical *Combat between Good and Evil*. This topic has gradually become more important and has already created one of the dominant themes in the final issues of the 2020 edition. We divided it into three subthemes: *Sign of End Times*, *Evil’s quest to establish a new world order*, and *Vaccination breaks the relationship with God*.

The subtheme *Sign of End Times* presents the idea that the existence of the current form of the world is coming to an end. “Only some know that fundamental changes may occur, and the world will be directed into a new period” (2/10). The author of the text was not mentioned. Another example was in part of the article “The Peak of Hard Times (I)” suggesting that the prohibition of Church services could be seen as a sign: “When will this difficult period begin? [...] Since February 2020, quarantines have been declared in various countries and it is not possible to serve Christ’s Mass there” (13/9). The author of the text was not mentioned. As a sign of an end, the periodical also notes information from Spain: “These days we watch unusual scenes taking place worldwide due to measures realized in the current state of the coronavirus threat. On April 14, police in the Spanish city of Jaén brought an icon of the Mother of Constant Help to the Christ King Clinic with applause and a warm reception by paramedics. Something like this would not have happened under different circumstances” (7/6). The author of the text was not mentioned. The words of Nana Akufo-Addo, president of Ghana, were also included in this subtheme: “This is what the Bible says, ‘the crime mystery, in secret arranged’ and we pray that this year, before his end, God’s will reveals all these crimes that are secretly arranged and which try to bring all of us to knees, and to have us being vaccinated” (14/10). The date nor the translator was cited.

The subtheme, *Evil’s quest to establish a new world order*, develops the previous subtheme – several influential world figures (often Fauci, Gates, and Soros are mentioned) want to establish a new world order using chips to control people. Chipping will be done through vaccination. The idea is aptly described in editorial 2/11–12: “We can say there are two very opposing trends that are preparing for a particular conflict. One trend has been formed intensively, especially in the last 50–100 years. Leaders of this trend are striving to build a New Social Order, which would be characterized by the union of the three main religions. Furthermore, this order is built on the control of people by chipping.” The author of this editorial was

not mentioned. Similarly, the idea was mentioned in editorial 2/10: “A confrontation between the two groups occurs, and this conflict will culminate in the next few years [...]. For us, it is important on which side we stand up.” The author of this editorial was also not mentioned.

The topic of vaccination has been even more developed in some texts. The main idea was not only about controlling people. These texts warned that *Vaccination breaks the relationship with God*, which is the third subtheme we created. An example is given in the article “From the present revelations”: “[...] it is a DNA transformation that occurs immediately after application [...]. People with transformed DNA are lost to heaven forever, they cannot be redeemed. That is what Jesus himself said” (19/10). The author of this text was not mentioned. Editorial 2/9 speaks similarly: “[...] it is necessary to remember that now we have entered the most difficult time, and right now the Beast I (Antichrist) is going to appear. At first, he will be very nice to gain people, but then he will want ‘for their own good’ to accept chips, which will change their psyche [...]. If we accept the chip, our mind becomes permanently blacked out and we will lose contact with God.” The author of this text was not mentioned. Vaccination is even associated with a part of the biblical Book of Revelation (13:16–18), which discusses the sign of the beast that people will wear. The name of the article is “From the present revelations” and the mentioned words are presented as revelations of Jesus: “The Lord said, ‘Listen to me, I will tell you about the sign of the beast. The time has come for the sign of the beast to be introduced as obliged vaccination. The Antichrist will appear on the screen and will make a notification about the implementation of the beast’s system and the application of its sign. My children, you have been warned, be prepared’” (18/10). As in previous texts, the author of the text was not mentioned; there was only the indication “20.3.2020, S.S., rec. 19.3.2020.”

RQ2: How do the psychological topics describe the pandemic situation?

Regina is a monthly magazine. The first mention of Covid-19 appeared in the May issue, very marginally as a trivialization of this phenomenon (“[...] if Jesus had stopped the coronavirus with his miraculous intervention, stopped all hardships and problems around this provocative virus, what would have happened? Would mankind believe in Jesus Christ? I guarantee you do not” (6/5)). By this time, the Czech Republic had already finished its first major lockdown, and strict measures have been slowly released. Therefore, the downplaying problem seems inadequate to the situation in which readers of the May issue found themselves. Since the June issue, articles downplaying Covid-19 started to appear regularly in the journal.

Since the September issue, the theme of *Combat between Good and Evil* has increased. We could therefore conclude that the periodical initially downplayed the Covid-19 situation (this was supported by references to “authorities”) but later escalated its inclusion of the theme of the final *Combat between Good and Evil* (pointing out that the “End time” has already arrived). The description of the pandemic situation thus resembles a change from one extreme (denial and reducing the severity of the impact of Covid-19 on people’s mental and somatic health) to another (escalation of the situation and signs of the end of the world).

RQ3: Does the pandemic information include some coping strategies⁷⁴ offering to change past habits, including religious ones?

The theme of *Trivialization* was associated with the coping strategy of *Denial*. Meyer classifies it as a maladaptive strategy.⁷⁵ It means to ignore the problem.⁷⁶

The theme of *Combat between Good and Evil* could be contained in the strategy *Marking Religious Boundaries*. The aim of this strategy is to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable religious behavior and leads the believers to remain within the acceptable area.⁷⁷ This strategy belongs to the broader group of strategies called “Religious methods of coping to gain believers comfort and closeness to God.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Meyer, “Coping with Severe Mental Illness,” 268.

⁷⁶ Carver et al., “Assessing Coping Strategies,” 270.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 523.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

7 Discussion

The theme of *Trivialization* was associated with the coping strategy of *Denial*. Carver et al. described denial as a controversial strategy – it is useful for minimalizing distress, but it “only creates additional problems unless the stressor can profitably be ignored.”⁷⁹

The theme of *Combat between Good and Evil* includes the religious strategy of *Marking Religious Boundaries*. Believers try to stay within the boundaries which determine what is acceptable for a good religious life.⁸⁰ The perception of doing “right things” brings them a feeling of comfort. However, staying within the right boundaries also brings the believers a danger of closing in ghettos.⁸¹

Nevertheless, there may be more psychological mechanisms within the subthemes we have created. The subtheme of *Sign of the End Times* is characterized by an apocalyptic language highlighting the “End Time” in which the reader is currently located. The actual situation could be understood as stressful, which means a threat to the reader’s well-being.⁸² The accentuation of the lack of time presses readers to make a quick decision to be on the right side. These psychological mechanisms then impede individuals from seeing the whole situation in a broader context, creating the necessary distance, and adapting effectively to it.

The subtheme of *Evil’s quest to establish a new world order* describes two groups of people – one is trying to control humanity and establish a new world order, the other must be careful about this effort. The reader is encouraged to consider carefully which group to join. The division of mankind into a group of the righteous and a group of sinners is typical of apocalyptic literature.⁸³ Here we can trace the psychological mechanism of polarization. Using symbolic language, we can say that a multicolored reality is presented in black and white. The journal *Regina* develops one polarity in the readers (“we are the right ones”) and leads them to the conclusion that “those who are on the other side must be bad.” This mechanism is typical for religious populism.⁸⁴ Seeing themselves as the last righteous people is a typical phenomenon of the apocalyptic ideas.⁸⁵

The subtheme of *Vaccination breaks the relationship with God* contains a warning that a vaccinated person cannot be saved. Thus, it strongly develops one of the basic emotions – fear. In the case of this subtheme, it seems to be the maladaptive fear paralyzing the readers and putting them under subjective stress. The fear of eternal rejection is one of the great themes of Christian faithfulness.⁸⁶ Fear is the most used emotion in right-wing religious manipulation.⁸⁷

In the subtheme of *Vaccination breaks the relationship with God*, a reference to the biblical Book of Revelation (13:16–18) was mentioned. This part talks about the sign of the beast.⁸⁸ The text in the journal compared vaccination with the sign of the beast. The sign probably originally appealed to coins with the image of the emperor.⁸⁹ Harrington perceives this sign symbolically – it is not a real print or tattoo. When Christians choose to follow Christ, they symbolically bear his sign on their foreheads, and for this they are

⁷⁹ Carver et al., “Assessing Coping Strategies,” 270.

⁸⁰ Pargament et al., “The Many Methods,” 523.

⁸¹ Halík, *Čas Prázdných Kostelů*, 153.

⁸² Smith and Kirby, “The Role of Appraisal and Emotion in Coping and Adaptation,” 1–2.

⁸³ Harrington, *Revelation*, 4.

⁸⁴ Palaver, “Populism and Religion,” 22–3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁶ Beier, *A Violent God-Image*, 12. See also Craney et al., who found a positive correlation between fear of hell and negative religious coping. Cranney et al., “Hell Anxiety as Non-pathological Fear,” 875.

⁸⁷ Palaver, “Populism and Religion,” 24–5.

⁸⁸ “It forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to be given a stamped image on their right hands or their foreheads, so that no one could buy or sell except one who had the stamped image of the beast’s name or the number that stood for its name. Wisdom is needed here; one who understands can calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number that stands for a person. His number is six hundred and sixty-six” (Rev 13:16–18). The text is taken from *The Catholic Bible*.

⁸⁹ Harrington, *Revelation*, 163; Collins, “The Apocalypse (Revelation),” 1009.

under his protection. On the contrary, others symbolically wear the sign of the beast and belong to God's adversary.⁹⁰

The reference to Revelation in the mentioned text indicates the use of the World-historical (Church-historical) interpretation,⁹¹ when Covid-19 vaccination is perceived as the current fulfillment of what is described in the book. However, we can also talk about the End-historical ("futurist") interpretation,⁹² as information about Covid-19 is presented as a sign of the approaching end of the world. The description of the Covid-19 pandemic as a fulfillment of Revelation prophecy may also indicate a narcissism of the author of the text. The readers are pushed to develop their narcissism by thinking of their excessive importance – it is they who live in a time that is crucial to the history of the world. Harrington mentions that the futuristic approach represents a misunderstanding of the Book of Revelation. The idea of a chosen minority to be saved while God punishes other people in the country is not Christian.⁹³ Christian eschatology in the conception of Vatican II is marked by the hope of the Church walking toward heavenly Jerusalem and centralization of Christ's redemption.⁹⁴ These ideas are completely absent in the analyzed texts.

As already mentioned, in most cases the articles lacked any mention of the author (e.g., "The message of Jesus Christ received by John Leary, Thursday 23 April" (19/9)). In some cases, the author was mentioned (e.g., Nana Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana), but it was not stated when his words were said, which source was used for the translation or the name of the translator. Emotions, especially fear, were often used in the text. Another important tool presented in the analyzed texts was polarization – there was an effort to present the complex situation in black and white. According to the guidelines of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic,⁹⁵ the magazine *Regina* cannot be considered a credible source of information.

8 Study limits and future research

The first limit is the danger of subjective analysis of data by qualitative research. The text analysis was analyzed by two researchers. Both authors are psychologists with a research orientation to qualitative and combined data analysis. The authors analyzed the texts individually and then discussed the results of the analyses together. The intersection of the results of the analyses of both authors was the fact that the texts possessed much unfounded information stimulating fear and anxiety instead of active coping strategies to promote the reader's hope of improving the epidemiological situation. The articles we have analyzed did not include bibliographic sources to support their ideas. The authors of the Thematic Analysis recommend researchers to be clear and explicit about what they are doing. What they say they are doing needs to match up with what they actually do.⁹⁶ Our analysis was done honestly with the procedure previously described in Section 5.

The second limitation is the restriction of our analysis to articles in which Covid-19 has been mentioned in relation to religion. There were more references to the disease in the journal, but not connected to religion, such as medical information (disparaging the seriousness of the disease, deception of results of examination of Covid-19), or information supporting Donald Trump in his attitude to the disease. Analyzing these texts as well would contribute to a greater understanding of the dynamics of Covid-19 information in the periodical. Nevertheless, this would lead to a change in the research question. Our research was primarily focused on information related to religion. The object of our interest was not strategies to manage

⁹⁰ Harrington, *Revelation*, 161–4.

⁹¹ Ibid., 15.

⁹² Ibid., 15.

⁹³ Harrington, *Revelation*, 16.

⁹⁴ Bordoni and Ciola, *Gesu Nostra Speranza*, 155–7.

⁹⁵ "Dezinformace," "Pět Nejčastějších Manipulativních Metod."

⁹⁶ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 96.

the disease from a medical point of view. We were interested in how the pandemic situation was described and which coping strategies were offered to change habits (including religious ones).

The third limit of our work is related to translation. The periodical occasionally presents articles translated from English. Our analysis was based on texts translated into the Czech language (as the texts were presented in the journal). By translating it back into English, there may be slight changes in the meaning of the original text. Since the journal does not mention the sources used (or only mentions vague references such as “You Tube interviews”), it was not possible to gain the original text.

In future research of this kind, we would like to analyze other religious periodicals informing about the Covid-19 pandemic. We are interested in which coping strategies these texts operate with to promote the mental health of readers.

9 Conclusion

Halík symbolically compares fundamentalism to kitsch: “What is kitsch in relation to art is fundamentalism in relation to religion.”⁹⁷ The fundamentalist journal *Regina* reported on Covid-19 unilaterally. At first, the disease was underestimated; later, it was presented as a sign of the end times. There is no mention of the hope that one day the disease will be overcome, and there is no emphasis on the personal responsibility of everyone. The emphasis on relationships with God, spiritual connectedness with others, and a benevolent world view (mentioned above as positive religious coping)⁹⁸ are missing. In the analyzed texts, there was an effort to find the illusory certainty and security that is typical of religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, “a faith that has never been blinded, which has not experienced darkness, can hardly help those who have not seen and cannot see.”⁹⁹ If a large part of the population of the Czech Republic does not trust traditional religious institutions but also does not reject faith in the supernatural,¹⁰⁰ then *Regina* magazine can hardly address them. “The spread of infectious diseases is one downside of the unstoppable process of globalization, the multifaceted interconnection of our world. However, we must not respond to these infectious diseases by spreading even more dangerous infections: nationalism, populism, and fundamentalism, building walls, and closing in ghettos.”¹⁰¹

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⁹⁷ Halík, *Čas Prázdných Kostelů*, 32.

⁹⁸ Pargament et al., “The Brief RCOPE,” 51.

⁹⁹ Halík, *Dotkni se Ran*, 230. “The religion of the ‘illuminated’, the pharisee, sinfully confident, unharmed religion, serves instead of bread a stone, instead of faith, ideology, instead of the testimony theory, instead of helping instructions, instead of the mercy of love only commands and prohibitions.”

¹⁰⁰ Hamplová, *Religion in Czech Society*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Halík, *Čas Prázdných Kostelů*, 152–3.

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