The mitigating responses of confucian religious institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic, which causes global catastrophes, has called for urgent responses from global communities, including religious communities around the globe, to adjust and find effective solutions to overcome the threatening dangers of the Corona virus. In relation to that phenomenon, this article investigates the responses of Confucian religious institutions in Indonesia to the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on Confucian theological perspectives, institutional policies, and concrete actions taken during the pandemic. The study employs a comprehensive research approach, combining qualitative and documentary analysis, field observations, interviews, and discussions with religious leaders and their community members. The research reveals that Confucianism values wisdom, compassion, and courage during the pandemic, seeing it as a chance for personal and spiritual growth. Confucian religious institutions implemented health protocols in their religious rituals and actively helped affected communities by distributing sanitizers, offering psychological support, and organizing vaccination drives. This research underscores the vital role of religion in educating, supporting, and assisting people in overcoming pandemic challenges. It will begin by introducing the COVID-19 pandemic briefly, then delve into the theological responses of Confucianism to the pandemic and subsequently explore how Confucian institutions adapted their religious rituals and helped the people overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 Introduction

In addressing the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, Fachrul Razi issued Circular No. SE. 1 of 2020, on March 13, 2020, concerning the Implementation of the COVID-19 Handling Protocol in places of worship to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.[1] The circular states some instructions, first, every house of worship must pay attention to and maintain cleanliness. Second, every house of worship is advised to prepare a body temperature detection device at the entrance to check and ensure that participants in worship activities are in good health in order to avoid the spread of the virus. Third, every religion should constantly remind its followers to follow health protocols. Fourth, all religious communities should observe the washing of hands regularly and thoroughly, wear masks, maintain social distancing, and ensure that houses of worship have access to washing hands with soap and water or hand sanitizers. Fifth, religious leaders and the faithful are encouraged to disseminate information on cough/sneeze etiquette and so on, such as displaying posters about the importance of applying cough/sneeze etiquette and proper procedures in places of worship. Sixth, religious leaders are also asked to regularly update information about COVID-19 including providing communication media, information, and education on preventing and controlling of COVID-19 virus in areas which are easily accessible.[2] Seventh, all religious people are invited to continue to be vigilant and always pray to God to protect and provide protection and safety for all from various calamities and dangers, especially from the threat of COVID-19.[3, 4]

Based on that governmental instruction, this article focuses its scope on the responses from Confucian religious institutions in line with three fundamental questions of this research: first, what are the Confucian theological views on the COVID-19 pandemic? Second, what are the policies of the Confucian religious institution vis-à-vis the need to adapt to religious activities in response to the challenges of the pandemic? Third, what are the concrete actions of solidarity organized by Indonesian Confucian communities to address the COVID-19 challenges?

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2 Research methodology

The research employed a comprehensive approach, combining qualitative and documentary analysis, field observations, interviews, and discussions. It aims to provide insights into Confucianism’s theological views, formal policies, and actions of solidarity during the pandemic. The study involves the examination of Indonesian Confucian institutional documents related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These documents include circulars, appeals, recommendations, guidelines, and official statements issued by the Indonesian Confucian High Council (MATAKIN) and other relevant institutions. These documents serve as valuable sources to understand the formal policies and theological views of Confucianism in response to the pandemic.

It also involved observations of Indonesian Confucian religious communities’ practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It included attending Confucian ceremonies and rituals, observing adherence to health protocols, and documenting any adjustments made to religious activities in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Aside from observations, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with key leaders and members of Indonesian Confucian religious communities. The interviews explored their perspectives on Confucianism’s theological views regarding the pandemic, the formulation of formal policies, and the implementation of guidelines in religious activities. It combined multiple data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of Confucian religious institutions’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

By examining theological views, formal policies, and actions of solidarity, the study aims to shed light on the role taken by Confucian religious institution in Indonesia to contribute to the broader discourse on religious responses to public health emergencies.

3 Result and discussion

3.1 Confucian religion’s view on the COVID-19 pandemic

In Confucianism there is a long-standing life principle: “Wise, Compassionate and Courageous. This is the virtue to be pursued. So those who want to live must have one determination” (Zhongyong, XIX:8).[5, 6] Based on this principle, the Indonesian Confucian High Council (MATAKIN) emphasized the role of individuals, families, and communities in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone must be committed to taking care of themselves and their families, and communities to avoid COVID-19 viruses and be able to survive the pandemic.[7]

Everyone is asked to be wiser, wiser in thought and action, knowing what to do and what not to do, what to prioritize, and what to set aside. In every endeavor, Confucians must give priority to a sense of humanity, be full of love for family and society, and not worry under any circumstances.[8-10] Each person should have the courage to confront all problems, including during a difficult time of pandemic. To be strong in determination requires courage. To be courageous, they must be well-informed. To acquire knowledge, they must learn to examine the nature of things.[11, 12]

Confucians are asked to understand what COVID-19 is, how it spreads, the extent of its consequences, and what must be done to prevent its transmission.[8, 13] To be well-informed about COVID-19, they can take preventive measures properly and consciously, thus anxiety amongst people will be reduced or eliminated. This spirit is based on Zhisheng Kongzi’s own example. “When Zhisheng Kongzi is free at home, his demeanor is pleasant and natural, happy and patient.” (Lunyu VII: 4).[5, 6] Zhisheng Kongzi’s attitude became an example for Confucians. When being forced to stay at home due to the pandemic, each should act in a comfortable manner, filled with hope, patience, and optimism to pass the challenge for the good of all away from anger and hopelessness.[14, 15]

The COVID-19 pandemic is also perceived as a blessing in disguise to families; it’s an opportunity for families to have quality time together.[13, 16, 17] Children may be more devoted to their parents. Likewise, parents have the opportunity to connect and care more for their children. In fact, there are many things that can be done at home. The available time can be used to do activities together to clean the house, organize the house, cook, sing, watch TV, do gardening, and especially pray so that the COVID-19 pandemic will end soon and life will return to normal again.

The pandemic moment can also inspire the believers to deepen the teachings of Confucianism, read the Bible, recite sacred verses/Nien Jing that will bring peace of mind, and reflect on what each person has done in this life.[18, 19] Religious values manifest not only in worship but also in the conduct of daily life.

Confucianism holds that there is always change in life.[16, 18, 20] Thus, in times of great change, people should learn to adapt to the surrounding environment. Though difficult and life-threatening, Confucians should be mindful of the situation and find a creative way out of the pandemic. Confucians should always have strong faith, act wisely, and create a comfortable atmosphere full of love and joy in the family and their surroundings.

3.2 Formal policies taken by the confucian religion in Indonesia to face the COVID-19 pandemic

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian Confucian High Council (MATAKIN) and all their respective stakeholders have played very significant roles in helping people who were affected by the economic crisis.[7, 21] Since the beginning of lockdowns and large-scale social restrictions, MATAKIN has tried to issue policies that can be used as guidelines for activities for all Confucians in Indonesia. These policies are specifically related to ceremonies and rituals of worship:

1. MATAKIN Policy Appeal regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, 20 March 2020
2. Chinese New Year Worship Guidelines contained in the Chinese New Year Message 2572 Kongzili, February 6, 2021
3. Guidance for Condolence Ceremonies, for Provincial, Regency, City and MAKIN/KAKIN/Other Confucian Community Leaders, March 30, 2020, 109/MJ/03/2020
4. Guidance Manual for Grief Ceremony Services for People Died Due to Positive COVID-19, March 30, 2020
5. Guide to the Ceng Beng Ceremony, Service and Social Service, April 3, 2020, 110/MJ/04/2020
6. MATAKIN Policy Call, regarding the Spike in COVID-19 Cases, 17 June 2021

Those instructions and policies led the Confucian communities and temples in Indonesia to adjust their religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the safety of their followers as follow:

1. Online Worship: Confucian temples and communities turned to online platforms to conduct virtual worship services, lectures, and discussions.
2. Reduced Gatherings: Onsite communal gatherings were limited in size or temporarily suspended to comply with government health guidelines. When possible, smaller groups were conducted while maintaining social distancing and health protocols.
3. Safety Measures: Temples and religious centers implemented safety measures such as mandatory mask-wearing, temperature checks, and hand sanitizing stations for those who attended onsite services.
4. Outdoor Ceremonies: Some rituals and ceremonies were conducted in open-air settings to reduce the risk of virus transmission. This allowed for physical distancing while still maintaining important religious practices.
5. Hybrid Approaches: Some Confucian communities have also adopted hybrid approaches, combining online and in-person elements to cater to the needs and comfort levels of their members.
6. Educational Campaigns: During the sermons and reflections, the leaders within the Confucian community also engaged in educational campaigns to promote public health guidelines and encourage responsible behaviour among their followers.

3.3 Solidarity actions of confucian communities with the wider communities in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic

In building solidarity and cooperation according to the principle “in the four corners of the ocean all humans are fellow brothers and sisters,” MATAKIN has been actively involved in raising aid for all communities affected by Covid 19, including:
1. Solidarity distributes Hand Sanitize, March 24, 2020
2. Self-Isolation Flyer and Poster Guide by MATAKIN, April 6, 2020
3. Flyer and Poster Alert Symptoms of Covid 19, 20 April 2020
4. Surgical Mask Assistance Solidarity for Religious Organizations, 11 June 2020
5. Covid 19 Task Force, Active Case Information and Assistance Centers, Jakarta, Banten and West Java 20 June 2020
6. MATAKIN and Perkhin Covid 19 Pandemic Psychology Consultation Center, 13 July 2020
7. MATAKIN and Perkhin Covid 19 Task Force, Free Vaccination, 15 August 2020

These charitable activities have played a critical role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities, helping to alleviate suffering, address immediate needs, and promote resilience during the challenging times of the pandemic.

4 Conclusion

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has become a global catastrophe and has infected hundreds of millions of people and caused millions of deaths, and ravaged the global economy that has affected humanity, Confucian religious institutions in Indonesia has played their role to help mitigate the threat of the pandemic. The Confucian High Council of Religion (MATAKIN) responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic by issuing circulars, appeals, recommendations, and guidelines as well as organizing humanitarian social assistance activities.

The views and directions were derived from the core teachings and traditions of Confucianism which were in dialogue with the context of the community during the COVID-19 pandemic while drawing input from science and technology as well as collaborating with various related parties such as the government, non-governmental organizations, and wider communities.

MATAKIN encourages Confucians to get involved and actively participate in overcoming the pandemic by trying to break the chain of the spread of the Coronavirus and help individuals and communities who were exposed to or who have become directly or indirectly victims of COVID-19 virus as well as assisting the government, medical team, and all who are working on the front lines in treating, curing, and overcoming the pandemic challenges.

The Confucian religion adjusts the procedure for celebrating its religious worship in such a way that it can comply with health protocols such as in the form of online worship activities, the use of masks, social distancing, hands washing, hand sanitizing, body temperature checking, instructions to increase body immunity, et cetera.

In the face of a pandemic that threatens individual and collective life, religious institutions need to contextualize the implementation of existing religious rites without undermining the meaning and purpose of the rites themselves. With the help of technology and science, Confucian religious communities have managed to adjust to the existing challenges and help their community members and the wider communities to pass through the difficult period of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

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