



THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Religion and Spirituality during
the challenging times



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Theology

Department of
Pastoral Theology,
Liturgy & Canon Law

Malta
2021

This study was prepared by the following members of the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law within the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta.

Rev. Prof. Paul Galea

Dr Pauline Dimech

Prof. Adrian-Mario Gellel

Rev. Dr Kevin Schembri

Rev. Dr Carl-Mario Sultana

ABSTRACT

The idea of conducting a study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our local population emerged in June 2020 during one of the regular meetings of the academic members of staff of the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law at the University of Malta. The scope was to understand some of the effects which the COVID-19 pandemic might be having on the people and to reflect constructively on a global crisis which was difficult to understand and very hard to live.

Taking into consideration the social distancing restrictions which were being imposed at the moment, it was decided to conduct an online survey using an anonymous questionnaire which could be filled by anyone. Apart from the demographic information, it covered 6 sections related to what are considered as classical dimensions of religion, that is, beliefs, personal experience, the community, ritual, and the socio-cultural dimension.

The number of entries was 1102 with a margin of error of 3% (95% confidence interval). The participants' cohort consisted of 385 Males (M) (35%), and 711 Females (F) (65%). For the sake of comparison, these were subdivided into 5 groups according to age brackets which were arbitrarily divided and labeled. These were, Youths (Y) ages 16-30 (N=221, 20%); Adults (A) 31-49 (N=433, 39%); Middle-Aged (M) 50-59 (N=237, 22%); Seniors (S) 60-69 (N=139,13%); and Retired (R) 70-90 (N=71, 6%).

In the course of this study some basic questions were raised like: Is there a link between natural disasters and increased religiosity? Has there been a shift in religious behaviour, such as from public to private prayer? Do these disasters lead to an increase in prejudice towards others, God included? Did this pandemic trigger more existential conflicts and religious struggles? How did isolation and social distancing effect relationships at home and in the community?

The results showed consistently that there was none of that apocalyptic end of the world interpretation of the pandemic, typical of fundamentalist religious groups. If one were to ask the question of whether there is a relationship between natural disasters and increased religiosity, with this data in hand one would answer generally yes, except for the youngest generation. One major outcome was that the majority of participants made use of the media to worship and they liked celebrating from home. At the same time, they do not think that churches (public worship) have become superfluous. They continue to see churches linked to their religious identity. They missed going to Church especially receiving the Eucharist. This, again, is not reflected in the responses of the majority of the youngest group. One would have to see how this will be reflected when churches reopen and life returns to normality.

THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Religion and Spirituality during the challenging times

The present pandemic has caused much heartache and hardship. By now we all have family members or friends who have contracted the virus. Worse yet, we might have family members or friends who have succumbed to it. Those of us who have not taken sick find that the virus has thrown our lives in disarray. Working at the office or shop is not without risks. Many work from home. Others may no longer work at all. Our cities, streets and restaurants are deserted. We are now spending much more time at home with a lot of time at our disposal. Many might find this a burden as they do not know how to utilise it. This pandemic has put our life on pause. We have now more time to reflect on our lives

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Religion

The Covid-19 Pandemic has generated a lot of anxiety and mental health problems. Classical European literature mentions the possible roles of religion in responding to and coping with epidemics of contagious illnesses, such as the plague (Boccaccio 1353, Manzoni 1840, Camus 1947). How religions are coping with the Covid-19 pandemic is still early to tell. There are however some studies which speak about religious factors that have been associated with the current pandemic. A recent one in the UK (MacDonald, 2021) and another one in Poland (Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2021) are two examples. Other observations taken from newspaper articles and internet websites, are indicative of what is happening to religious beliefs and practices (Dein, S. et al. 2020). Such observations cover issues like, religious doctrinal responses; religiously related behaviour; prejudiced attitudes and behaviour towards religious groups; and tensions, strains and conflicts about religious matters. Some of these issues merit a closer attention because they are good starting points for deeper studies.

Religious doctrinal responses

A belief found in almost all religions is that the pandemic is not merely extraordinary but it marks an imminent apocalyptic change. This is held by only a small minority across all religions. Some Christians, for instance, have taken a literal interpretation of the book of Revelation and of other biblical sources in that they believe that the end of the world will be preceded by some kind of pestilence. Other religious groups, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim and recently Hindu, have neglected health preventative measures and actually helped in the spreading of the infection. Such religious interpretations are ambivalent. While offering comfort on the one hand, they have been counter-productive on the other hand.

Religious behaviour

The pandemic has affected religious practice in significant ways: cancellation of live religious services; closing religious schools; cancelling pilgrimages; prohibiting group interactions during festivals and celebrations. As an alternative, churches, mosques and synagogues have provided online streaming. As a result, Christians have been deprived of receiving the Eucharist; Jews celebrated the Passover without guests; Muslims were instructed to delay the Haj and pray at home. There were however some dramatic exceptions. Hundreds of people in March last year, took part in a funeral procession in the town on Bnei Brak, of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who died of Covid-19, jamming closely together in contravention of social distancing rules as police reportedly looked on without taking action (Staff, 2020).

This April, almost 3 million Hindu pilgrims bathed in the Ganges River as part of this year's Kumbh Mela festival, raising concerns that the festival could become a super spreader event. In fact, the day after, the festival's second-holiest day, India's Health Ministry reported nearly 170,000 new coronavirus infections. The situation since then has gone out of control (Pathak, 2021).

Is there a link between natural disasters and increased religiosity?

Prayer is a common way of dealing with adversity. When catastrophe strikes people seek closeness to God (Bentzen, 2019). Religion can facilitate coping in situations beyond their control (Pargament, 1996). There is evidence for the intensification of prayer activity during this pandemic (Coppen, 2020). Searches for "prayer" on Google escalated in April 2020 and have doubled with every 80,000 new registered cases of Covid. Also searches for the terms God, Allah and Muhammed increased significantly. Benzen (2020) speculates that the Covid-19 pandemic encouraged religious coping.

Is this a shift from public to private prayer?

Prayer.com, the world's no.1 prayer app and website has been highly successful in attracting new subscribers and revenue (Heilwell, 2020). A Pew poll (Pew Research Center, 2020) – 55% of Americans prayed for the pandemic to end, including 15% of those who "seldom or never prayed", and 24% who endorse no religion. This, despite the fact that the last 4 decades have seen a decline in religious affiliation.

The Gallup Report

"The most dramatic result (of the pandemic in religion) has been the exceedingly quick shift of religious services from in-person to online worship". In fact, 19% of Americans reported their faith has intensified; only 3% reported it got worse (Newport, 2020); 50% "prayed for an end of the spread of the virus"; "attended religious services in person less frequently" and "watched religious services online on TV instead of in person".

Religious activity has changed: collective worship has become difficult; online worship is increasing and private worship/prayer appears to have been considerably on the increase.

Prejudice

Some Christian and religious sources have suggested that the pandemic is a punishment for some kind of collective sin, such as, gay marriage, sexual immorality and abortion. More moderate faith leaders reject this idea as they prefer to see God as love. Some see it as a punishment against Jews or some other population, such as the Chinese for their policy of state atheism and persecution of Muslims. Prejudice against others is likely to increase distress and in some cases precipitate mental ill-health.

Religious struggles

Major life crises have the potential to shake people not only psychologically, socially and physically but also religiously and spiritually resulting in religious struggles. These can take many forms, such as feelings of anger towards God; a feeling of abandonment or of being punished by God; concerns that this may reflect the work of the devil or demonic forces; doubts about the truths of one's religious faith; questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose in life; struggles with living up to one's moral values; and conflicts with other people about religious issues (Exline et al., 2014). It is expected that the Covid crisis will trigger more of these struggles.

Religious struggles and greater distress

A significant body of research has tied religious struggles to greater distress. These include psychological problems, physical decline and a greater fear of mortality (Pargament and Exline, in press). Lee (2020) reported higher levels of struggle with God associated with elevated scores on a Coronavirus Anxiety Scale. One could expect a rise in Covid-19 related religious struggles among various religious groups and subsequent mental health related problems, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidality.

A Study with the Maltese Population

The idea of conducting a study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our local population emerged in June 2020 during one of the regular meetings of the academic members of staff of the Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta. The scope was to understand some of the effects which the COVID-19 pandemic might be having on the people and to reflect constructively on a global crisis which was difficult to understand and very hard to live. During the preliminary discussions, several ideas were put forward. Taking into consideration the social distancing restrictions which were being imposed at the

moment, together with the timeframe within which to conclude this study, it was decided to conduct an online survey using an anonymous questionnaire which could be filled by anyone. This strategy intended to gather information about how people interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic and the partial lockdown in Malta. The questions were meant to gauge the personal experiences of the participants, how COVID-19 impacted their sense of existential meaning, their faith, their sense of community and how they coped with the crisis. Some of the questions in this survey were inspired by the above mentioned studies and by other surveys conducted elsewhere. Others targeted specifically the local situation.

Participants were recruited randomly through a sponsored open invitation using the Facebook Page of the Faculty of Theology, as well through mailshots to all the contacts of the Faculty of Theology, the academic, administrative and technical staff of the University of Malta and the Junior College, the students and alumni of the University of Malta, and other stakeholders. The questionnaire was available for 3 weeks between the 30th November and 21st December 2020. During this period, 1102 responses were recorded. The data was then transposed on to the SPSS (IBM 27) program to produce the descriptive statistics and to make the needed contrasts.

One has to acknowledge that this kind of methodology has both advantages and disadvantages. While on the one hand it facilitates a quick and abundant response rate, on the other hand it reaches only those who have access to internet and who are familiar with the computer. In fact, the demographic data confirms that the majority of participants held a university degree. For this reason, one has to accept the results as representing a particular, albeit an important chunk of the Maltese society, and be careful when it comes to extending them to the whole population.

The Questionnaire

The tool was an anonymous online questionnaire drafted collegially by the departmental members, consisted of 43 questions and a number of sub questions. Apart from the demographic information, it covered 6 sections related to what are considered as classical dimensions of religion, that is, beliefs, personal experience, the community, ritual, and the socio-cultural dimension. Two other sections covered ministerial outreach and how participants envisaged a way forward. The entire questionnaire required around 20 minutes to complete. The following is a brief description of the sections.

Section 1 was related to the *Demography* of the participants and included questions meant to gather personal information, which apart from the generic information of age, occupation, etc. included other personal preferences, such as likes and dislikes, etc.

Section 2 was the *Beliefs* part. These questions were meant to tap on personal beliefs, such as whether one's perception of God and feelings changed during these times; or whether one was inclined to give a religious interpretation to the pandemic.

Section 3 sought to explore the *Personal Experience* of the participants during the partial lockdown. It included questions like whether they felt more, or less anxious, exhausted, resigned, stressed, prayerful, closer to God, to family, friends, etc.

Section 4 explored *Community* issues particularly how the suspension of mass gatherings impacted one's relationship with the faith community.

Section 5 addressed the topic of *Ministerial Outreach*. It related to people's experience of a limited ministry during the lockdown.

Section 6 dealt with *Ritual* during this time especially with the experience of online worshipping.

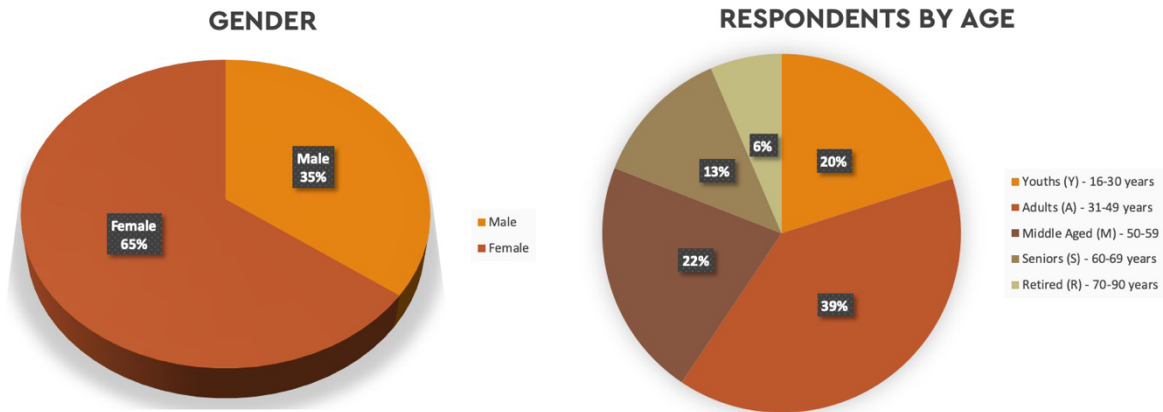
Section 7, the *Socio-Cultural* dimension explored people's reaction to the cancellation of traditional festivities, like the Holy Week and Easter celebrations, First Communion, weddings, funerals and the village feasts.

The 8th and final section named the *Way Forward*, sought to capture their reaction to proposals such as whether we should hold a celebration to mark the end of the pandemic, what would the main emphasis of such a celebration be, and how the participants see their future religious life after the pandemic.

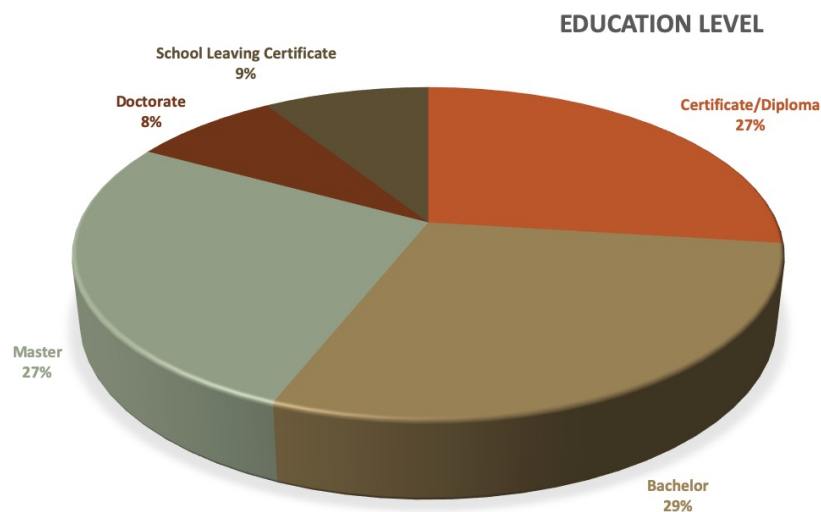
RESULTS

Section 1: Demographic Information

The number of entries was very good at 1102 with a margin of error of 3% (95% confidence interval). The participants' cohort consisted of 385 Males (M) (35%), and 711 Females (F) (65%). For the sake of comparison, these were subdivided into 5 groups according to age brackets which were arbitrarily divided and labeled. These were, Youths (Y) ages 16-30 (N=221, 20%); Adults (A) 31-49 (N=433, 39%); Middle-Aged (M) 50-59 (N=237, 22%); Seniors (S) 60-69 (N=139,13%); and Retired (R) 70-90 (N=71, 6%). Two other categories were also isolated for making contrasts. These were based on gender and education level, more specifically between graduates and non-graduates. The result of these contrasts produced only minor differences from the other groups and these will be referred to in due course. As regards their state, 50% of the Y group were single as to be expected. In fact, the number of those who were single decreased with age to an average of 14% for the other groups. There was an average of 5% who were cohabiting but these were found only in the first 3 groups, Y, A, and M. Widowhood was reported only in the R group (16%), and separation/ annulment was recorded only among the M group (6%)

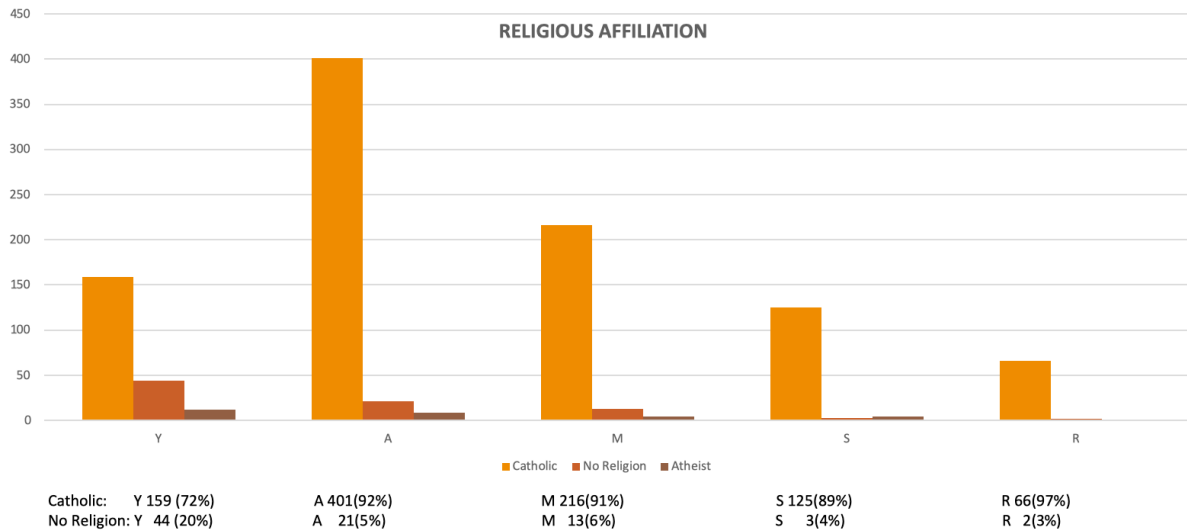


As for the education level, the sample is rather skewed as 91% reported having received tertiary education: Certificate/Diploma (27%); Bachelor (29%); Master (27%); and 8% a Doctorate. A total 9% had a school leaving certificate.

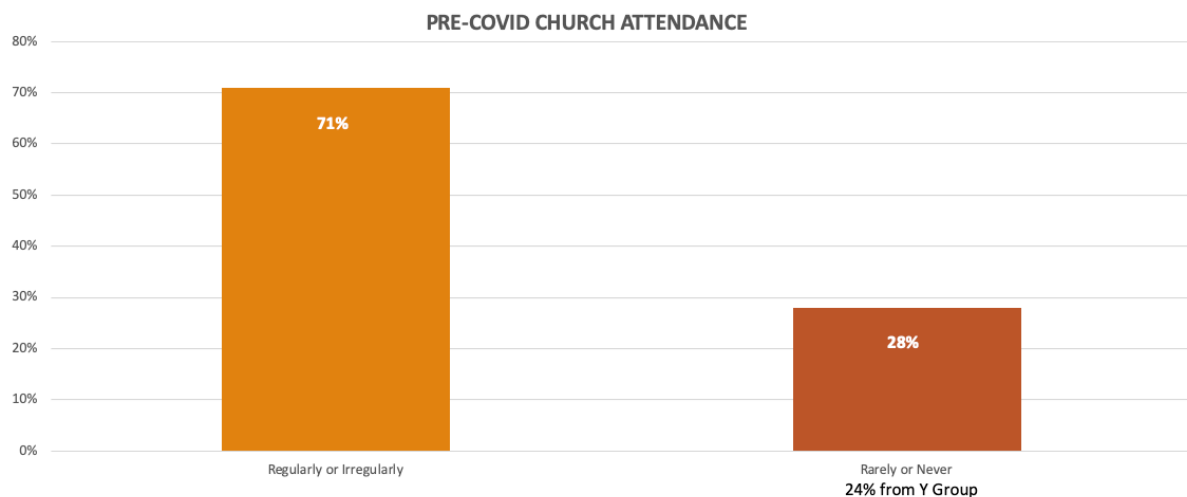


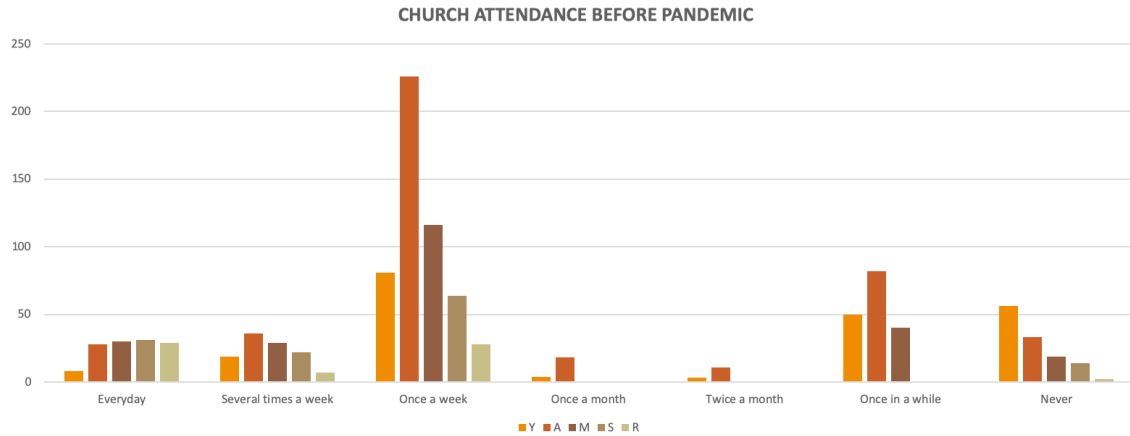
As far as their occupation is concerned, 47% worked at a professional level; 21% at managerial level; and 15% at a clerical level. There were 6% who declared being skilled workers, and 3% as homemakers. This means that 83% of participants were involved in professional, managerial and clerical positions.

Concerning which religion they adhere to, an average of 88% declared to be Catholic. Of the rest, 11% declared to embrace no religion at all or to be atheists. The majority of these are to be found in the Y group (25%).



As regards Church Attendance before the pandemic an average of 46% reported going once a week. To this, one should acknowledge another 11% who go several times a week, 11% who go daily, and 3% who go once or more a month (These are not cumulative percentages but reflect overlapping responses). This means that 71% attend regularly or irregularly, whereas 28% do so rarely or never at all. It is significant to note that 24% of the latter are from the Y group. The rest is scattered along the other groups. Those who attend more than once a week are from the older groups. The Non-Graduates group (N=99) obtained similar results as the Y group. This is explained by the fact that 33% of this group is under 39. This suggests that the major discriminating factor on this variable is related more to age rather than to their education level.

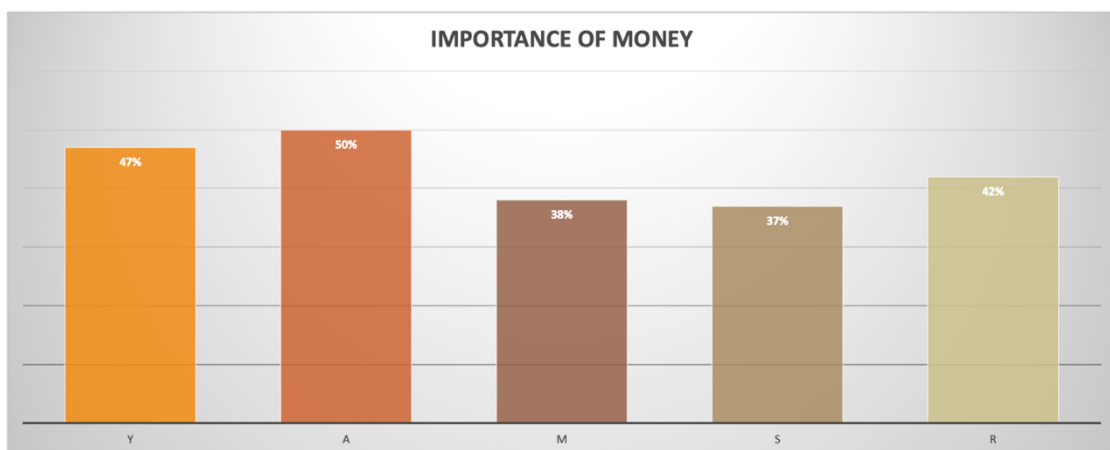




Those who attend more than once a week are from the older groups. The Non-Graduates group (N=99) obtained similar results as the Y group

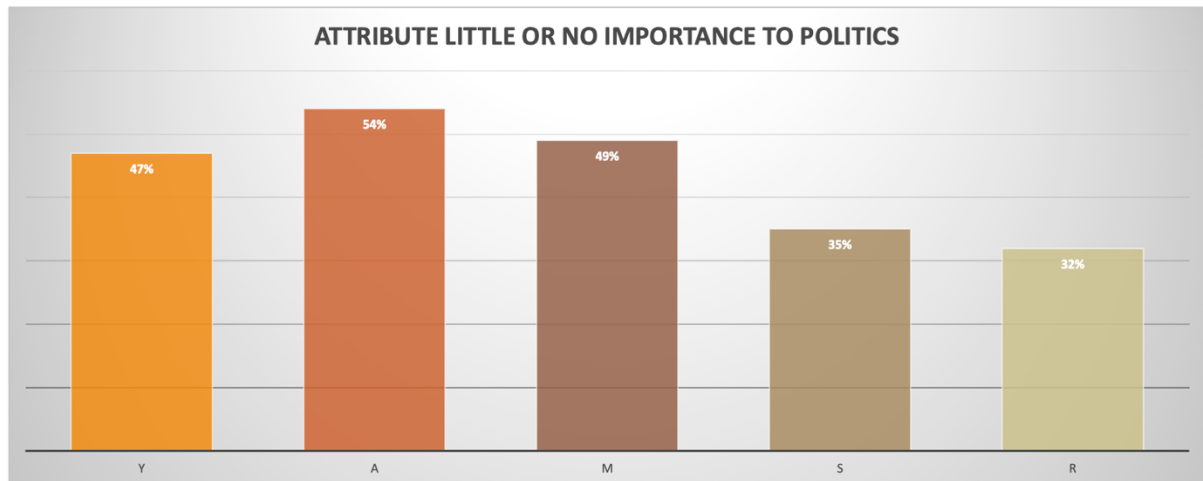
The next questions delved into the personal beliefs of participants. They had to answer on a scale from 1 to 5 on how important to them were the family, to be a parent, friends, the career, politics, etc. The family is evidently extremely important for all those who answered (Y 95%; A 81%; M 99%; S 97%; R 95% (Average 98%). The importance of being a parent was acknowledged mostly by those in the older age brackets, most likely corresponding to their actual state of life: Y 46%; A 76%; M 79%; S 76% and R 88% (Average 75%). Friends also very important for most of the participants especially for the young: Y 89%; A 73%; M 73%; S 75% and R 66% (Average 75%). Pets seem to be also important mostly for the young: Y 53%; A 47%; M 42%; S 34% and R 36%.

The importance of a career is highest among the young and it progressively weakens with age: Y 78%; A 71%; M 49%; S 35%; and R 32%. When it comes to the importance of money, 44% took a neutral stance. For the rest, it was people in the younger age brackets and the retired who gave it high importance: Y 47%; A 50%; M 38%; S 37%; and R 42%. Similar results were recorded regarding the importance of entertainment. Here another 40% pronounced themselves as neutral. The rest of the scores being spread along the age groups in descending order: Y 62%; A 42%; M 37%; S 24% and R 34%. Being independent was cherished by all the age brackets with an average of 79%.

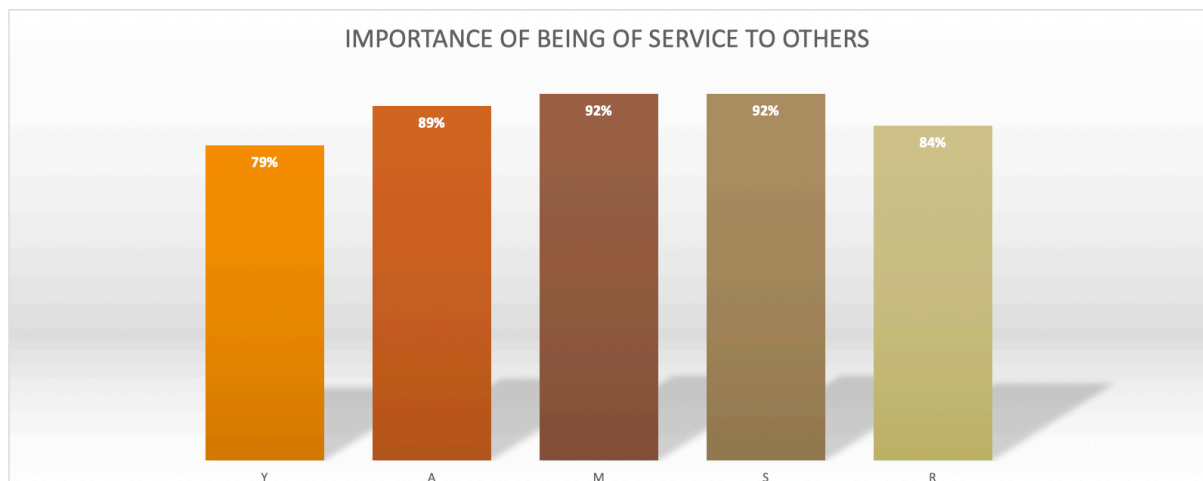


44% took a neutral stance. For the rest, it was people in the younger age brackets and the retired who gave it high importance

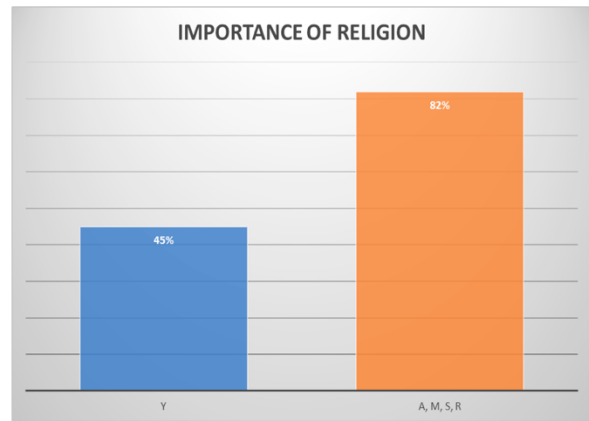
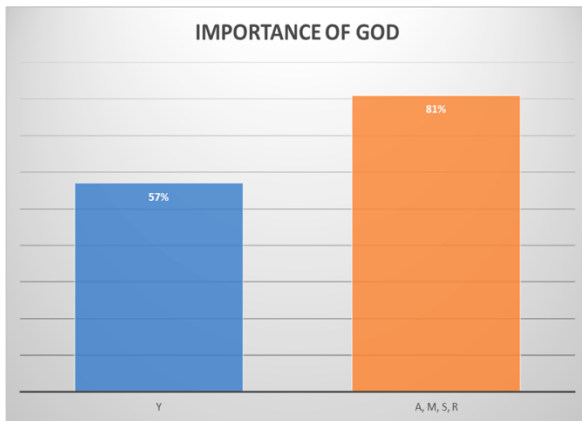
An interesting outcome from this sample is the importance the participants attribute to politics. While one third took a neutral approach (29%) for the rest, the balance was largely for not being that important: Y 47%; A 54%; M 49%; S 35%; and R 32%. (Average 48%). Only an average of 24% saw it as important. This lack of interest in politics is not reflected in a lack of interest in others. The responses to the statement of what importance they gave to being of service to others was very high, averaging 73%: Y 79%; A 89%, M 92%; S 92; and R 84%.



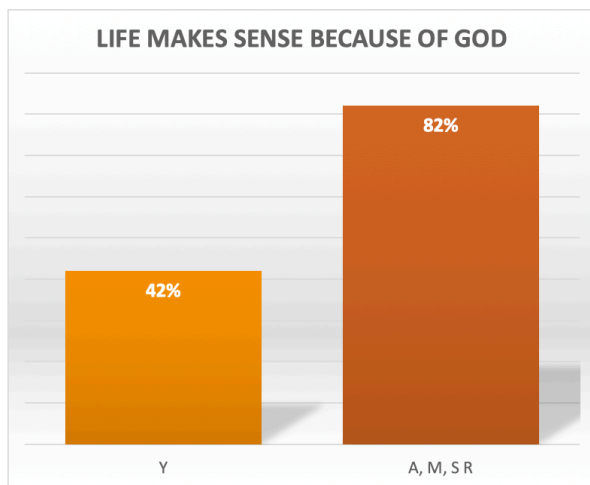
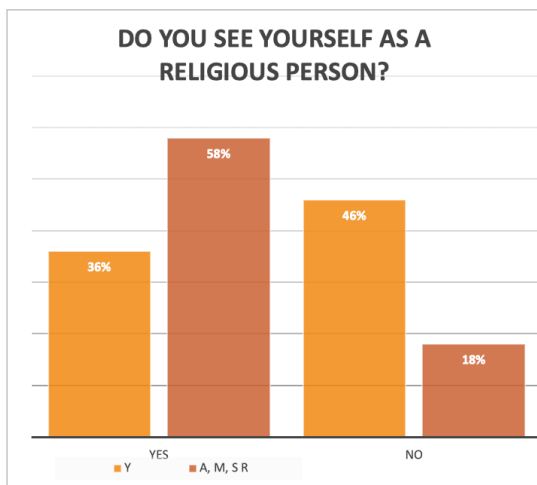
29% took a neutral approach; 48% did not give it much importance; only 24% saw it as important



The other responses in which the Y group varied from the average scores was in relation to questions of how important to them were God and religion. Whereas the average response for this question amongst the other 4 groups was 81%, for the Y group it was 57%. Similar results were seen with regards to the importance of religion. For the other groups the average was 82%, whereas for the Y group it was 45%. To the more explicit question of whether they see themselves as a religious person, 46% of the Y group said no, and only 36% said yes, in contrast with the other 4 groups where the negative responses averaged 18%, and the yes responses were 58%.



Another set of questions which also showed a marked difference between the youngest group and the other groups related to whether life makes sense, and whether it makes sense because of God. For the first question the Y group's positive reply was 46%, compared to the 71% average of the other groups, and for the second question the Y's positive replies were 42% compared with the remaining average of 82%.

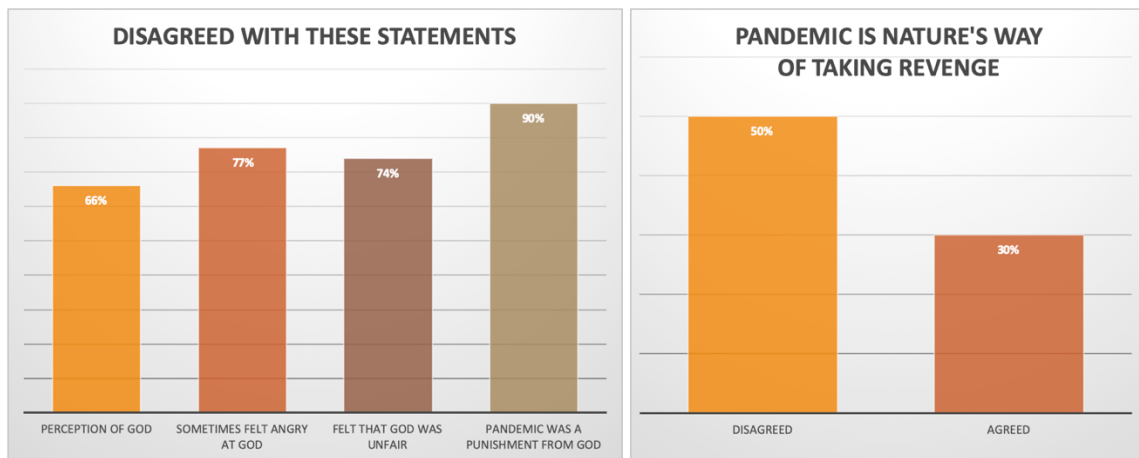


Section 2: Religious Beliefs

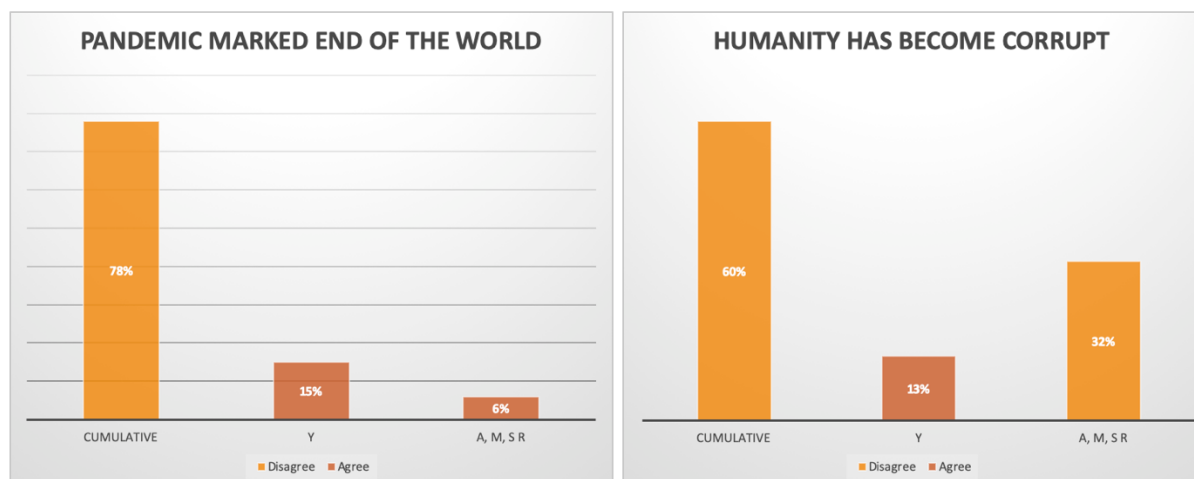
The questions here were meant to tap on personal beliefs, such as whether one's perception of God and feelings changed during these times of crisis or whether one was inclined to give a religious interpretation to the pandemic.

There was a general consensus between all groups on the following items: Perception of God changed (66% disagreed); Sometimes felt angry at God (77% disagreed); Felt that God was unfair (74% disagreed); Pandemic was a punishment from God (90% disagreed). Some intergroup differences could be seen on the following items: Feared they would die (62% disagreed; 29% of the R group agreed); Religious people should

not be afraid of the virus (77% disagreed, but this was higher among the R group, 88%); Pandemic was nature's way of taking revenge (50% disagreed, 30% agreed).



However, the more marked differences between groups, especially between the Y and the rest could be seen on the following items: Felt closer to God during pandemic (50% of Y group disagreed, compared to the 60% of remaining 4 groups who agreed); Faith started to shake (51% of Y group disagreed compared with the 62% of the other groups); Faith in God increased (53% of Y group disagree compared with the 46% of the other groups who agree); Pandemic marked the end of the world (while 78% of all groups would disagree, 15% of the Y group agreed, compared with the 6% of the remaining groups). To the statement that Humanity has become corrupt there were 60% overall who disagree, but there were 13% of the Y group who agree, compared with the 32% from the other groups who agree.



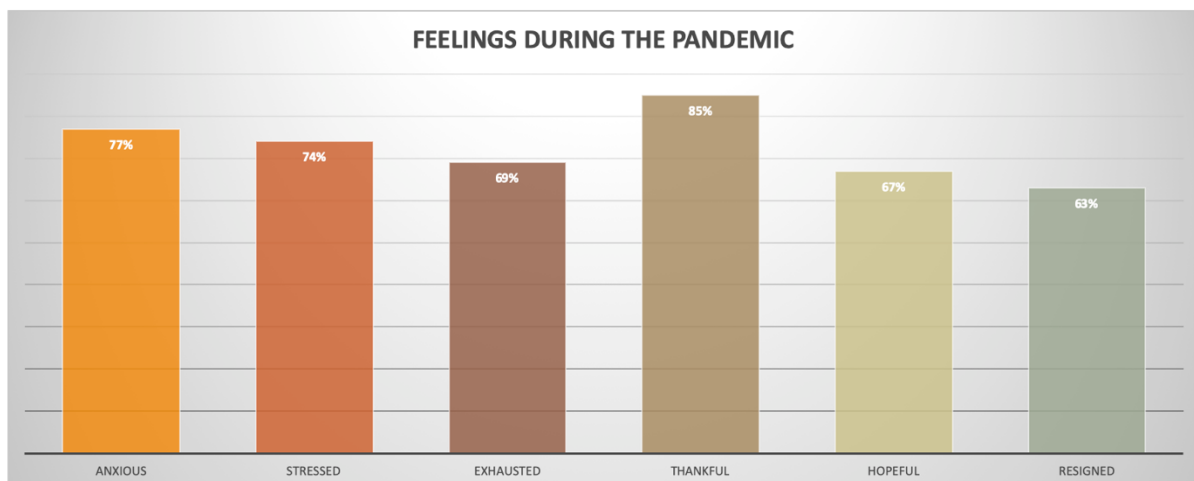
The last question in this section was on which moments were especially demanding on one's faith. Seeing mass burial graves in other countries was on top of the list (27%); followed by hearing huge number of infections rising daily (14%); and 3rd, having a family

member or a friend test Covid positive (11%). There were also some interesting differences between groups on this selection. Not being able to visit relatives (6%); or being diagnosed with Covid-19 (4%) were reported exclusively by the S and R group, being stuck at home (3%) was selected by the youngest 3 groups.

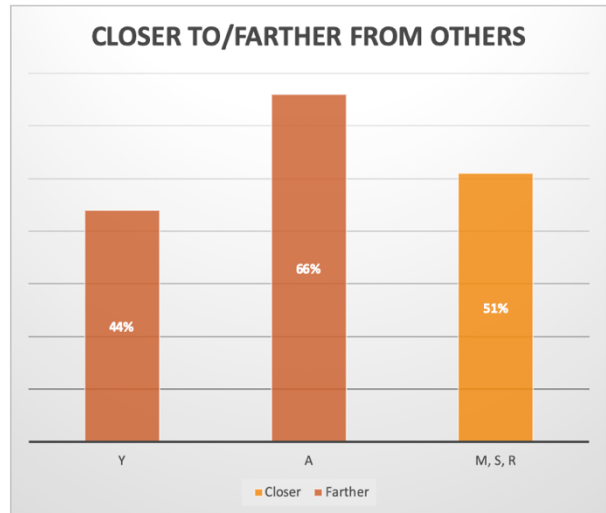
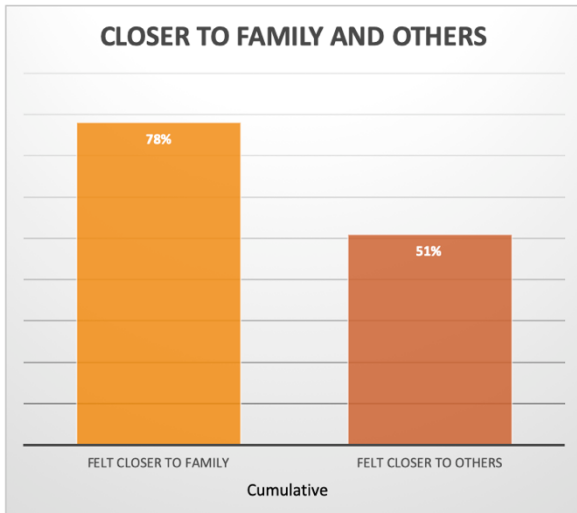
Section 3: Personal Experience

The questions related to this dimension sought to get first-hand information on participants' experiences during the lockdown period, especially those related to stress and the coping measured adopted, particularly religious coping.

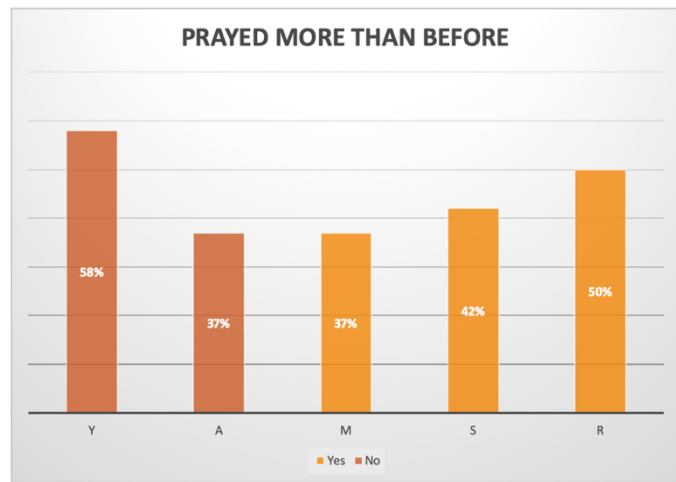
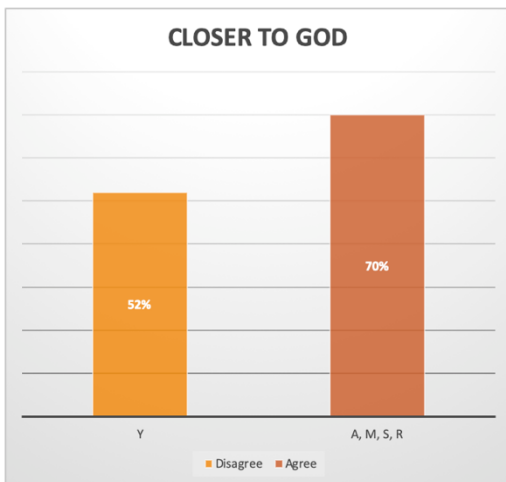
As to whether the lockdown period was a source of more anxiety and stress the replies show a general consensus amongst all the ages: Anxious (77%); Stressed (74%); Exhausted (69%). At the same time, they all felt Thankful (85%); Hopeful (67%) and Resigned (63%).



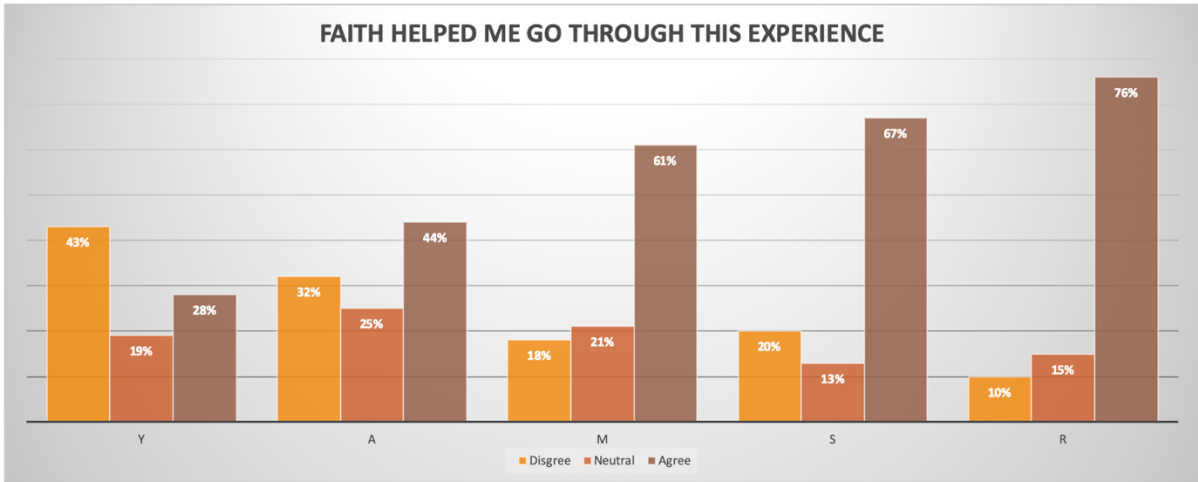
Similar questions meant to gauge how the lockdown affected the participants' relationships, the majority replied that they felt Closer to the Family (78%). But results were mixed when it came to Feeling closer to Others. In fact, 51% who agreed on this came from the 3 higher age groups. The Y and A groups recorded feeling Farther from Others at 44% and 66% respectively. There was agreement among all about feeling distant from their neighbours (68%). To the question of whether they felt Closer to God, the split between the age groups was evident once again. It was the older groups who in their majority answered positive (70%), whereas 52% of the Y group disagreed.



To explore whether a type of religious coping was adopted, two specific questions were asked related to prayer. One was whether prayer was a source of consolation, and the other was whether they prayed more than before. As for the former, the Y and the A groups answered in the negative (44%, 34%). It was the other groups that answered in positive way with the percentages rising progressively with age (M, 52%; S, 61% and R, 77%). Similar results were noticed for the second question. While the Y group (58%) and the A group (37%) answered in the negative, the remaining groups answered positively showing also a rise with each age group, M, 37%; S, 42% and R, 50%.



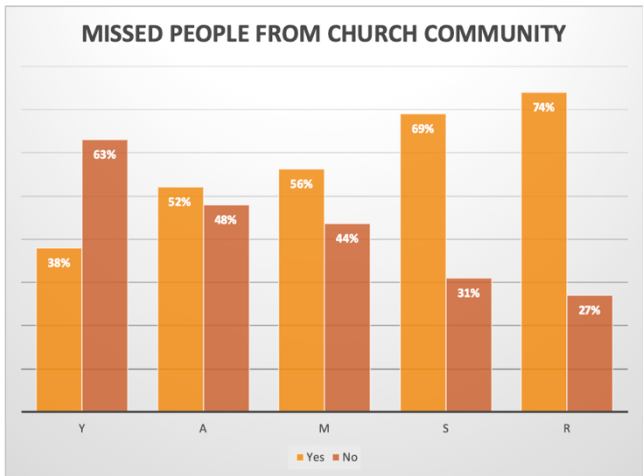
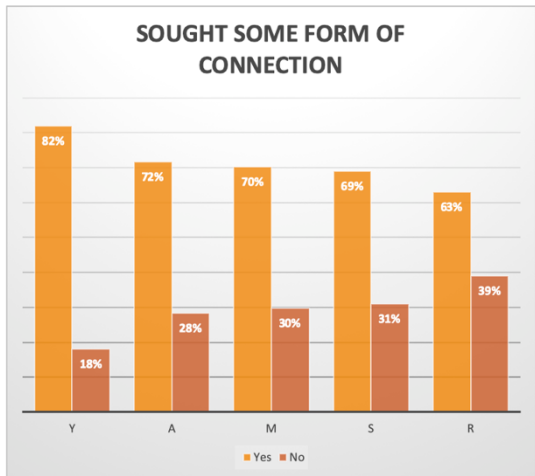
Similarly, in reply to the question of whether faith helped them go through this experience only 28% of the Y group agreed in contrast with an average of 62% of the other 4 groups who agreed.



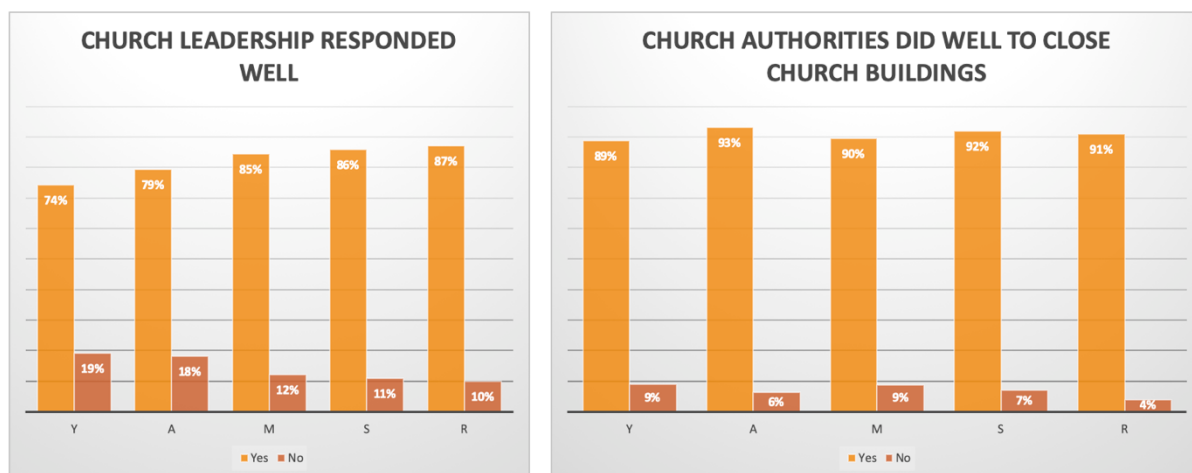
More specific questions tapping on possible alternative forms of religious coping gave negative results. These dealt with whether they practiced Mindfulness or Yoga, or whether they made use of the Bible or any other Spiritual Text. The results across all the groups were unanimous, 77% for the former, and 66% for the latter.

Section 4: The Communitarian Dimension

Questions in this section were meant to explore forms of connectedness with others during the lockdown, and particularly with the Church community. The majority of participants, 73%, did in fact seek some form of connection with others. As to the question of whether they felt connected with the Church community, or whether they missed meeting them, the responses varied according to age. As for the first question, 74% of Y, and 64% of A said they did not feel connected, in contrast with 53% of M, 56% of S, and 53% of R who replied in the affirmative. Similar results were reported with regards to the second question. While 63% of Y said they did not miss people from the Church community, 52% of A, 56% of M, 69% of S, and 74% of R said they did.



Asked whether the Church authorities responded well to the Covid-19 crisis, 84% replied in affirmative. The great majority, 93% replied that Church leaders did well to close church buildings.



As to the question of whether they sought any help from others and what kind of help it consisted of, 79% said they did so from close family members and 33% from other family members. Another 50% sought help from friends. As to what kind of help was sought 42% said it was mental/psychological. There were 6% who needed food, and 3% who sought financial help.

Section 5: Ministerial Outreach

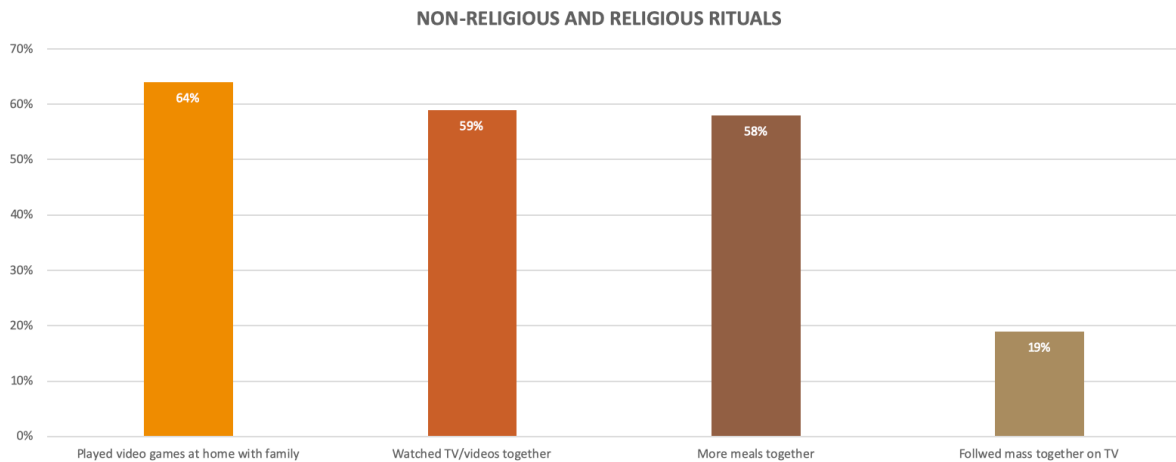
When asked whether they contacted a clergy person or a lay minister during the lockdown, only 25% said they did. Of these, 7% did so out of their own request and mostly through social media (35%) or by phone (26%). The reasons for such contacts were either just checking (21%), following a worship service (16%) or for a shared prayer (11%).

When asked if they did try to reach out to others during the lockdown, 73% said they did. As to the kind of means used, 51% did so by phone, while 11% of the younger groups used the social media, compared with the 6% of the older groups. 7% of the older groups also helped by donating money.

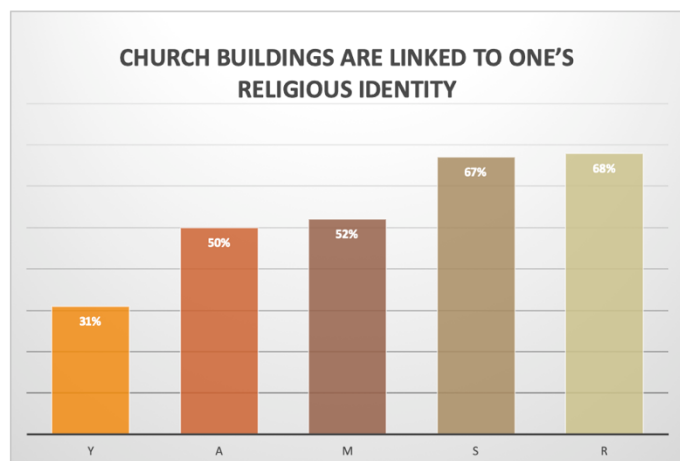
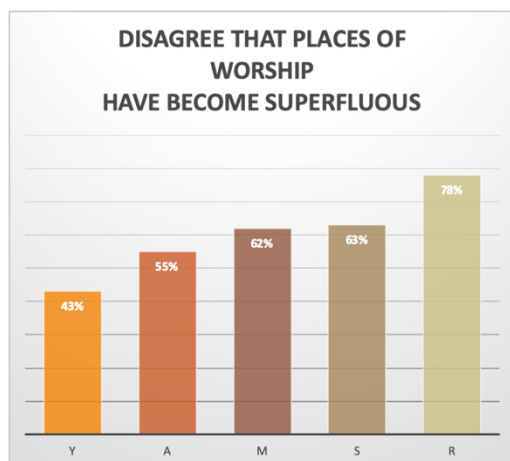
Section 6: Ritual

The questions related to this section dealt with non-religious and religious forms of ritual practiced during the lockdown. As to the former, new forms of behaviour were introduced, such as, 64% of all participants reported playing games at home with other family members. Another 59% watched videos/TV together, and 58% had more meals

together which does not seem to have been the case in ordinary times. As regards religious rituals, 19% reported having followed mass together on TV from home.

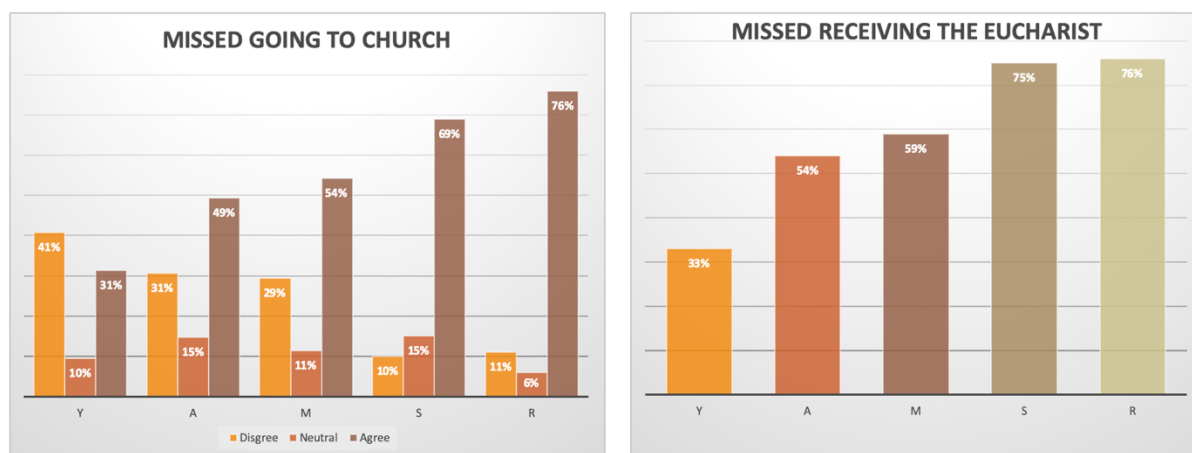


Another set of questions related to Church buildings. With regards to the statement that places of worship have become superfluous, the majority disagreed, rates rising progressively with age (Y 43%; A 55%; M 62%; S 63%; R 78%). This is repeated in response to the statement of whether the Church building is linked to one's religious identity. The agreement rate was Y 31%; A 50%; M 52%; S 67%; and R 68%. There was a general consensus on the question of whether one needs a church to pray. Those who disagreed were 58%. There was similar consensus on whether virtual contact is as good as meeting face to face. The majority, 65%, disagreed.



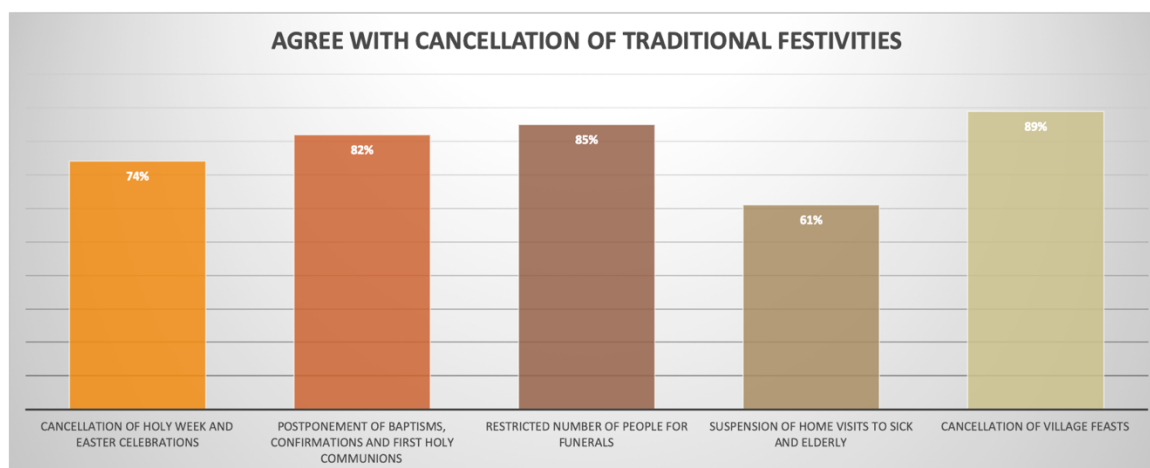
The following set of questions were meant to gauge one's feelings about the fact of not being able to attend Church services. The sharpest contrast came with the Y group with only 31% agreeing with this statement, and 40% disagreeing. The agreement rate was higher among the other groups: A 49%; M 54%; S 69%; and R 76%. Similar results can be

seen with regards to the statement of having missed receiving the Eucharist. The agreement rate was: Y 33%; A 54%; M 59%; S 75% and R 76%. As to the question of whether they missed going to Confession, there was a certain consistency in the disagreement responses except for the R group. The disagreement rate was: Y 52%; A 47%; M 46%; S 31%. It was only in the R group that a majority of 51% agreed. About the issue of not being able to attend funerals, 50% of all the participants found it hard, whereas 24% took a neutral stand.



Section 7: Socio-Cultural Dimension

This dimension explored people's reaction to the cancellation of traditional festivities, like Holy Week and Easter celebrations, First Communion, weddings, funerals and the village feasts. The responses showed a strong general agreement across the board on all the statements related to these activities. For instance, 74% agreed with the cancellation of Holy Week and Easter celebrations; 82% agreed with the postponement of Baptisms, Confirmations and First Holy Communion; 85% agreed with the restricted number of people for funerals; 61% agreed with the suspension of home visits to the elderly and the sick; and an impressive 89% agreed with the cancellation of the village feasts.

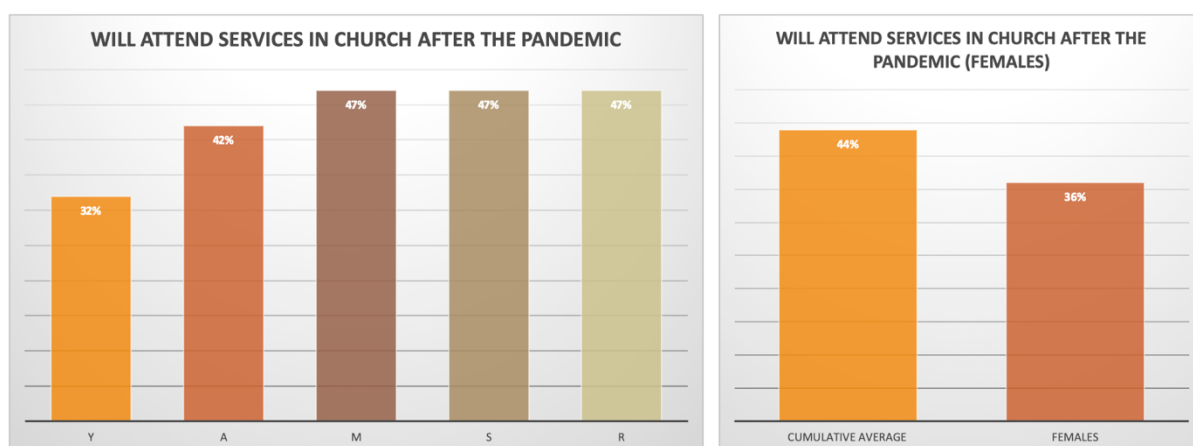


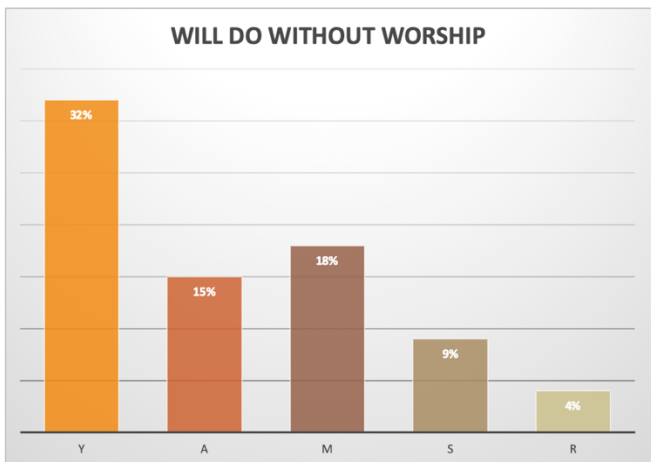
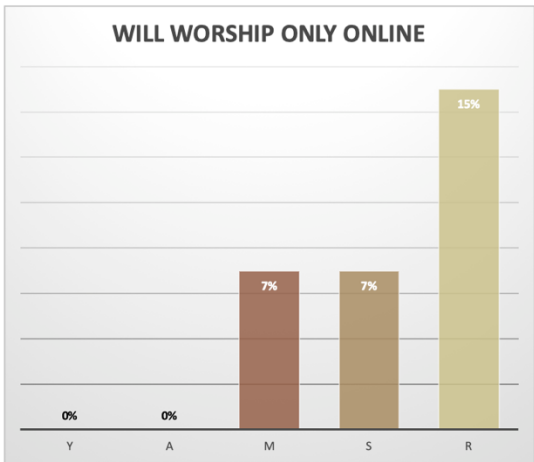
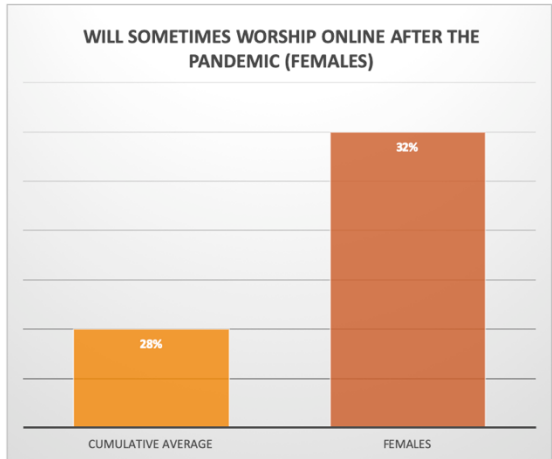
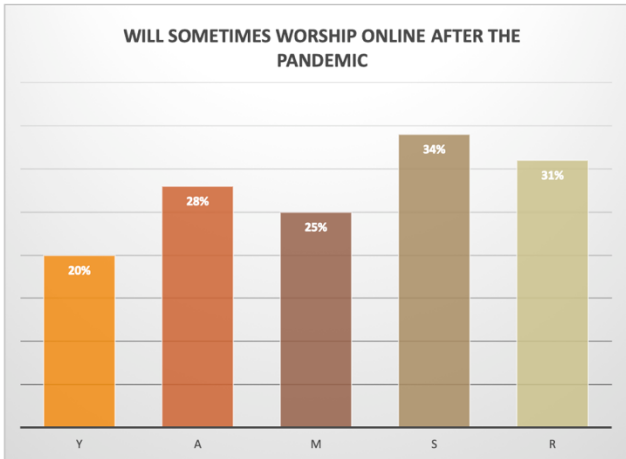
Section 8: Way Forward

The questions in this section sought to capture participants' reaction to the proposal of holding a celebration to mark the end of the pandemic, what would the main emphasis of such a celebration be, and how do they see the future of religion after the pandemic.

For the first question of holding a celebration to mark the end of the Pandemic, 65% answered in the affirmative and 35% in the negative. As to what the main emphasis of such a celebration should be, 35% said to *Give Thanks to God*. However, like in the previous sections, the responses varied between the age groups, especially between the Y group and the rest Y 15%; A 25%; M 41%; S 50%; and R 65%. The second preference was *Appreciating Life and Health* with an average of 24%. Responses here also varied with the age groups but not in a progressive way: Y 17%; A 31%; M 21%; S 12%; and R 15%. The third option was *Remembering the Dead* at 21%. Responses this time show a declining rate related to age: Y 27%; A 20%; M 20%; S 16%; and R 9%.

The last and final question of the survey related to their intentions for the future when the churches reopen. An average of 44% replied that they intend to *Attend Services in Church*. Responses here replicate previous patterns across the age groups: Y 32%; A 42%; M 47%; S 47%; R 47%. There was however a significant drop of 12% in this response among the Females group at 36%, compared with the general average. In the second place, an average of 28% said that they would *Sometimes Worship Online*. Responses here also varied along the age groups: Y 20%; A 28%; M 25%; S 34%, and R 31%. The Females' response here was 32% compared to the average 28%. Thirdly, an average of 19% said they would *Do Without Worship*: Y 32%; A 15%; M 18%; S 9%; and R 4%. Finally, an average of 9% said they would *Worship Online Only*. In this preference the Y and the A categories were missing. For the rest the ratings were: M 7%; S 7%; and R 15%.





Discussion

The most important factor to be taken into consideration is the nature of the sample. Being an online survey, it is skewed in favour of population which has received a tertiary education and therefore represents a particular segment of the population. Nonetheless, while it should not be generalized, it still conveys important information. From the demographic information one could see the importance of the family and friends; the mitigated importance of money but not of the career; and the disenchantment with politics but not with the ideal of being of service to others.

There is no doubt that the lockdown period proved to be a source of anxiety, stress and exhaustion for the majority of people who replied to the questionnaire and for various reasons. At the same time, many felt thankful, hopeful and resigned. The majority experienced isolation from others and deprivation of the everyday life habits. But many tried to keep some kind of connection especially with the family. The youngest, despite their probable major dexterity with the social media, reported of feeling most isolated from others. The elder generation missed more the physical presence of others and the routine of worshipping in church.

This study sought primarily to explore whether religiousness did feature or not in the people's life as a form of coping alongside other forms of coping.

It is quite evident that the vast majority of the people represented in this sample claimed to adhere to the Roman Catholic Religion (88%) and that 11% said to be Atheists or to have no religion at all. Other confessions are left out. This is also reflected in the response given to the question of whether they looked at alternative forms of religious coping, such as Mindfulness or Yoga, to which 70% replied they did not. One question whether this forms part of a kind of simple black or white thinking where all shades of grey are discarded. This could perhaps be the result a limited exposure to other cultures and religions, as one would expect to find in other bigger cosmopolitan cities, or to a straightforward movement towards secularization.

Another important feature that came out of this survey is the way the Y group differed from the other groups especially in terms of religiosity. It was in this group that most of the irreligiousness subsists. This is corroborated by responses such as Church Attendance. It is not surprising that out of the 28% of people who rarely or never go to Church, 24% are from the Youth category. Moreover, when assessing this variable within the Non-Graduate group, it was found that also 28% of these rarely or never go to Church. Considering that 33% of this category of Non-Graduates are made up of people under the age 39, one is led to believe that it is age, rather than the level of education which is the major discriminant variable when it comes to religiosity.

Similar results were obtained with regards to this group in their response to more explicit religious questions such as, how important is God (57%), and whether they see themselves as religious persons (36%) or spiritual persons (52%). This secular trend was reaffirmed even in times of stress as during the lockdown. As to the question of whether they felt Closer to God, more than half of the Y group disagreed (52%) in contrast with the 70% of the other groups who agreed. A pattern of an increased religiosity according to age appears as constant throughout the survey suggesting inversely a linear secularization trend along generational lines.

Worthy of investigation is the Belief section where the questions sought to explore any possible link between an increase in one's personal beliefs and the pandemic. The results showed consistently that there was none of that apocalyptic end of the world interpretation of the pandemic, typical of fundamentalist religious groups. If one were to ask the question presented in the introduction of whether there is a relationship between natural disasters and increased religiosity, with this data in hand one would answer generally yes, except for the youngest generation.

Despite this, it is worth mentioning that there was a higher rate, though small, among the Y group who agreed that the pandemic marked the end of the world (15% of the Y group agreed, compared with the 6% of the remaining groups), and a gradual increase by age among those who disagreed with the statement that humanity has become

corrupt (13%, 21%, 24%, 28%, and 43%). One has to see whether there is a correlation between a lack of religious faith and apocalyptic thinking.

The decreased adherence to the traditional faith systems could not be missed in the assessment of one's sense of belonging to the faith community and particularly during these taxing moments. While the majority of participants would seek some form of connection with others, especially family members and friends, it was only the older people who sought to connect with members of the faith community.

An interesting phenomenon that developed during the pandemic was that related to ritual, both secular and religious. The lockdown made many rediscover life in the family and sought ways and means how to spend time together. This resulted in many playing games and watching TV/videos together, and interestingly, finding more opportunity to sit down and have meals together. One has to see how this practice of eating together compares with pre-covid times and whether it will be sustained after the pandemic.

According to the already mentioned Gallup Poll, the most dramatic result of the pandemic in religion has been the exceedingly quick shift of religious services from in-person to online worship. This seems to have been the case also in the local scenario. In this survey, 56% of those who answered reported making regular use of the media for worshipping with a higher propensity from the side of the older people. While the great majority approved the attempt by the Church to move into the digital age, the older people missed receiving communion and preferred participating in Church in person. In other words, although one can still pray without going to Church, being able to do it face-to-face in a Church building is preferable for the vast majority.

This ties up with the question of whether participants would return to worship in Church when the churches reopen. An average of 44% replied that they intend to do so, numbers leaning more towards the older generation. It would be interesting to discover why fewer women intend to do so, their percentages being closer to those of the youngest group. As to the future of online worshipping, 28% said they would resort to it sometimes, and that 9% would worship exclusively online, with the younger generation completely missing on these questions. It would be also interesting to compare this with how people in other countries will react after the pandemic as some studies are hinting (McDermot, 2021), (Halík, 2020).

A final word goes for the socio-cultural dimension of religiosity during the pandemic. Despite the popularity of these events, such as First Communions, Confirmations, Weddings, etc., there was a general consensus that the Church authorities did the right thing to cancel these celebrations when it came to protecting public health. What is striking is that 89% agreed with the cancellation of the village feasts. This might sound surprising as these feasts take a prominent place in the life of most parishes and employ a considerable chunk of their resources and energy. These figures raise some doubts as

to how much support these might actually have from the majority of the people. But this goes beyond the data and the scope of the survey.

Conclusions

In the course of this survey some basic questions were raised:

1. Is there a link between natural disasters and increased religiosity?

The results show that the majority of participants felt closer to God and prayed more; many found prayer as a source of consolation; for the majority, faith helped them go through this experience. However, this was not the case with the younger generation who in their majority disagreed.

2. Has there been a shift in religious behaviour, such as from public to private prayer?

The results have shown that the majority of participants made use of the media to worship and they liked celebrating from home. At the same time, they do not think that churches (public worship) have become superfluous. They continue to see churches linked to their religious identity. They missed going to Church especially receiving the Eucharist. This, again, is not reflected in the responses of the majority of the youngest group.

3. Do these disasters lead to an increase in prejudice towards others, God included?

Most of the participants did not attribute this pandemic to God's intervention. As a result, their perception of God, whatever that was, and their feelings did not change. The majority did not attribute an apocalyptic meaning to the pandemic. Nor did they see it as a punishment for something. However, there was a stronger sentiment from the youngest group that this could have been some form of revenge by nature, and that humanity has become corrupt.

4. Did this pandemic trigger more existential conflicts and religious struggles?

The results of this survey seem to show that participants remained fairly entrenched in their positions. Though raising a fair amount of anxiety and distress the pandemic did not seem to have triggered serious religious struggles. The majority actually felt thankful, hopeful and resigned. There was however, more awareness amongst the oldest group of the possibility of dying because of the Covid-19 than among the youngest group. This could have had a bearing on existential issues more than on the rest.

5. How did isolation and social distancing effect relationships at home and in the community?

One major outcome of having to spend longer time at home was the (re)discovery of family life and rituals, such as playing games together, watching TV and maybe most importantly, to enjoy having meals together. Many of the participants looked forward

to resume face-to-face contacts in their community. Despite this, it is not certain if this will be reflected in an increase in Church attendance as a good number do not intend to relinquish worshipping online. Many approved the restrictions imposed by the Church authorities on religious gatherings and almost 89% did not mind skipping the village feast.

Religiosity as a way of coping has been subject to numerous studies and criticism. Spiritual-religious coping is the exploration of how religious beliefs, attitudes or practices reduce the emotional distress caused by stressful events of life, such as sickness, loss or bereavement, by offering meaning, consolation and resignation and making these more bearable. Some forms of religious coping may be helpful. Others are more doubtful if not harmful, such as those provided by sects and cults. It all depends on the person's disposition, the level of religious maturity and the context (Pargament, K.I. et al. 1998).

The late pioneer in psychology of religion, A. Vergote, never concealed his concerns about such coping strategies as he believed that religion can never be used as an instrument. That might also make it more difficult to distinguish from magic. A similar reasoning is shared by Gordon Allport in his classical distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religion. The former is seen as a way in which a person lives one's religion. In the latter, one uses one's religion for other purposes. Religion, most would agree, serves a higher function, primarily that of supplying meaning which is more than a mere consolation or pain killer, although these could be legitimate side effects. Religion as consolation, such as in the context of a crisis, risks fizzling out when the crisis subsides and might not impact other areas of a person's life.

In this study, it seems that the participants have shown a certain consistency both in their beliefs and unbeliefs, in that the present pandemic did not alter significantly what they held on to before the pandemic. However, it is very likely that the pandemic will bring a change in the way people will worship and practice their religiosity when the crisis is over. These results seem to hint at that. But this is a question that only time will tell. It would be interesting to monitor such changes by conducting further studies preferably with a sample which is more representative of the Maltese population, and to follow up this research with a longitudinal one.

References

- Bentzen, J. S. (2019). Acts of God? Religiosity and natural disasters across subnational world districts. *The Economic Journal*, 129 (622), 2295–2321.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/uez008>
- Bentzen, J. (2020). *In crisis, we pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 pandemic* [Unpublished manuscript].
https://www.dropbox.com/s/jc8vcx8qqdb84gn/Bentzen_religiosity_covid.pdf?dl=0
- Boccaccio, G. (1353). *The Decameron – preface. English Translation 1886* (J. Payne & R. Aldington, trans.). Giunti, Kindle. [Google Scholar]
- Camus, A. (1947). *La peste* [The plague]. Gallimard. [Google Scholar]
- Coppen, L. (2020, April 11). Will coronavirus hasten the demise of religion – or herald its revival? *The Spectator*. Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/will-coronavirus-cause-a-religious-resurgence-or-its-ruination>
- Dein, S., Loewenthal, K., Alan Lewis, C., & Pargament, K. I. (2020). COVID-19, mental health and religion: an agenda for future research, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 23:1, 1-9.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1768725>
- Exline, J. J., Pargament, K. I., Grubbs, J. B., & Yali, A. M. (2014). The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and initial validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 6 (3), 208–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036465>
- Halík, T. (2020). The Pandemic and Theology. Christianity at a time of sickness.
<https://www.durhammartyrs.co.uk/post/the-pandemic-and-theology-tomáš-hal%C3%ADk>
- Heilwell, R. (2020, March 27). This social network for churches is thriving in the coronavirus pandemic. *Vox*. Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/3/27/21194239/coronavirus-churches-online-pray-com>
- Jupowicz-Ginalska, A., Szewczyk, M., Kiciński, A. (2021). Dispensation and Liturgy Mediated as an Answer to COVID-19 Restrictions: Empirical Study Based on Polish Online Press Narration, *Religions*, 12 (2), 127.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020127>
- Lee, S. A. (2020). Coronavirus Anxiety Scale: A brief mental health screener for COVID-19 related anxiety. *Death Studies*, 44 (7), 393–401.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1748481>
- MacDonald, S. (2021). Research launched into Church response to Covid. *The Tablet*, January 29.
- McDermot, J. (2021). What I learned from saying Mass on Facebook Live for a year (from a La-Z-Boy chair). Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/03/14/facebook-live-mass-jesuit-coronavirus-catholic-240205>

Manzoni, A. (1840). *I Promessi Sposi, storia milanese del secolo XVII scoperta e rifatta da Alessandro Manzoni. Edizione riveduta dall'autore — Storia della Colonna Infame, inedita*. Milano [Milan], dalla Tipografia Guglielmini e Redaelli.

Newport, F. (2020, April 6). Religion and the COVID-19 Virus in the U.S. *Gallup*. Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/307619/religion-covid-virus.aspx>

Pargament, K. I. (1996). Religious methods of coping: Resources for the conservation and transformation of significance. In E. P. Shafranske (Ed.), *Religion and the clinical practice of psychology* (pp. 215–239). American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/10199-008>

Pargament, K. I., Brant, C. R. (1998). Religion and coping. In H. G. Koenig (Ed.), *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health*, Academic Press.

Pathak, S. (2021, April 13) Millions Flock To Hindu Festival Amid Coronavirus Spike.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2021/04/13/986686352/millions-flock-to-hindu-festival-amid-coronavirus-spike>.

Pew Research Center. (2020, March 30). Most Americans say coronavirus outbreak has impacted their lives. Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/03/30/most-americans-say-coronavirus-outbreak-has-impacted-their-lives/>

Staff, T. (2020, March 29). Flouting rules, hundreds gather for Bnei Brak funeral as police look on. Retrieved April 29, 2021.
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/flouting-rules-hundreds-gather-for-bnei-brak-funeral-as-police-look-on>