



THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Religion and Spirituality during
the challenging times

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Executive Summary

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.

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 other studies and surveys conducted elsewhere. Others targeted specifically the local situation.

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.

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.

Results

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%).

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 in its great majority (91%) 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. This could perhaps be the result a limited exposure to other cultures and religions, as one would expect to find in bigger cosmopolitan cities, or of a straightforward trend 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 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.

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.

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 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.

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, or maybe, from the more educated category of people.

Conclusions

In the course of this study 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.