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Citation style: Dobosz Dagmara, Gierczyk Marcin, Janiak Agnieszka, Piasecki Dariusz, Rajba Beata. (2022). Transformations of Religiosity during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic-On the Example of Catholic Religious Practices of Polish Students. "Religions" (Vol. 13, iss. 4 (2022), art. no. 308), doi 10.3390/rel13040308



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Article

Transformations of Religiosity during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic—On the Example of Catholic Religious Practices of Polish Students

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Abstract: This paper attempts to identify the changes in religiosity among Catholic practitioners in Poland that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the changes in the realization of religious practices by students (N = 354). A questionnaire prepared by the authors was used for the study. We sought to answer the question of the extent to which the socio-demographic characteristics of the subjects, a history of COVID-19, and the death of a family member due to SARS-CoV-2 infection differentiated the subjects' opinions about religiosity and their undertaking of religious practices. The paper also addresses the issue of media-facilitated religious practices. The study showed that the frequency of religious practices was influenced by the perceived religiosity of the family, the religiosity of the respondent, and the declaration concerning the belief in God. The same factors most often significantly differentiated respondents' opinions on COVID-19. No relationship was confirmed between having COVID-19 and subjects' beliefs about the pandemic or frequency of religious practice. Among the respondents, the pandemic did not intensify the practice of religion. In the face of danger, respondents did not turn to God; there was no revitalization of religion. The situation of limiting the physical experience communion of the Church was treated not as an acute undersupply but as an opportunity or a pretext to abandon the practice of religion.

Keywords: COVID-19; religiosity; religious practices; function of religion; pandemic; students



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Academic Editor: Brandon Vaidyanathan

Received: 10 February 2022

Accepted: 30 March 2022

Published: 31 March 2022

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1. Introduction

Diseases and plagues of all kinds have accompanied humans from the very beginning. The civilizational advancements, expansion of empires, population growth and climate change every so often influenced the emergence and spread of various types of epidemics. In limit situations, such as illness or death of a loved one, people often turn to religion for support and to religious content, as evidenced by the research of Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unique changes in rituals and religious services. Religious practice was restricted due to the closure of churches or a reduction in the number of participants. Indirect participation in religious practices, through the media, was proposed as an alternative.

Although a lot of Poles declare themselves believers (87.4%), with a vast majority declaring themselves as Catholic, participation in Catholic religious practices has been declining for thirty years now. The number of non-practicing people is growing the fastest among people aged 18–24, and the percentage of regular practitioners is also falling in this group (CBOS 2021). Considering that the religiosity of young adults is a developing phenomenon (Rydz 2014) and research reports show that during the pandemic some

young people rediscovered the value of their religion and deepened their relationship with God (Zareba and Mariański 2021), we decided to study how the religious practices undertaken by young people have changed in the face of COVID-19 and the expansion of the religious offer with practices implemented with the help of the media (Meza 2020). The research was exploratory, preliminary, and fragmentary, with Polish students selected as the research group.

1.1. *The Aim of This Study*

The aim of this study was to find out how the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic was related to changes in Catholic religiosity on the example of the implementation of religious practices. We assumed Walesa's viewpoint that religious practices are an indicator of the religiosity of an individual or a group. According to the author, the most important religious practices include participation in the Eucharist, receiving Holy Communion, personal relationship with God, expressed in regular prayer, participation in optional services, observing fasting, religious customs, reading religious literature (books, magazines) (Walesa 2005, p. 33). The study also addressed the issue of religious practices with the use of the media. According to Meza (2020), many churches increased their online offer during the pandemic (a variety of activities via various media, in particular via the Internet) to overcome the disruptions caused by the coronavirus. Assuming that the pandemic can be a time of religious conversion (Bentzen 2021), we decided to check how it influenced the amount and type of religious practices adopted by students, both in a collective form, in parishes, individually, in families and through the media. According to Walesa, religious practices "are the most observable and concrete manifestations of religiosity. They are also the most obvious form of connectedness to the religious community" (Walesa 2005, p. 33). The detailed questions also sought to elicit to what extent the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the history of the COVID-19 disease and the death of a family member caused by SARS-CoV-2 infection differentiated the respondents' opinions on religiosity and their undertaking religious practices.

The results of the study, that is the answers to specific questions, were also supposed to be an initial attempt to confront fundamental question: was it recognized that religion invariably has a meaning-making and integrative function at the time of the pandemic?

1.2. *These Social and Psychological Functions of Religion*

Religion has been recognized as an essential element of culture in known civilisations, a crucial part of its core (Huntington 2005). Due to its fundamental function for society, religion has been the subject of interest of sociology since its recognition as a scientific discipline (Durkheim 1898; Weber [1963] 1993). Classical sociological theorists such as Max Weber and Emil Durkheim, despite their differences in describing the ways of functioning of religion, saw in its similar meanings: meaning-making, legitimizing (of the existing social reality), integrating (Weber [1963] 1993; Durkheim 1990). According to Durkheim's theory, religion is a fundamental component of social life. In his view, by providing knowledge about the world around it, religion facilitates coping with reality and gives meaning to existence (Durkheim 1990). Religion, therefore, has an important social function—it creates, maintains, and strengthens social solidarity. Religious festivities bring people together by creating a unity of experience and social bonding (Durkheim 1990). According to Weber, religion helps humans cope with the challenges of fate, gives meaning to suffering, helps to accept injustice (Weber [1963] 1993).

These social functions of religion—taming the difficult and making sense of the senselessness of suffering and death—seem particularly compelling for the psychology of religion. The psychology of religion emphasizes three dimensions of human functioning: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural. These factors influence specific behaviours of an individual or group to God that are captured in concrete religious practices. The cognitive dimension concerns religious awareness, that is, the level and quality of its understanding concerning God. A major factor in this dimension is the memory of the religious expe-

rience. The emotional dimension plays a fundamental role in a person's religiosity, as it accompanies experiences, stimulates prayer (strengthens or weakens it), and helps make various decisions and take actions. This dimension, therefore, relates to concrete religious practices. On the other hand, the behavioural dimension concerns social behaviour, where the religiosity of an individual or group realistically affects the actions taken and the social relationships (Krok 2005).

Park's (2005a, 2005b) understanding of religiosity seems extremely interesting and still understanding of religiosity seems extremely interesting and relevant, especially during the pandemic. She looked at religiosity in the context of both physical and mental health. Based on her research on coping with stress, she showed that religiosity plays a key role in overcoming stress and coping with stressful life experiences (Park 2007; Park and Cohen 1993; Park et al. 2008). In limited situations, such as illness or death of a loved one, people often turn to religion for support and religious content, as evidenced by the research of Folkman and Moskowitz (2004).

Hence, turning to religion is one of the most basic stress management strategies (Ross et al. 2009). Traditionally, in social psychology, it is assumed that religious practices can also play an additional role. They constitute a social affiliation seal membership in groups, especially in small communities (Gross 1971). Thus, they can also be interpreted in terms of conformist behaviour. In a pandemic, it is expected that when conformist practitioners are given an excuse to abandon religious practices, they will use it.

1.3. Religiousness of Catholic Youth

Young people are a barometer of changes and social moods. The situation of adolescents and young adults, their way of perceiving the world, and their aspirations and experiences, are considered to be a measure of changes that are taking place and will take place in the near future (Guzik and Marzęcki 2018). Moreover, getting to know the views and attitudes of this age group is extremely important, because nowadays young people are increasingly influencing the older generation. In many studies, the religious attitudes and practices of young people are treated as one of the dimensions characterizing the generation group. Research conducted among adolescents makes it possible to discover the direction and pace of transformations of religious attitudes and behaviour.

The period of early adulthood is associated with mental processes that result from both the individual's previous experiences and the anticipated future. Most of the research on the religiosity of adolescents is carried out in the normative understanding of development, which assumes the stages of development of the structure and functions of religion. The religiosity of young adults as a developing phenomenon is defined as a stage of personal-reflective faith (e.g., a structural concept of faith development or the development of religious thinking and identity) (Rydz 2014). Young people at this stage of life are characterized by the so-called authenticity of religiosity. Its formation is related to the shaping of the worldview, and within it—own views and religious beliefs, and the formation of the ideological foundations of religious practices (Róžański 2016). Some studies indicate that the process of higher education changes the content of beliefs to a more liberal one, because the religiously diverse environment of universities favours more inclusive beliefs. Other research suggests that higher education does not have a major impact on religious beliefs and practices (Mayrl and Uecker 2011). Simultaneously it is emphasized that religious beliefs in this age group are associated with important social ties, such as relationships with parents, peer groups and religious communities. Some studies have found that parental religiosity can still influence religious beliefs in the student population. Young people whose parents were more likely to attend church were more likely to maintain traditional beliefs about God (Smith and Snell 2009).

Compared to Europe, Poland has a high percentage of believers, with the majority declaring themselves to be Catholic. At the same time, research shows that in recent decades there have been noticeable changes in the religious attitudes of subsequent generations. Faith becomes more and more selective, individualized and axiologically relativized, which

brings Poles closer to the patterns of religiosity characteristic of Western Europe. These changes are faster in the group of adolescents and young adults (Guzik and Marzęcki 2018). In addition, although the level of religious practice among academic youth is clearly lower than in the entire Polish society (Zaręba and Mariański 2021), compared to other European countries, young Poles stand out in terms of the declared level of religious commitment and activity in the field of religious practice, which is one of the highest in Europe (Stachowska 2019). For example, in the group of young adults (16–29), the percentage of declared Catholics was: 82% in Poland, 54% in Ireland, 23% in France and 10% in Great Britain. The percentage of young adults declaring no religious affiliation is as high as 91% in the Czech Republic, 70% in the UK, only 1% in Israel and 17% in Poland. Weekly participation in the Holy Mass is declared by almost half of young Poles, compared with 27% Portuguese, and 24% Czechs and Irish. Poland, next to Israel, Portugal, and Ireland, is one of the countries with the highest declared participation in religious practices, especially worship and prayer (Bullivant 2018).

1.4. The Pandemic in Poland and the Ability to Practice Religion

The Catholic faith and accompanying practices are recognized by Poles as an important area of life. In 2018, 92% of Poles identified themselves as Catholics. Only a few (1%) declared being of a different religion (Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, among others) or Christianity in general (2%), or described themselves as non-denominational, agnostic, atheist (4%). At the same time, research shows progressive secularization of Polish society (Zaręba and Zarzecki 2018). The 21st century has seen a marked decline in religious practice in Polish society, especially among young people. The understanding of religiosity has also changed, and it is currently preferred in a more individualized and less institutionalized form. Increasingly, religious precepts are not guidelines for everyday conduct (CBOS 2015; Zaręba and Mariański 2021). We were interested in whether the constraints of the pandemic would affect young people's religious activities, thus deepening the secularization observed earlier, or whether the COVID-19 pandemic as a major stressor would cause young people to turn to religion (Bentzen 2021).

Restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic imposed in 2020 limited access to worship services and forced religious organizations to shift most of their activities to other media where through various social actors, e.g., churches, priests, it was possible to connect with the faithful who were able to participate in religious practices. As of 25 March 2020, Poland limited the number of people who could actively participate in a church mass to five. Additionally, the faithful participating in the liturgy were legally required to cover their mouths and noses. Beginning 20 April 2020, the limit of people who could attend the Eucharist was gradually increased. The allowed ratio was 15 m² per person, while in May it was 10 m². (Mikołajczak 2021, p. 372). On 12 March, Regulation No. 1/2020 of the Permanent Council of the Polish Bishops' Conference was issued, which included recommendations to the bishops of Polish dioceses on ways to participate in Catholic rituals (Ciesielski 2021).

In view of the danger to health and life (according to can. 87 § 1, can. 1245 and can. 1248 § 2 of the Code of Canon Law), we recommend that diocesan bishops grant dispensations from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays until March 29 to the following faithful: a. the elderly, b. persons with symptoms of infection (e.g., cough, runny nose, elevated temperature, etc.), c. school children and youth and their adult caregivers, d. persons who are afraid they will get infected. Dispensation means that it is not a sin to be absent from Sunday Mass at the indicated time. At the same time, we encourage those making use of the dispensation to practice individual and family prayer. We also encourage spiritual communion with the community of the Church through radio or television broadcast, or online streaming (PC of the Polish Bishops' Conference 2020).

The dispensation was extended until 29 May. Another dispensation was implemented as of 17 October 2020 and lasted until 20 June 2021.

2. Methods

The study was conducted among Polish students using a questionnaire about the religiosity of the respondents and the impact of COVID-19 on the frequency of religious practices. The questionnaire consisted of seven sections. The respondents completed questions about their age, gender, place of residence (large city, mid-sized city, small town/village), and experience of illness or loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. Additionally, the respondents were asked to rate their own and their family's religiosity on a 5-point scale. The respondents were also asked to indicate the frequency of religious practices before and during the pandemic—on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 means “Never”, 2—“Sometimes”, 3—“Often”, 4—“Every day” and 5—“Several times a day”). Adopting Chmura's (2009) distinction between prescribed (mandatory) practices and devotions, the research focused on two practices belonging to the former group, that is Mass attendance and individual prayer. Mass attendance is among the strictly required patterns of religious life and is heavily emphasized in parish ministry (Mariański 2010). In contrast, the frequency of prayer is an indicator of religiosity in its private dimension. Although individual prayer is an optional practice, some Catholics believe that it is an obligatory practice, the abandonment of which constitutes a grave sin. A decline in the rate of regular prayer may foreshadow changes in regular Sunday practice, as there is usually a clear link between the frequency of daily prayer and attendance at Sunday Mass (Zareba and Mariański 2021). Additionally, the respondents specified the mode of practice—traditional or through the media.

The primary objective of the study was to find out how students' religious practices developed during the pandemic. It was assumed that a crisis situation would trigger one of the basic coping strategies, which is turning to religion (Ross et al. 2009). On the other hand, it was expected that conformist practitioners would use the pandemic as an excuse to abandon religious practice.

2.1. Analyses

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27 software. To compare the respondents' responses about their religious practices before and during the pandemic, a series of Wilcoxon tests were performed, and in the case of statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$ or less), data on changes in religious practices were shown as percentages for clarity.

2.2. Participants

There were 354 respondents of whom the majority were women (72.3%). Men made up 26% of the study group, with the rest identifying their gender as other than the previously mentioned. Because the survey was conducted on a group of university students, the vast majority—nearly 80% of the respondents—were in the 18–24 age group. Three-fourths of the respondents attended a secular university or college and nearly one-quarter attended a Catholic university. When asked about the place of residence, respondents most often indicated a medium-sized city—38.4%, 34.2% of respondents declared living in a small town or village, while 27.4% of respondents indicated living in a big city. Nearly one-third of the students when asked about their attitude toward faith responded that they did not practice faith at all; the second largest group was those who practiced every Sunday and sometimes on weekdays (37.6%). The remaining respondents practice every Sunday (32.2%) or less frequently (Figure 1).

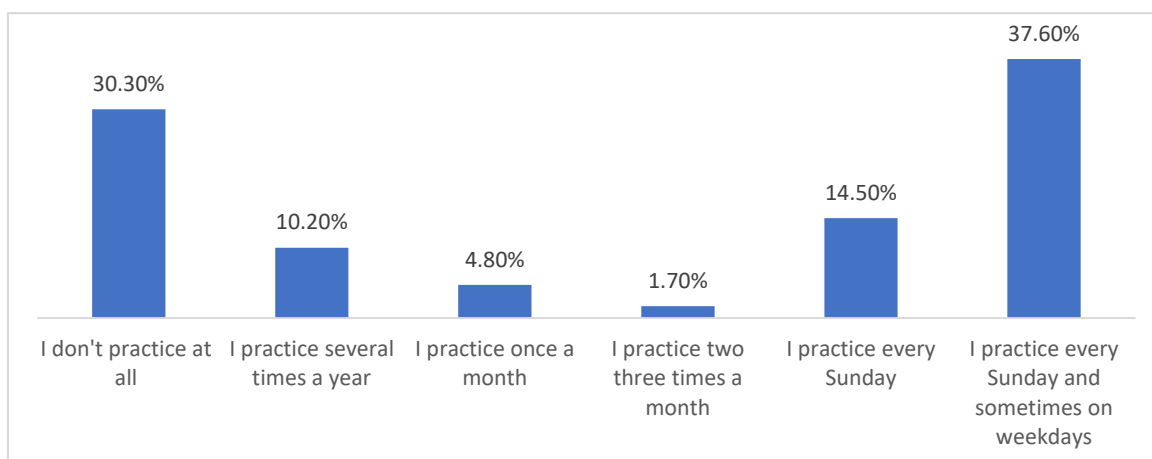


Figure 1. Characteristics of respondents in terms of declared frequency of religious practices.

The survey revealed that more than 40% of respondents have had or are currently suffering from COVID-19, and 14.1% of the respondents have lost a loved one due to COVID-19. When asked if they believed in God, respondents overwhelmingly answered yes (61.6%). It should be noted, however, that only 46.2% identified themselves as being religious. Among the respondents, 61.0% declared belonging to religious families.

3. Results

When asked to rate whether the pandemic had affected their religiosity, the respondents overwhelmingly said that nothing had changed (69.1%). However, nearly one-fifth of the respondents reported that they became less religious during the pandemic (Figure 2).

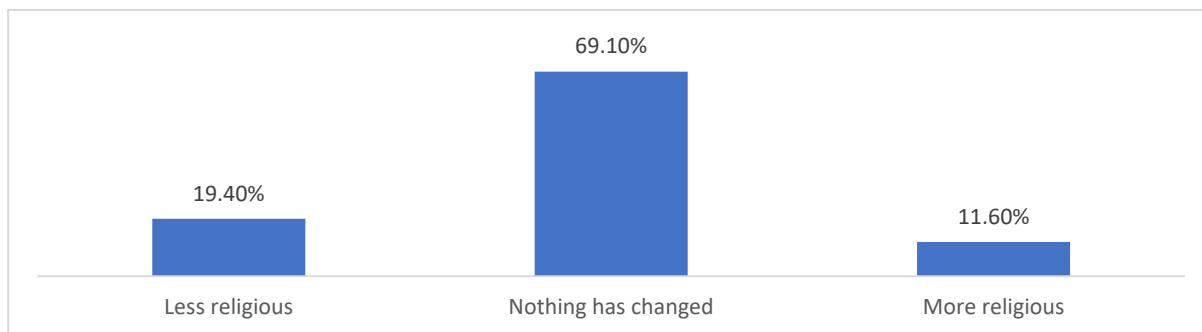


Figure 2. Respondents' declarations about the impact of the pandemic on religiosity.

There was a considerable, statistically significant decrease in religious practice in the pandemic (Figure 3). Attending worship services once a week or more often before the pandemic was reported by 43.5% of the respondents. During the pandemic, the number of respondents attending Mass regularly dropped to 33% in the temple and 12% through the media (of which 5.6% also attended Mass in the temple). Overall, 39.4% of respondents attended Mass during the pandemic; 31.2% of the respondents took **holy communion** before the pandemic and 27.2% during the pandemic, with 25.3% doing so in the temple and 3.4% via the media (of which 1.5% took communion both ways); and 15.4% of the respondents **recited the rosary before** the pandemic and 12.7% during the pandemic, with 9.6% doing so in the temple and 4.6% doing so through the media (of which 1.5% said the rosary both ways). Before the pandemic, 48.5% of the respondents **prayed**; during the pandemic 37.6% prayed, with 30.2% doing so in the temple and 12.3% doing so through the media (of which 4.9% prayed both ways). Participation in **religious communities** before the pandemic was reported by 21% of the respondents. During the pandemic, this group decreased to 11.1%, with 2.8% doing so both in the temple and through the media.

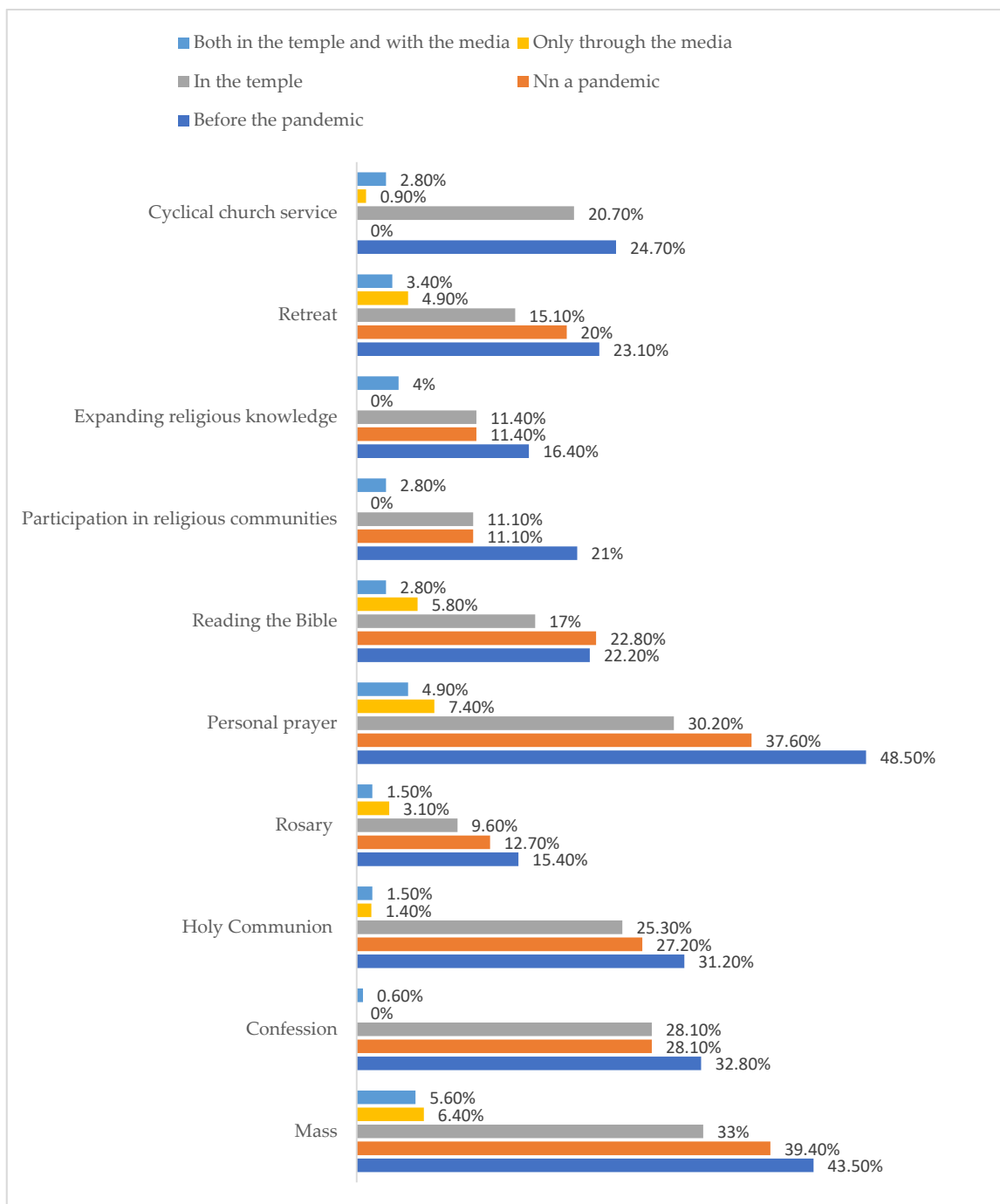


Figure 3. Percentage summary of practitioners before and during the pandemic, as well as modes of practice (in the temple and through media such as TV or radio).

Before the pandemic, 23.1% of the respondents participated in **retreats** and 20% did so during the pandemic, with 15.1% doing so in the temple and 8.3% through the media (of which 3.4% prayed both ways). **Religious knowledge** was deepened by 16.4% of the respondents before the pandemic and 11.4% during the pandemic, with 4% choosing lectures held in the temple and via the media. **Cyclical church services** such as the Stations of the Cross were attended by 24.4% of the respondents before the pandemic and only 21.6% during the pandemic. 20.7% participated in the temple, 3.7% through media, but of this group, only less than 1% were using the media alone. One exception to the overall downward trend was **Bible reading**. Before the pandemic, this practice was undertaken by

22.2% of the respondents and during the pandemic by 22.8%, with 17% of the respondents reading the Bible in the temple and 8.6% doing so through the media (of which 2.8% participated in Bible reading both ways).

The decrease in the frequency of religious practices in the religious group is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ and applies to 9.4% of those who attended mass, 11.5% of those who attended regular religious services before the pandemic, 14.3% of those who went to confession regularly before the pandemic, 12.8% of those who took communion, 22.5% of those who prayed regularly before the pandemic, 17.5% of those who recited the rosary regularly, 52.4% of those who participated in religious communities before the pandemic, 13.4% of those who attended retreats and 30.5% of those who deepened their religious knowledge. Only the change in Bible reading was not statistically significant.

At the same time, the frequency of religious practice increased for 1.4% of the previously irregular practitioners. In the entire sample, 11.4% of the respondents admitted to such a change; 19.1% noted that the frequency of their religious practices had declined, and 68.2% of the respondents reported no difference in piety. A series of chi-square tests showed that those participating in religious practices at the temple were not significantly different from those practicing irregularly or not at all in terms of COVID-19 incidence (40.3% became ill).

There was a statistically significant difference in the groups comprising people who did or did not experience the death of a loved one due to COVID-19, but only in terms of pre-pandemic practices: participation in religious communities (Chi-2 = 12.77; $p < 0.05$) and retreats (Chi-2 = 9.32; $p < 0.05$), and practices during the pandemic: receiving communion via the media (Chi-2 = 9.93; $p < 0.05$), reciting the rosary in the temple (Chi-2 = 9.83; $p < 0.05$), praying via the media (Chi-2 = 13.47; $p < 0.01$) and in the temple (Chi-2 = 13.2; $p < 0.05$), and participating in religious communities via the media (Chi-2 = 9.97; $p < 0.05$). The loss of a loved one was experienced by those who, prior to the pandemic, were more likely to participate in communities and retreats and, during the pandemic, were more likely to engage in religious practices in the temple and more likely to receive communion through the media. This was 13.3% of the study sample.

The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020 limited access to worship services and forced religious organizations to shift most activities to the media. Some researchers believe that this reinforced the mediatization of religion (Hall and Kołodziejska 2021). However, our study found that participation in the church community through remote, media-facilitated regular religious practices was marginal. More than half of the respondents reported no media-facilitated religious practices, and only 2.2% of the respondents undertook new practices during the pandemic using the media. At the same time, when asked if practicing through the media brought them closer to God, they mostly answered that it did not matter to them.

4. Discussion

In the social sciences, it has been assumed that religion facilitates coping with reality and gives meaning to existence (Durkheim 1990). The existential and meaning-making function was recognized as one of the primary functions of religion. Any religious system allows one to face existential dilemmas and equips them with the tools to deal with human existence's most incomprehensible and tragic aspects. The religious psychologist Piwowarski (1977, p. 14) defined *religion* as "a system of beliefs and actions through which a community attempts to solve the most important problems of human life", such as, dying, death, and the pain of loss.

Crystal Park (Park 2005a, 2005b) showed that religiosity allows humans to cope with stressful situations and restores their psychological well-being. This is because religiosity provides a person with meaning and understanding of what is happening in human life. It explains the seemingly unexplainable necessity and irreversibility of death. Functionalism in anthropology had the most to say about the function of religion concerning the phenomenon of death, the threat to life, embodied in the persons of Bronisław Malinowski

and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe—Brown, which were seeing two powerful tools in religion: psychologically-therapeutic and socially-integrative. Barbara Olszewska–Dyoniziak, in her study of the origins and social function of religion, writes: “Malinowski drew attention to the fact that religion, first of all, satisfies the need for confidence and optimism in the face of dangers and critical moments of human life (birth, initiation, marriage, death, various random events, etc.) and provides the sense of peace and security needed to achieve psychological balance, and only secondly, it satisfies the need to express collective unity, which aims is to integrate the group” (Olszewska-Dyoniziak 2002, p. 20). Dyonizak further elaborated and theorized “that among contemporary modern societies the psychological role of religion is decreasing, and its socially integrative role is increasing” (Olszewska-Dyoniziak 2002, p. 20).

What happens to us, then, when religion loses its centrality, and the world falls out of the frame and confronts us daily with threats to our own lives and those of our loved ones? The loss of the axial importance of religion for society was described by Max Weber (Weber 1968) and given the term *Entzauberung der Welt*. By disenchantment of the world, he meant the advent of the primacy of reason (linking it to the rise of modern capitalism and Protestant ethics), resulting in a shift from a religious-magical understanding of the world to a logical-causal one (Weber 1994). His secularization thesis (Weber 1994), also shared by Emil Durkheim (1990), Gabriel Le Bras (1969), Anthony Giddens (2004), refers to the belief that with the development of societies, mainly through their rationalization (disenchantment of the world) and modernization, religion loses its importance in all aspects of life.

Weber’s concept of the world’s disenchantment was further developed by the religious sociologist Peter L. Berger; he was publishing, since the 1960s, texts on secularization putting forward its connection with social modernization. Giddens defined *secularization* as a process by which religion loses its influence on various areas of social life. A sign of secularization, according to him, is a decline in the number of members of churches and participants in religious worship, decreasing influence of religious organizations on social life, and the decline of their prestige in society along with the overall loss of significance of religious beliefs and values (Giddens 2004). Weber’s secularization thesis has been challenged, especially in its recognition as unidirectional).

Researchers indicating the place of religion in the life of modern society use such terms as desecularization, new signs of transcendence (Berger 1969), re spiritualization (Horx 1993), return of sacrum (Bell 1993), megatrend religion (Zulehner 2004), return of religion (Lienkamp 2003), revitalization of religion (Kracht 2018). According to Berger, although there are functioning processes of secularization, somehow, at the same time, the world is more religious than ever.

We assumed, therefore, hypothetically that in times of pandemics, multiplied activation of thanatic fears, and widespread anxiety, people will turn to the practice of religion, recognizing its therapeutic and integrative power—of bringing together and providing support comforting in times of danger.

The study showed that the frequency of religious practice was influenced by the perceived religiosity of the family, the religiosity of the subject, and the declaration of belief in God. These same factors most often significantly differentiated respondents’ opinions about COVID-19. However, it did not confirm a relationship between COVID-19 experience and respondents’ beliefs about the pandemic or frequency of religious practices.

Our study has shown an important, statistically significant decrease in religious practice during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 43.5% of respondents declared participation in church services once a week or more frequently. During the pandemic, regular mass attendance fell to 33% at the temple and 12% through the media (5.6% of which also attended temple services). In total, 39.4% of the respondents participated in the mass during the pandemic.

In all, 32.8% of respondents made a confession before the pandemic, and 28.1% during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 31.2% of respondents went to communion, compared

to 27.2% during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the rosary was prayed by 15.4% of respondents, and during the pandemic by 12.7%, with 9.6% doing it in the temple and 4.6% through the media (1.5% of which prayed the rosary in both ways). Before the pandemic, 48.5% of the respondents prayed, and during the pandemic 37.6%, with 30.2% doing it in the temple and 12.3% through the media (4.9% of whom prayed in both ways). Before the pandemic, 21% of respondents took part in religious communities. During the pandemic, this group decreased to 11.1%, with 2.8% participants both in the temple and through the media. Before the pandemic, 23.1% of respondents participated in the retreat, and 20% during the pandemic, with 15.1% doing it in the temple and 8.3% through the media (of which 3.4% prayed in both ways). Before the pandemic, 16.4% of respondents deepened their religious knowledge. During the pandemic that number decreased to 11.4%, with 4% choosing to speak at the temple and in the media. Before the pandemic, 24.4% of respondents participated in regular services such as the Way of the Cross, but only 21.6% did during the pandemic; 20.7% practiced them in the temple, 3.7% through the media, but from this group only less than 1% limited themselves to the media.

Bible reading was an exception to the general downtrend. Before the pandemic, 22.2% of respondents were practicing it, and during the pandemic 22.8%, with 17% doing it in the temple and 8.6% through the media (of which 2.8% participated in reading the Bible in both ways). The increase in individual religiosity stands in contrast with the respondents' decrease in collective forms of expressing religiosity, though it is difficult to ascertain whether this shift relates to pandemic fears or is a possible change in meaning-making.

The study did not confirm the hypothesis of intensification of religious practices in the pandemic. The data potentially suggests that two of the indicated fundamental functions of religion—integrative and meaning-forming—lost their importance, religion ceased to perform them. The socially-integrative aspect of religion appears to have changed in importance among respondents, as collective forms of religiosity decreased during the pandemic. Among the respondents, the pandemic did not intensify the practice of religion. In the face of danger, respondents did not turn to God, and there was no revitalization of religion (Kracht 2018). In addition, the situation of limiting the physical experience communion of the Church was treated not as an acute undersupply but as an opportunity or a pretext to abandon the practice of religion.

For participants in the study, religiousness does not seem to be important, we can rather talk about abandoning the sacral dimension of one's life by the respondents.

Our study takes on importance and look interesting when compared to the results of similar studies conducted in 14 countries by Pew Research Center's Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey focuses on views of religious faith and family relationships around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds on research released in the fall of 2020 about responses to the coronavirus outbreak, and the public perceptions of how the pandemic has affected religious beliefs and family situations. Data for this report were drawn from nationally representative telephone surveys conducted from 10 June to 3 August 2020, among 14,276 adult population 18 plus in 14 advanced economies: the United States, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and South Korea.

Majorities in all the countries surveyed do not feel that religious faith was strengthened by the pandemic, including 68% of U.S. adults who said their own faith had not changed much. In Spain and Italy, two of Western Europe's more religious countries, only roughly one-in-six people said their own religious faith had grown due to the pandemic. The pandemic has led to the cancellation of religious activities and in-person services around the world, not only in Poland, but few people said their religious faith had weakened as a result of the outbreak. Across the countries surveyed, a median of just 3% said their own religious faith had decreased, including 4% in the U.S. In South Korea, 9% said their personal faith had become weaker as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Americans were most likely to say COVID-19 bolstered religious faith, though the majorities around world saw little change (Pew Research Center 2021).

Detailed results of our study are especially interesting when compared to the research conducted by Diego Meza in Colombia among 1192 Catholics in the Department of Nariño in May 2020 (from different age groups). Like in our Polish case his hypothesis that an unpredictable and adverse event, such as the pandemic, may intensify religiosity was not supported by the findings of this research (Meza 2020, p. 229). There was no strong intensification of religious practices during the time of the pandemic, despite the fact that the religious practices offered both on the Internet and by other means of communion has multiplied. “Both women and men who are not very practicing tend to abandon these practices during quarantine, in other words, pre-pandemic religious behaviour functions as a preacher about increasing or decreasing religious actions during pandemic. [. . .] simple and brief devotional practices are more frequent than those that require a religious official, connect online or meet in community”. Religious actions of prayer prevail over those that are formative, such as reading the Bible or studying Catholic doctrine (Meza 2020, p. 230). This last finding is different from our result.

The assumption posited by the psychology of religion that religiosity plays a significant role in overcoming stress and coping with limit situations has not been confirmed either (Park 2007; Park and Cohen 1993; Park et al. 2008). If a pandemic is considered to be a stressful situation, then the research findings do not indicate that intensifying religious practices was a way to cope with the challenge posed by the pandemic. Instead of the expected rise, there was a statistically significant decline in religious practice during the pandemic. The only exception was the subjects who declared the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19; for those subjects, increased involvement in religious practices both in the temple and through the media was observed. For this group of respondents, engaging in religious practices may have served as a strategy to cope with loss, feelings of helplessness, and fear. As Özer et al. noted, religious coping is the most commonly used method when people feel most distraught and helpless (Özer et al. 2022).

The decline in religious practices by Polish students during the pandemic was also confirmed by Sylwia Mikolajczak’s research on students of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. It showed that 78.3% of students attended Sunday mass before the coronavirus outbreak, and 58.5% attended regularly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a decrease in the number of people attending Sunday Eucharist (69.9%), as well as a decline in regular attendance (48.3%). This showed that 8.4% of the study population stopped attending Sunday liturgies during the pandemic. (Mikolajczak 2021, p. 390). If religious practices are to be considered as indicators of religiosity, then the pandemic not only failed to increase religiosity among students, but it actually weakened it. This is also evident in the worldview declarations. A total of 61.6% of the respondents declared that they believed in God, 61% also declared belonging to religious families, but only 46.2% of the respondents declared to be religious.

The pandemic proved to be a period of religious dispensation, which were not resumed by some of the practitioners. The data collected shows that the availability of online practices did not significantly affect the religious commitment of most respondents. After the period of suspending direct participation in religious practices due to the dispensation, they did not resume them at the level declared before the pandemic, which is also confirmed by other studies conducted in Poland. The lifting of restrictions and limits on church attendance did not result in a return to religious activity at pre-pandemic levels, as regular weekly attendance was declared—in the referenced studies—by only 36% of the respondents. Less frequent activity in this regard was declared by one in four respondents (25%), and no activity at all was declared by 40% of the respondents (Bożewicz 2020a, p. 7). In comparison, in 2019, regular participation in liturgy was declared by 47% of the respondents, while irregular participation was declared by 38% and passive approach by 15% of the respondents (Bożewicz 2020b, p. 3). The research done by both Bożewicz and S. Mikolajczak, as well as our research, indicates a general downward trend in the practice of Catholic religion among university students. It can be concluded that the dispensation

given due to the pandemic proved to be an excuse for abandoning religious practices for nearly 10% of our respondents (9.2%).

5. Conclusions

If, following Peter L. Berger, we consider secularization to be the process by which religion loses its importance both in social life and in the consciousness of individuals, and a category from which the phenomenon of privatization of religion arises (Berger 2019), then it must be concluded that in the study group the pandemic did not contribute to the reversal of secularization. The pandemic was not a motivation to engage in religious practices in the study group. It is possible that students:

- a. Found them unhelpful in coping with the stress of the pandemic, religiosity ceased to be a coping strategy for them;
- b. Did not treat the pandemic as a limit situation which they coped with through religious practices, they did not feel directly threatened;
- c. Participants have made their previous practice of religion dependent on a physically experienced connection with other church members. When they lost it through the closing of the churches, the experience of loss of a personal relationship with the community was equated with the loss of a personal relationship with God. Participation in the practice of religion through the media did not prove to be an alternative to maintaining a personal relationship with God.

The contemporary interpretation of the religious phenomenon emphasizes both the personal character of human reference to it and the personal character of the object of religion (Zdybicka 1977, p. 168). In exercising their religiosity, man seeks—as a person—another person. He seeks for someone, and not something, who could answer his question about the meaning of life, help him in life's difficulties, be a friend, a companion in life.

The relationship between man and God is based on human beings' relationships, so the model is taken from the social life in which man naturally participates (Sliwak 2006, p. 56). The fact that the patterns of religious relations are drawn from a person's social life, and experiences influences the fact that different types of such relations are formed (Otto 1993; Jacyniak and Plużek 1996, pp. 111–39).

Similar claims can be found in the works of Belgian religious psychologist—Dirk Hutsebaut (1980), who believes that the religious relationship in its structure is analogous to interpersonal relations and that man, experiencing that, likewise enters into a relationship with God. In establishing a relationship with God, they are convinced that the partner of this relationship is someone who sees them, listens to their words, enters a personal relationship with them, and gives them a personal response (Sliwak 2006).

Jarosz (2004, p. 196) investigated the interpersonal determinants of religiousness. In his research, he used, among others, The Scale of Relationship to God by D. Hutsebaut.

In the conclusion of his work, he stated that his results confirm: “[. . .]. theoretical premises of “transferring” types of interpersonal relations to the field of religiosity [. . .]”. Therefore, the disappearance of the direct relationship with the followers would translate into the disappearance of the relationship with God.

- d. Have relativized the so-called “church going” which is the essence of Polish Catholic life thus far. The bishops' dispensation contributed to increasing doubt in the previous rules of religious life and proved to be an expected precedent.

Religion, as a specific form of “bringing closer” the sacred, was the basic building block of social bonds and is a symbolic transfiguration of the collective, which (unconsciously) worships itself in religious rituals (Durkheim 1990). Religion does not alleviate suffering, but it gives us the community of the Church—a space, a frame for this suffering, a place of support, the possibility of placing it in its intended context (existential context), and above all, compassionate community. A community that nourishes us with its unfailing, expectant presence, comforting us bravely and unceasingly. Meanwhile, the pandemic

and its closing of churches has deprived us of this physical solidarity and thus deprived religion of this supportive role.

Confirmation of these conclusions requires extensive research. Our study is only a small contribution to the broader phenomenon of changes in the religiousness of Catholics at the end of the first two decades of the 21st century. Investigating the sources of these changes seems to be a cognitive challenge—the pandemic was accompanied by a crisis of authority for the clergy associated with the disclosure of the moral abuses by the Polish clergy, as well as a deepening discrepancy between the official religion teaching in schools and the everyday experiences of Poles. Ciesielski speaks of “a sense of the incompatibility of the principles of official religion with the emotions of everyday life” (Ciesielski 2021, p. 146).

Religious socialization in Poland may thus be an example of a sociological incompatibility between the values professed by an individual and the values realized by the individual (Knoblauch 1996, p. 24). When examining the transformation of religiosity in Poland, one should also address the large issue that has already troubled researchers (e.g., Grabowska 2018), that is whether we are dealing with secularizing tendencies or, on the contrary, a kind of religious revival that manifests itself, for example, in the current popularity of more orthodox religious principles (e.g., liturgy according to pre-Vatican II principles), a popularity that extends beyond the borders of Poland and began before the pandemic.

The presented study is only a kind of invitation to international systematic and systems analyses, including other countries and other groups of participants, allowing for comparisons and verification of conclusions.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.D., M.G., A.J. and D.P. methodology, D.D., M.G. and A.J.; formal analysis, B.R.; writing—original draft preparation, D.D., M.G., A.J., D.P.; writing—review and editing, D.D., M.G., A.J. and D.P.; visualization, M.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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