

Transformations of Religiosity during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic

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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. 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.

Keywords: COVID-19 ; religiosity ; pandemic

1. 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 experience. 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 (^[1] [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.

2. 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 ([Zareba 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](#)).

3. 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 ([Zareba 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](#); [Zareba and Mariański 2021](#)). Researchers 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).

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