



ORIGINAL PAPER

Religious coping in times of crisis

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Abstract:

The article focuses on the theoretical aspects of the relationship between crises (such as health, economic or social crises) and religion, highlighting theoretical models of religion as a form of coping. The case study regarding the impact of the global pandemic of COVID-19 on religious life aims at pointing out the general perceptions of how religious beliefs and behaviours were influenced, as well as how faith communities have adapted to the coronavirus crisis.

Keywords: *religious coping; crisis; COVID-19 pandemic; religious faith.*

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Introduction

In times of crisis, marked by uncertainty and adversity, religion often becomes a way to deal with unforeseen, difficult and stressful situations, with many studies indicating a direct relationship between religion and, implicitly, how man expresses his faith and his physical and emotional well-being.

In defining the term religion, the concept of adaptation also comes up, thus building a frame of reference, a global approach by which to understand the world and to interpret human events. Adaptation itself is a form of universal human experience adopted by people when they go through unpleasant, frustrating, dangerous or stressful situations or events and who need to find a way to obtain or keep what is valuable to them.

Religious adaptation is self-regulating and improving behavior, which refers to the “use of cognitive or behavioral techniques, in the face of stressful life events, that arise out of one’s religion or spirituality” (Tix and Frazier, 1998: p. 411).

In Kenneth Pargament's view, the ability to adapt to religion refers to the way in which religious beliefs or practices are used in order to provide meaning and purpose in difficult times in life.

Koenig, Pargament, and Nielsen (1998) emphasize the idea that religious adjustment strategies can prevent and mitigate the negative emotional effects of a stressful life. Therefore, religious adaptation “encompasses religiously framed cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses to stress” (Wortmann, 2013), aims to provide a meaning to life, personal development, creating a connection with divinity, hope or gaining inner peace.

The theoretical explanations of religious adaptation form common perspectives of understanding that are based on how beliefs and religious behaviors are used to “manage the perception, occurrence and/or consequences (e.g., emotional, psychological) of an undesirable or threatening event or situation” (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson and Lincoln, 2008).

Forms and methods of religious adaptation

In the context of crisis, religion encourages man to perceive the difficult moments he faces as an opportunity to change his life, helps him to create a connection with the divinity or superior force, and it also guides and supports the individual by engaging him/her in religious rituals during the stages of transition in his life (Goodman, 2020).

On the other hand, during a crisis, religion can become problematic by the way in which the image of the divinity is reconstructed, as “revengeful” and “something that punishes”, thus accentuating the feelings of abandonment, anger, disappointment, guilt and distrust.

In the literature, religious adaptation is presented as a multidimensional construct that can be both religious and secular in itself (McDougle, Konrath, Walk et al., 2016), with forms and methods of religious adaptation, both positive and negative.

In general, methods of religious adaptation include a variety of beliefs, behaviors, and activities focused on emotions and problem solving such as:

- ✓ prayer for help, healing, forgiveness, thanksgiving, guidance
- ✓ trust in God
- ✓ reading religious materials
- ✓ meditation

- ✓ rituals of purification, emptying and forgiveness of sins
 - ✓ forms of support from the religious community
- Such examples of religious adaptation are found in existing religions and religious cults.
- ✓ In the Orthodox Christian cult there is the healing ritual or healing mystery, the sixth mystery of the church, entitled "the holy anointing". It takes place especially on fasting days and consists in the participation in religious services of both healthy and sick people, who, by means of the prayers said by the priests and the anointing with oil considered holy, seek to cure diseases of the body and of the soul.
 - ✓ Bar Mitzvah is a ceremony by which a person becomes a full member of the Jewish community and responsible for his/her actions
 - ✓ The Roman Catholic sacrament of confirmation, the second of the sacraments of initiation (the rest being baptism, communion, confession, marriage, holy orders and anointing of the sick people) is a ceremony in which young people are baptized and confirmed to live their lives as true Christians.
 - ✓ The doctrine of karma in the Hindu religion includes the idea of rebirth and liberation from the cycle of reincarnations. Adherents of this religion claim that both the future existence and the present life of man are conditioned and influenced by the actions and way of life of the person from previous lives.

Pergament explains and supports the importance of understanding the functions of religious adaptation methods by emphasizing that it is not enough to know how often religious behavior is performed (eg, worship, prayer, involvement in religious activities), but rather it is essential to be known "the content of prayers, the types of support sought from faith communities, and the perspectives about what the stressor means in light of one's faith may vary dramatically across people performing the same religious behaviors or even within the same person across different stressors"(Cummings and Pargament, 2010: 31).

Thus, Pergament (1997) built RCOPE, currently the most commonly used instrument for measuring religious adaptation, a scale that includes elements for evaluating the forms of religious adaptation related to major stress factors in an individual's life and for integrating religious and spiritual dimensions in the healing process and in treatment schemes (Pargament, Feuille and Burdzy, 2010: 54).

The measuring instrument includes 105 items divided into 21 subscales, items that reflect the functions of religious adaptation, those of meaning, control, comfort, intimacy and transformation of life, the search for the sacred or spirituality). The instrument itself was built to take into account the way in which people represent their positive and negative methods of religious adaptation from a cognitive and attitudinal point of view.

The positive forms of the subscale regarding religious adaptation have been associated with individual perception of the sacred and with religious evolution in stressful times. Instead, the negative religious adaptation was associated with the state of tension and conflict, which are highlighted in a low quality of life and indifference towards others. In their research, the authors noted a greater preponderance of the use of positive methods of religious adaptation compared to the negative ones, both being representative of the following items:

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Table. 1 Positive and negative forms of religious adaptation (RCOPE)

<i>Positive forms</i>	<i>Negative forms</i>
“looked for a stronger connection with God”	“wondered whether God had abandoned me”
“sought God’s love and care”	“felt punished by God for my lack of devotion”
“sought help from God in letting go of my anger”	“wondered what I did for God to punish me”
“tried to put my plans into action together with God”	“questioned God’s love for me”
“tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation”	“wondered whether my church had abandoned me”
“asked forgiveness for my sins”	“decided the devil made this happen”
“focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems”	“questioned the power of God”
“looked for a stronger connection with God”	
“sought God’s love and care”	

Source: Pargament, Feuille and Burdzy, 2010: 57

Although there are a variety of perspectives used in defining religious adaptation, the inclusion of the idea of "sacred" is the common element, because all beliefs and practices that include sacred elements have a greater capacity to provide meaning, balance, order, and security.

The relationship between religious adaptation and health

In general, studies on religious adaptation refer to issues related to the health, well-being, self-esteem and personal satisfaction of the individual.

Health problems create reasons for anxiety and stress, and therefore affect the quality of life of the individual and his/her ability to function properly. Often the stressors take many forms from the negative effects of the condition itself, high costs of treatment, difficult access to treatment to other obstacles encountered in the health system.

In times of poor health, people can turn to religion to overcome sickness by promoting emotional well-being, adopting an active behavior to solve health problems, building social support, and creating or maintaining a relationship with the divinity. The religious methods of adjustment used (eg prayer for healing, relief, guidance, help from the community) help people to accept the situation they are facing and to overcome the stress caused by those problems more easily. In these difficult times, focusing on religious values, beliefs, and teachings can help people gain a clearer perspective on their situation.

Most research on the relationship between religious adaptation and health indicates that positive forms of religious adjustment mark the intensity of an individual's relationship with God and are associated with a better quality of life. In contrast, negative forms of religious adaptation reflect a weak relationship with the divinity and are associated with a poorer well-being of life.

There is a lot of relevant research that emphasizes how people use religion in times of crisis. They show how religious adaptation greatly improves the physical and psychological health of individuals, reduces mortality, anxiety and the impact of

unpleasant events on the lives of individuals. On the other hand, research has also highlighted how the physical and mental health of the individual can worsen in the case of people who are dissatisfied with the relationship with the divinity and show distrust in its powers.

Among these researches that highlight the influence of religious adaptation in relation to health can be mentioned:

- ✓ H G Koenig, K I Pargament, J Nielsen researches the relationship between religious and non-religious adaptation behaviors with the health status of hospitalized elderly patients. People who use methods of religious adaptation show better mental health, establish a connection with the divinity and with members of the religious community, help other people and positive appreciations about it (H G Koenig, K I Pargament, J Nielsen, 1998);
- ✓ Tarakeshwar, N.; Vanderwerker, L.C.; Paulk, E.; Pearce, M.J.; Kasl, S.V.; Prigerson, H.G., have researched religious adjustment and quality of life among patients with advanced cancer. 170 patients were selected and it was concluded that religious adaptation directly influences the quality of life, which depends on the types of religious adaptation strategies used (Tarakeshwar, Vanderwerker, Paulk, Pearce, Kasl and Prigerson, 2006);
- ✓ Hebert, R., Zdaniuk, B., Schulz, R., & Scheier, M. highlight how positive and negative religious coping influences overall well-being (both physical and mental), life satisfaction and the level of depression among women with breast cancer (Hebert, Zdaniuk, Schulz and Scheier, 2009);
- ✓ Woods, TE, Antoni, MH, Ironson, GH, & Kling, DW used a sample of 33 HIV-positive African-American women with mild symptoms to investigate the link between their level of religiosity and their emotional and physical condition. Using forms of religious adjustment (trust in God and well-being associated with religion), lower levels of depression and anxiety were found among the women included in the study (Woods, Antoni, Ironson and Kling, 1999);
- ✓ Wachholtz, A. B., & Sambamthoori, U. have research into how prayer influences people with depression. The main results of the study were as follows: people who pray are usually involved in a religious community, prayer is used as a complementary form of therapy for depression, and Latin Americans and African Americans are more likely to pray when they suffer from health problems associated with depression, while non-whites, regardless of depression level, are more engaged in prayer (Wachholtz and Sambamthoori, 2013);
- ✓ Wachholtz AB, Pargament KI (2005) researched how meditation with spiritual components creates greater benefits (physically, psychologically, spiritually) than other forms of meditation that are considered secular. Thus the group of spiritual meditation reported less anxiety and a better state of mind, more spiritual experiences both during and outside meditation, a greater tolerance for pain than the group of secular meditation and relaxation (Wachholtz and Pargament, 2005).

Research on religious adaptation by means of the practice of Orthodox church-goers during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic marked the beginning of a new stage, full of challenges and uncertainties for people around the world. In addition to the challenges in the fields of science, medicine, economics and education, there have also been challenges in the way people organize their daily lives, from family life, setting up relationships with friends and colleagues, to understanding meaning of life.

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The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, every aspect of individual and social life, including the organization and functioning of religious cults. Measures imposed to prevent the spread of coronavirus (isolation, social distancing, avoid contact with people but also with objects of common use, avoid crowded places) have directly influenced issues related to access and attendance at places of worship, conducting religious rituals specific to each religious cult, the interaction between members of religious communities.

In this context, the World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted the key role of leaders, institutions and religious communities in preventing the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) and combating the diseases associated with it. As a source of guidance, support and care, they can disseminate information on responsible social behavior, provide support to vulnerable people and the community during times of health crisis. "Religious-inspired institutions can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices" (World Health Organization, 2020).

This research aimed to identify social and individual approaches to religious adaptation. The social approach emphasizes the degree of integration of individuals in the community and is measured by attendance at the place of worship, while the individual approach focuses on the frequency of prayer.

Research methodology: the research was applied among religiously involved people, ie among Orthodox church-goers who attend Orthodox places of worship in Craiova. The Orthodox Christian cult was chosen because, at national level, the Romanian Orthodox Church has the highest number of followers, in the 2011 Census, 86.5% of Romanians declared that they are of the Orthodox religion. The opinion poll method was used, based on a questionnaire administered, on a sample of 143 people, aged over 18, 67.9% female and 32.1% male, among those who attend Orthodox churches in Craiova. The questionnaire was applied between May and June 2021.

Results

Overall, the answers can be grouped into three categories: attending church regularly (ie monthly), attending church irregularly (only on public holidays, once a year or less) and not attending church. According to the data provided by the European Value Study-European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017) the Romanian population has a high frequency of participation in religious services, approximately 49% of the population say they go to the place of worship at least once a month. Compared to the previous wave of EVS research (2008), in Romania, there is a slight decrease in religious public behavior on all analysis criteria.

Table. 2 Participation in religious service of the Romanian population

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once a month	Only on specific holy days	Once a year	Less often	Never, practically never
2017	5.8%	25.5%	17.7%	36.5%	7.1%	2.4%	5.0%
2008	6.3%	24.0%	19.6%	36.4%	6.0%	3.4%	4.3%

Source: EVS (2020). European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7500 Data file Version 4.0.0, The data from 2008 were taken from the Longitudinal Data File EVS 2008 and the individual model of Romania

The study found that about a third of respondents participated in Sunday religious services at least once a month in the last 12 months, the most common behaviors being those aimed at going to church once a week (11.9%) or once every two weeks (11.9%). However, there are high percentages of irregular attendance (34.3%) among those who are connected to the Orthodox faith and the church, and non-attendance of the church amounts to 27.3%.

Table 3. Participation in Sunday religious services in the last 12 months (March 2020-April 2021)

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Weekly	11.9%
once every 2 weeks	11.9%
once a month	5.6%
once every 2 months	5.6%
only on important Christian holidays	15.4%
less often	18.9%
I did not go	27.2%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	3.5%

This low attendance is observed among the respondents, 46.2% of those involved religiously stated that between March 2020 and April 2021, they went to church to a lesser extent than usual. For 38.5% of the respondents, the participation in the religious services has not changed, while 14% claim that they started to go to church more often with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4. Church attendance during March 2020-April 2021 (more, the same or less than usual)

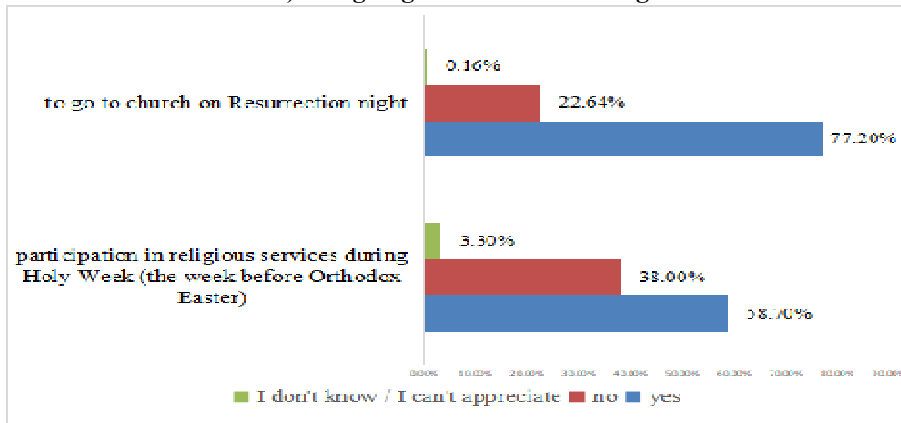
<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
less	46.2%
as before	38.4%
more	14.0%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	1.4%

In itself, the Orthodox religion, by means of its religious holidays, builds a sense of belonging and cohesion because it creates subtle connections throughout society as people develop similar experiences (Gheorghitã, 2015: 151). The Easter Holiday captures the very fundamental teaching of Christianity, namely the power of sacrifice and the transition to eternal life. In 2012, in the research conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy - IRES, "Easter for Romanians", on a sample of 1500 people, aged 18 and over, almost all respondents claimed to celebrate Easter, 85 % stated that they regularly participate in the Resurrection service and 59% usually attend church on Easter day.

Research data show that over 52% of the people questioned intend to participate in religious services during Holy Week (the week before Easter).

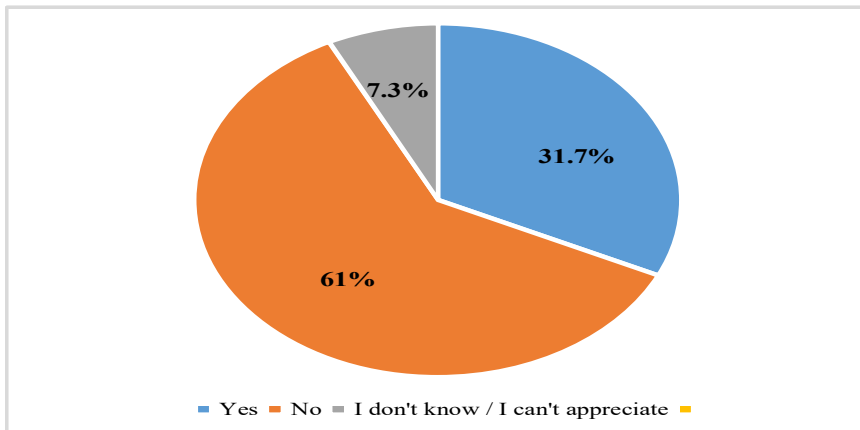
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Chart 1. Intention to participate in religious services during Holy Week (the week before Orthodox Easter) and going to church on the night of the Resurrection



In the context of the pandemic, the authorities' recommendations on social distance (avoiding group meetings, keeping distance from others) and observing sanitary protection measures (face masks, avoiding touching objects shared by community members, avoiding physical contact) have changed at the level of religious behavior. All the more so as, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Orthodox Easter celebration took place in the midst of a national emergency period, and was marked by restrictions on leaving the home and closing churches for church-goers. The Easter light was distributed, upon request, from house to house, by priests and volunteers and with the involvement of the police to ensure compliance with the rules of health protection. Thus, at the religious services of the Resurrection (on the first, second or third day of Easter), the majority of respondents say they do not intend to participate.

Chart 2. Participation in religious services after the Resurrection (on the first, second or third day of Easter) Orthodox Easter



At national level, the influence of the institution and religious leaders on the population is observed, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) being the one that affirmed its support for the health protection rules imposed at national level. Thus, on

the occasion of the Easter holidays in 2021, the recommendations sent by the Romanian Patriarchate regarding the access of people to the church on Easter night aim at observing the normative documents regarding the state of alert on the Romanian territory. These regulations are specified in the Order no. 1,103 / 95/2020 which lays down rules regarding the access and development of activities, as well as the specific sanitary measures, adopted and imposed by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Thus, according to Order no. 1.103 / 95/2020 for the approval of the rules on access to places of worship, the minimum safety distance and specific sanitary measures for carrying out religious activities access to the place of worship or in the places where religious services and meetings are organized shall be organized according to the following rules:

- ✓ ensuring an area of at least 2 square meters for each person and a distance of at least 2 m between persons (by Order no. 2,283 / 157/2021 of October 25, 2021, the access of church-goers to locations where religious services and meetings are organized if an area of at least 2 sq m is provided for each person and a distance of at least 2 m between persons.);
- ✓ disinfection of hands with disinfectant, at the entrance, provided by the organizers of the religious event;
- ✓ wearing a mask to cover the mouth and nose;
- ✓ observational triage, if one person shows symptoms of respiratory infection (cough, sneezing, rhinorrhea, temperature) is not allowed to enter the church;
- ✓ written announcements regarding the rules of hygiene and physical distance placed in visible places in the place of worship and in the places where religious services and meetings are organized;
- ✓ inside the place of worship shall be organized separate entry and exit circuits, clearly highlighted;
- ✓ the services held in the open air shall take place while maintaining the distance of 2 m between people.

The specific sanitary measures shall consider the disinfection of the cult objects with which the church-goers come in contact, periodic disinfection, once every 4 hours, for the surfaces or objects frequently touched.

These compulsory measures imposed changes in the organization of religious rituals, such as the Holy Sacraments considered necessary for any Christian for his salvation. Regarding communion and confession, the opinions of the respondents are divided: half agree and half do not agree with these restrictions.

The various practices, by which church-goers come into contact with objects of worship specific to Orthodoxy, such as icons, were also affected. For Christians, the icon provokes, “at the level of prayer a direct reaction, thanks to its simple evidence, it does not need to be translated, like the sacred text, into another language, but it reveals to us the broad vision that unites the past and the future, in a continuous present” (Bădescu, 2017: 48). In Orthodoxy, touching and kissing icons is an important ritual, one through which a connection with God is created and maintained and a way of confessing the faith. In this context, over 67% of respondents consider the recommendations to limit the spread of infections by avoiding touching or kissing icons and relics to be appropriate.

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Table 5. Recommendations on limiting the spread of infections by avoiding touching or kissing icons and relics

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
totally agree	49.6%
rather agree	18.9%
rather against	19.6%
totally against	10.5%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	1.4%

Pilgrimage is a central element of Orthodox religious faith and a measure of religious behavior. In Orthodoxy, the pilgrimage has deep spiritual meanings and is a way to intensify love for God, forgive sins, heal and confess the faith. About 50% of those surveyed said they go on pilgrimages less than they used to do before the pandemic broke out. The explanations take into account the travel restrictions imposed by the state, especially those in a state of emergency, the recommendations to keep a physical distance to protect yourself from contacting the virus (WHO warns that the virus can spread through respiratory drops when a person carrying the virus speaks, sneezes or is coughing), measures to discourage unimportant physical gatherings.

Table 6. Pilgrimages during March 2020-April 2021 (more, the same or less than usual)

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
less	49.7%
as before	14.0%
more	2.8%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	33.5%

Avoiding attendance at places of worship or not participating in important religious events does not have as main motivation the fear of contacting the virus, more than half of the respondents claim that there is a low probability of being infected with the new coronavirus. On the other hand, 47.6% of them claim that the church can become a source of infection to a large extent.

Table 7. The belief that a person can become infected with the new Coronavirus by attending church

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
to a very large extent	18.2%
largely	29.4%
to a small extent	30.8%
to a very small extent	12.6%
not at all	7.6%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	1.4%

Regarding the recommendation to avoid attending places of worship or not participating in important religious events, there is a tendency not to accept the recommendations imposed on limiting the spread of coronavirus infections, 64.3% being rather or totally against them, while only 35.7% rather or totally agree.

Table 8. Avoiding attending places of worship / not participating in important religious events

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>
totally agree	14.7%
rather agree	21.0%
rather against	24.5%
totally against	39.8%

Devotion, the less formal and public part of religious participation takes place in the private space, usually in the home, which makes this behavior more difficult to monitor. In general, four elements are used to measure the level of devotion: the frequency of prayer (personal as well as together with the family), the frequency of reading religious texts, the frequency of religious discussions in the family and the frequency of watching religious programs on television or listening to them on the radio.

In the research carried out, prayer was considered, which, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is configured as a more accessible option. Thus, 77.7% of the respondents state that they pray at least once a week, of which 45.5% state that they pray daily.

Table 9. Frequency of prayer

daily	45.4%
several times a week	20.3%
once a week	11.9%
at least once a month	7.7%
several times a year	2.1%
less often	7.0%
never	4.2%
I don't know / I can't appreciate	1.4%

In 2017, according to data provided by the European Value Study-European Values Study Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017) Romania ranks second in Europe, after Albania, as a country with a strong private practice, 54% of Romanians say they pray daily.

Table 10. Frequency of prayer within the Romanian population (EVS 2017)

Year	<i>Every day</i>	<i>Several times a week</i>	<i>Once a week</i>	<i>At least once a month</i>	<i>Several times a year</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
2017	54.2%	19.0%	8.2%	5.9%	2.5%	7.3%	2.9%
2008	53.9%	19.7%	7.1%	5.0%	2.6%	8.9%	2.8%

Source: EVS (2020). European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7500 Data file Version 4.0.0. The data from 2008 were taken from the Longitudinal Data File EVS 2008 and the individual model of Romania.

Conclusions

By means of the role that religion plays in crisis situations, there have been shaped both the positive explanations, that support the way in which religion contributes to healing by helping people overcome unpredictable and unpleasant situations, as well as the negative explanations, by emphasizing how it undermines the recovery process of the individual and society. Therefore, strategies for religious adaptation are defined as actions that are consciously chosen by individuals to deal with the unpleasant situations they face.

The theoretical and methodological approach to religious adaptation has raised many questions, bringing into question both aspects of how faith in God or divinity can become a source of motivation, refuge, peace, comfort, support, and empathy.

In the national context, the COVID-19 pandemic produced changes in the religious life, at the level of the institutional organization, of the religious rite but also of the religious behavior.

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