

The relationship between religiosity, religious coping, and anxieties about the future: a multidimensional analysis on the Evangelical churches of Naples

Maria Gabriella Grassia, Marina Marino, Rocco Mazza, Agostino Stavolo

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the social and personal lives of individuals, leading to the development of new forms of adaptation and response to critics. Extraordinary and traumatic events can have significant consequences on the way of living and practicing faith.

The research is part of the studies on Temporal Perspective (PT) concerning to religiosity, deepening the idea of temporal perspective as culturally sensitive, and therefore, also influenced by religious factors. The intent is to investigate how transcendental can relate to the perspective of individuals and the consequent way of interpreting and acting reality, especially in crises. The aim of contribute is to investigate the relationship between religiosity, religious *coping*, anxiety for the times to come, and the prospect of the transcendental future in the period of the pandemic.

The study aims to understand whether religiosity and beliefs, experiences, and practices (public and private) have affected the prospects of individuals. We referred to the concept of anxiety about the future due to the emergency in which there has been a response with an approach to faith and religious practices, using religion as a *coping* tool.

According to this, we administered a survey on a sample of subjects of the Neapolitan protestant Christian population of the Evangelical churches of the Assemblies of God in Italy (A.D.I.). Then, a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was carried out to identify the relationship between religiosity, *coping* tools, and prospects.

2. Literature review: temporal perspective and religious coping

The study on Future Time Perspective has influenced much of the research on Temporal Perspective (PT). Researchers refer to future perspectives using various conceptualizations, including Future Thinking and Future Time Perspective. The former concerns plans and expectations through which potential outcomes and goals may be achieved (Aspinwall 2005); the latter refers to an individual's beliefs and convictions or perspective toward the future about temporally distant goals (Bembenutty and Karabenick 2004).

Scholars have emphasized the benefits of future-oriented thinking, which is motivational for health and well-being (Boyd and Zimbardo 2005), influences the nature of social relationships (Lang and Carstensen 2002), and promotes goal setting, motivation, and achievement efforts (Shipp et al. 2009). However, the negative effects on future events and actions need to be considered. Future Time Perspective has focused less attention on how negative futures can impact a person's overall well-being by destabilizing both physical and mental health. Zaleski (1996) introduces the concept of Future Anxiety, which is a state of apprehension, uncertainty, fear, and worry about changes. In this context, religious *coping* is introduced (Pargament 1997).

Coping strategies enable the development of behaviours to manage traumatic events, stressful situations, and moments of conflict. While related to sacred elements, religious *coping* also includes a wide range of coping tools for various stressors: prayer, confession, seeking spiritual support from religious organizations, and accepting circumstances as representative of God's will (Pargament 2002).

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Nowadays, the development of Temporal Perspectives with the emergence of *coping* strategies has become a much-studied issue due to the instability and unpredictability of the social situation and the growth of socio-psychological intensity. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a pressure factor for individuals: levels of depression and anxiety are increased compared to those observed in pre-pandemic surveys (Lei et al. 2020); while noting an increase in the general use of religious and spiritual practices to alleviate the negative consequences of social isolation measures during the pandemic (Luchetti et al. 2020).

3. Methodology

The study is exploratory and aims to analyse the relationships between religiosity, religious *coping*, anxiety for the times to come, and the prospect of the transcendental future. To reach these goals, we developed these research questions:

RQ1: What are the dimensions emerging from the relationship between religiosity, religious *coping*, and anxiety about the future during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Are there relationships between the transcendental future and earthly future perspective?

To answer these questions, we conducted a preliminary study using a non-probabilistic sample. We referred to the population of 2555 faithful residents in Naples, belonging to the Evangelical churches of the Assemblies of God in Italy (A.D.I.). We decided to study the Evangelical church in Naples on the one hand because it is a fast-growing church, and on the other hand because its territorial and geographical proximity allowed us to be able to study the evangelical community. We used the distribution by church location neighbourhood and by gender of each individual to define quotas. We reached 279 individuals. The reason we worked with a small number of identified subjects is that, although sufficient for a preliminary analysis, they are not powerful enough to reach the entire population.

Then, we administered a survey from June 9 to July 30, 2021. The survey was carried out using a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) system. Thanks to this system, respondents were able to access the online questionnaire via a hyperlink disseminated through the use of the main social channels (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram) and were able to answer the survey by sending their answers in real time. The survey is divided by content areas:

- a) Ascribed characteristics of the respondent: questions were asked to find sociodemographic information. The section consists of 13 categorical questions.
- b) Health experience with Covid-19: the focus is on the possible consequences of an infection. The section consists of 12 categorical questions.
- c) Religion, faith in quarantine and future: it aims to detect the respondent's spiritual and religious orientation, use of religious coping during the period of the first quarantine (March to May 2020), level of anxiety about the future, and view of the transcendental future. The section consists of 8 categorical questions.

We studied religion using the Centrality of Religion Scale (CRS) designed by Huber S. and Huber O.W. in 2012. The CRS is a 5-point validated Likert scale that measures the centrality, importance, and relevance of religion in an individual's life. The theory supporting the design and validation of this scale is Charles Glock's multidimensional model of religiosity (1968); the scale measures the intensity of religious life in five dimensions. The

dimensions are:

1. Intellect: the intellectual dimension consists of knowledge of religious themes.
2. Ideology: the ideological dimension refers to beliefs.
3. Public practices: refer to membership in religious communities manifested through public participation in rituals and community activities.
4. Private practices: this dimension refers to the actions and rituals that individuals enact in an individual form in their private space to get in touch with transcendent reality.
5. Religious experience: it consists of the perceptions and emotions related to the relationship with the divine and transcendent.

4. Preliminary results

Factor analysis techniques allow the synthesis of the information contained in the original data, through the identification of an optimal space of reduced size. The method agrees to the construction of a set of latent variables (or factors), a combination of the original variables, that express concepts not directly observable. We performed a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) for identifying the relations of the variables investigated by the survey. In the MCA analysis, each principal inertia value is expressed as a percentage of the total inertia. These values quantify the amount of variation accounted for by the corresponding dimension. We selected the first two factors, whose percentage of explained inertia is 73,6%, following the Benzecri correction formula.

Fig 1. shows the factorial map of the variables. We coded with L the modalities related to the variables on religion. The modalities of the analysed variables are presented with the cosine measure (\cos^2).

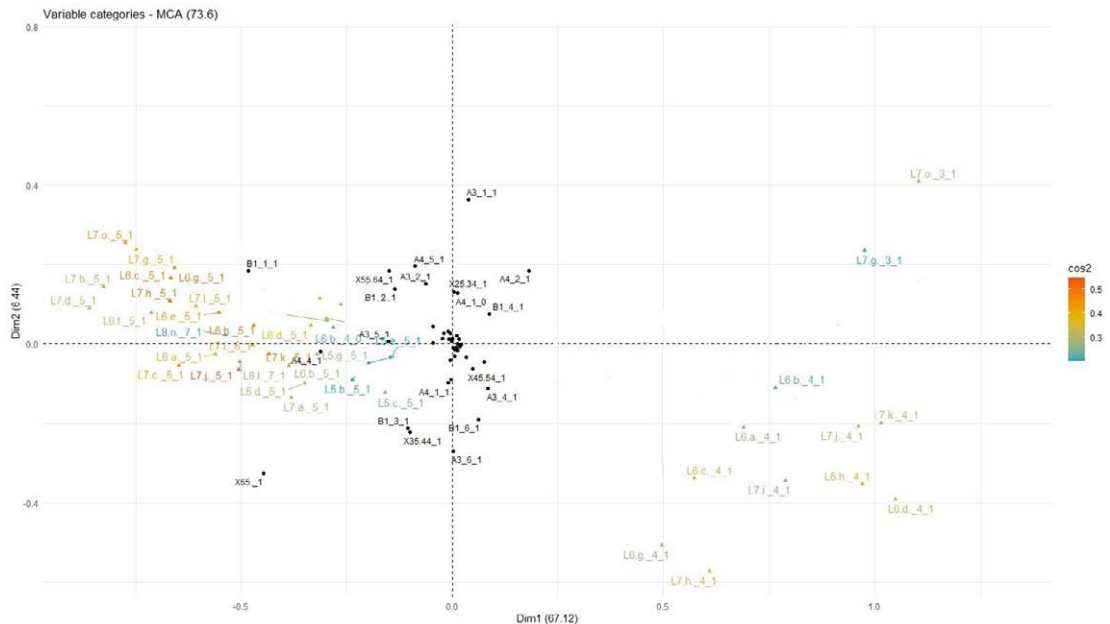


Fig. 1 – Factorial map

We nominated the first factor (67% of total inertia) such as the “Intensity of religion”. The

variables that determined the construction of the first factor related to how one turned to religion, and specifically to God, during the pandemic (e.g., "God's intervention," "God present," "Frequency of prayers," "Feeling heartened after a religious message").

Especially, for contributing to the construction of the factor are the ways related to concerns about the future and how subjects deal with daily difficulties, where an active attitude and positive outlook are evident. On the left side, the variables show more emotional involvement in religion compared to the left side, where the modalities of the variables with a lower value on the Likert scale are reported.

The second factor (6% of inertia) is labelled "Dimensions of religiosity". The variables that determined the second factor, on the other hand, highlight one's relationship with religion, differentiating between a personal dimension ("Frequency of prayer," "Reading of sacred texts") and a collective dimension ("Prayer with the religious community," "Importance of having a community of reference," "Remote religious services"). In particular, the representative modalities come close to defining an active spirituality, where variables are predominantly associated with the purely spiritual dimension of religious experience. Deity is seen as present and active, that can act in human life and can relate and communicate with it. The factor divides the map into two sides: in the upper part, the private and individualistic dimension of religiosity is highlighted: there are ways concerning the attendance and use of personal prayer, the reading of sacred texts, and the relationship with the divine; in the lower part is the collective dimension of prayer, evidencing the role of the relevant evangelical community and the importance of attending church services (in attendance and remotely).

According to this, we defined the four quadrants.

In the upper left quadrant are the modalities that evidence an individual's relationship with transcendental during the pandemic. In fact, by projecting the additional dots, we notice that the respondents were infected with Covid. This highlights the use of individual religious practices as a tool to counteract the psychological and social difficulties experienced during the period. Feeling God's presence and increasing the relationship with divinity through intimate moments, such as prayer and reading sacred texts, highlights the need for the faithful to have personal times and spaces for communication. This is related to decidedly convinced view of the future as life even beyond the earthly one.

The lower left quadrant emphasizes the importance of having a religious collectivist to refer to, they are devoting assiduously to religious practices and have an active relationship with the community. The element of the evangelical community appears to be central, showing how, during the Covid, the faithful needed to attend services. The deep relationship with divinity and community through religious practices is strongly associated with not having felt abandoned by God or spiritually dejected during the pandemic period.

The bottom right quadrant refers to the use of positive religious *cop*ing tools. Indeed, the reassuring and comforting element that faith has during times of stress is emphasised. Prayer turns out to be a central element of the quadrant. The same people who purposely devote much time to personal prayer are the same people who very often pray instinctively inspired by everyday situations. The feeling that God is able and willing to communicate, relates to the believer's awareness of his presence, which helps to reassure from fears due to the emergency and to hearten through listening to religious messages.

The last quadrant in the upper right refers to a less optimistic view of the future and a lower intensity of faith than the previous ones.

5. Conclusions

We reported some preliminary conclusions about the analysis. Through the use of the MCA, it is possible to visualize the relationship between the variables considered. It was found that the intensity of the use of positive religious coping during the pandemic generally follows responses

to "The Centrality of Religion Scale" (CRS), which measures religiosity regardless of the historical period experienced. Therefore, it allows us to relate religious behaviours before and during the emergency period. We noticed that high participation in public religious practices in habitual situations is equivalent to high participation in religious services remotely in quarantine. Therefore, it can be said that the distress situation does not seem to have affected religious orientations and behaviours by evidencing estrangement or rapprochement of individuals toward divinity, religious practices, or the evangelical community.

According to Pargament (2011), greater religiosity corresponds to greater use of positive religious coping methods. In the relationship between positive religious coping and religiosity, we can determine elements of the association that are repeated in the observation of the factorial plan. Carry out the importance of the image and awareness of a God who is present, able to come in contact with individuals, and able to take an interest in his life, to establish a relation. It is supported concretely by religious practices (the meetings and prayer) that enable a direct connection with God to soothe fears. The more one feels that ability to concretely intervene in an individual's life, the more one turns to the entity. The importance attached to the idea of an active, present, and working God has an effect on the perception of the future and the resulting feeling of anxiety. Prayer together with the community and family, as well as religious meetings, allows people to feel heartened by the message conveyed and strengthen their faith (*RQ1*).

This dimension can also be found in the relationship that anxiety about the earthly future establishes with the transcendental future, where the possible function of ascribing a purpose to live is evidenced. Observation of the factorial plan shows that greater religiosity corresponds to greater belief and trust in life after death. For evangelicals with the highest degree of religiosity is associated with a view of trust in life beyond death seen as a new beginning (*RQ2*). Moreover, it is the transcendental future that mediates between religiosity and anxiety about the future (Boyd and Zimbardo, 2005).

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