

Article

The Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey: Methods and Key Results

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Abstract: Religious leaders are highly influential actors in many societies across the globe. In the singular global crisis brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, their perspective on the pandemic itself but also the post-pandemic future is of high relevance. Against this background, we conducted the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey, a comprehensive survey of 1200 religious leaders globally, in 2020/2021. Its aim was to investigate the role of religious communities and religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article provides an in-depth outline and discussion of the survey methodology and the resultant dataset, thereby paving the way for future research using the survey data. Moreover, the first set of key results is highlighted. It emerges that the COVID-19 pandemic was not primarily a health crisis. Rather, in terms of its consequences, COVID-19 had the characteristics of a primarily economic crisis in the Global South and a primarily psychosocial crisis in the Global North. Moreover, the pandemic has had a fundamental impact on religious practice across the globe. This impact, however, seems to be highly unequal between the Global South and North. Religious communities are shown to have had an important role as civil society actors in the pandemic, providing both psychosocial and material support. Regarding the post-pandemic world, religious leaders envision a more equitable society and emphasize the need for environmental sustainability.

Keywords: COVID-19; religion; religious leaders; pandemic; spiritual support; post-pandemic future; development; survey



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created global economic and social rifts unprecedented since the middle of the 20th century. The disease itself, but perhaps even more so the lockdown measures implemented to stop its spread, severely affected people's lives all over the world. "Within a short period of time", as Sibanda et al. (2022, p. 1) point out, "the pandemic became the world's most pressing emergency, exposing the limitations of bio-medicine and highlighting the vulnerability of human beings in different parts of the world". Lockdown measures restricted economic activities, leading to increasing unemployment and poverty, particularly in those countries where social security systems could not cushion the measures' impacts (Arndt et al. 2020; Lakemann et al. 2020). Border closures and restrictions imposed limitations on international travel, trade, and cooperation (Verschuur et al. 2021). The enforcement of stay-at-home rules to curb the spread of the pandemic led to a spike in domestic violence in many contexts (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro 2020; United Nations COVID-19 Response n.d.). In the wake of all its negative impacts, however, the pandemic also provided a boost in innovation, for example, by leading to unprecedented digitization (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021) and medical innovation in finding vaccines and medication against the disease, but also increased awareness of climate

change and environmental degradation (Mohammad and Pugacheva 2022; Sonntag et al. 2020). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic shows characteristics of a “crisis as opportunity” (Gkeredakis et al. 2021; cf. OECD 2021).

It is clear that the sharp disruptions produced by the coronavirus crisis raised fundamental normative questions on what the post-Covid world should look like. At the beginning of the pandemic, at the end of April 2020, *The Economist* titled its edition “The 90% economy”, arguing that COVID-19 is likely going to lead to an economic downturn and ensue economic, social, and political crisis. This, according to the argument, would provide a unique window of opportunity for societal, political, and economic change:

If the pandemic lowers the barrier to reform it will offer a rare chance to recast the social contract to favour those who have been shut out, and to peg back those who today enjoy entrenched privileges through the tax system, education and regulation. Perhaps the pandemic will enhance a sense of national and global solidarity . . . Yet that may prove to be wishful thinking. In the next 18 months everyone with an agenda will argue that the pandemic proves their point. After 2007–2009 politicians failed to deal with the grievances of ordinary people and the demand for change led to a surge in populism. The 90% economy threatens even greater suffering. The anger it creates may end up feeding protectionism, xenophobia and government interference on a scale not seen in decades. If . . . that is an outcome you would reject, it is time to start arguing for something better. (*The Economist*, 30 April 2020)

Religious worldviews play an important role in shaping these desirable imaginaries of the future. Religion, as sociologist Eisenstadt argued, has a “transformative capacity . . . to legitimize in religious or ideological terms, the development of new motivations, activities and institutions” (Eisenstadt 1968, p. 10). While recent studies pointed to religion’s role in coping with the existential insecurities created by the pandemic (Alfano et al. 2023; Bentzen 2021; Frahm-Arp 2021; Hillenbrand 2020), in many contexts, religion and religious knowledge not only provide psychosocial support but shape people’s attitudes and actions—and their normative views on the post-Covid world. Moreover, religious communities often actively contribute to public debates on fundamental societal questions.

At the same time, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, messages spread by religious leaders were often ambiguous, ranging from conspiracy theories and criticism of lockdown measures to supporting governments’ lockdown measures (Frost and Öhlmann 2021). For instance, studies showed conservative evangelicalism in the United States to be associated with a lower likelihood of complying with pandemic hygiene measures such as the wearing of masks (DeMora et al. 2021; Gonzalez et al. 2021). Religious affiliation also seemed to be related to higher levels of vaccine hesitancy during the pandemic (Kanozia and Arya 2021; Omidvar Tehrani and Perkins 2022)—which seems to be consistent with pre-pandemic research on religion and vaccination (Harapan et al. 2021; Kasstan 2021; Shelton et al. 2013). There are even studies suggesting that the population’s belief in God is positively correlated with COVID-19 infections (Alfano 2023).

Against this background, the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at the Humboldt University of Berlin conducted the online survey Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona, a global survey of 1223 persons in religious leadership positions, predominantly from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The survey was conceptualized and implemented by researchers Marie-Luise Frost, Wilhelm Gräb, Philipp Öhlmann, Juliane Stork, and Ekkardt Sonntag as part of the research project “Driving Forces of Transformation—Religious Communities as Actors of Sustainable Development” funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. The motivation for the survey was fourfold. First, it aimed to investigate normative perspectives on the post-COVID-19 future held by religious leaders. Second, it set out to investigate the role religious leaders played with respect to messages spread in relation to government-imposed measures to curb the spread of the pandemic (e.g., advocating their acceptance or rejection; cf. DeMora et al. 2021; Frost and Öhlmann 2021;

Gonzalez et al. 2021). Third, it intended to investigate religious communities' and religious leaders' role in providing support and relief during the coronavirus crisis. Lastly, at that time, there was no comprehensive survey focusing on corona and religion. The focus on religious leaders was motivated by their relevance in shaping people's values, attitudes, and behavior as well as societal discourses, particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious leaders, as influential and relevant actors, were considered to play an important role in curbing the spread of the pandemic and the challenges emerging in its wake.¹

The purpose of this article is to introduce the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey, introduce and reflect on its methods, provide summary statistics of the ensuing dataset, and highlight key results. The article thereby seeks to provide a basis for further analyses of the survey data, as a unique database, with specific regional and thematic foci. This includes analyses by the survey's research team itself as well as further analyses by scholars who wish to make use of the data for their own research. In this article, the data and analyses presented focus on the quantitative parts of the survey; analyses of the qualitative parts would go beyond the scope of this contribution and will be the subject of specific analyses in subsequent publications.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: in Section 2, the survey's methodology and its implementation are described; Section 3 presents descriptive statistics of the data and key results; a discussion of the survey's methodology, its results, and its limitations are provided in Section 4.

2. The Religious Leaders' Perspective on Corona Survey: Research Design and Methodology

2.1. Scope

The scope of the survey included all religious traditions worldwide. Participation was open to persons in religious leadership positions, without limitation to specific religious traditions or geographic regions. The survey's design was informed by the core assumption that religious communities are actors that have the potential to shape socio-political discourses and that influence people's attitudes and mindsets (cf. Eisenstadt 1968). The survey further assumed that within religious communities this role is particularly taken up by religious leaders. It is primarily religious leaders who speak on behalf and with the authority of their respective religious communities. Therefore, the survey focused on persons in religious leadership positions. The following were included in the survey as religious leaders: leaders of religious communities, leaders and functionaries of religious organizations such as religious humanitarian and development organizations (faith-based organizations—FBOs), leaders and functionaries of religious umbrella organizations and networks such as interfaith or ecumenical networks. The definition of religious leadership was deliberately chosen to be wide in order to be able to include leadership at the community, regional, national and global levels. To be able to further differentiate the respondents' leadership levels in the data, respondents were asked to categorize their own position according to the leadership levels "local", "intermediate", and "top".

2.2. Thematic Focus

In accordance with the key research questions mentioned in Section 1, the survey was designed according to three interrelated thematic fields (see Figure 1). First, the field "Corona in the Community", in which respondents were asked for their perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their immediate contexts. The second field was "Activities and Messages to Community and Government". It was intended to assess what activities in religious communities were implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and, importantly, what messages religious leaders spread during and in response to the pandemic both to their communities and into the political sphere. Third, the field "Perspectives on Corona in Present and Future" captured religious leaders' normative notions on society during and after the corona pandemic.

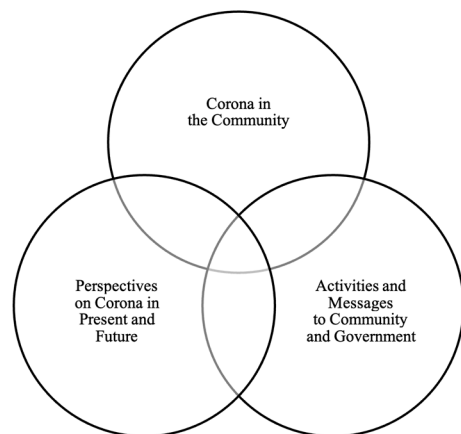


Figure 1. Thematic fields of the Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona Survey.

The survey’s thematic focus was transformed into a questionnaire that was structured into five sections: (1) information on the respondent, (2) situation in the community, (3) messages to the community, (4) views and attitudes on the pandemic, and (5) views on the post-pandemic future. Figure 2 displays this schematically and provides example questionnaire items for each section. Each question and its answer options will be discussed in Section 2.4.

Information on respondent and their religious	Situation in the community	Messages to community	Views and attitudes on the pandemic	Views on the post-pandemic future
religious tradition leadership level size and type of religious community/ organization country gender	What are the biggest problems your community is facing at the moment? <i>(Select top 5 priorities out of 18 options)</i> Have you done any of the following in relation to the coronavirus <i>(Select up to 8 out of 8)</i> Is there a specific reference from scripture and /or tradition that you have used in relation to the coronavirus pandemic? <i>(open-ended)</i>	What is the most important message you have given to your religious community concerning the coronavirus pandemic and the related measures? <i>(open-ended)</i> What is the most important message you would like to give your government regarding the pandemic and related measures? <i>(open-ended)</i> Have you told your religious community to do any of the following? <i>(Select up to 8 out of 8)</i>	Please indicate how much you agree to the following statements <i>(Likert-Scale: strongly agree / agree / undecided / disagree / strongly disagree)</i> Example statement: “My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well.”	How important will it be to do the following after the coronavirus pandemic? <i>(Likert-Scale: not important at all / not very important / moderately important / quite important / extremely important)</i> Example statement: “Reduce inequalities between rich and poor.” What is your vision for your country and the world after the coronavirus pandemic? <i>(open-ended)</i>

Figure 2. Structure of the survey questionnaire.

2.3. Structure and Implementation

The questionnaire included a total of 21 main items. It was composed of three types of closed- and open-ended questions. First, multiple-choice questions asked the respondents to choose a limited or unlimited number of answers from a predetermined set of options. A

second set of questions used Likert scale response options to capture respondents' ranking of the importance of a specific aspect or their degree of agreement with a certain statement. Third, the survey employed open-ended questions that allowed participants to enter text of their own choice.

Respondents could skip any questionnaire items. They were given the option to enter their name and the name of their religious community and to indicate whether they preferred to be quoted by name (in their responses to the open-ended questions). The questionnaire was available in six languages: English, German, French, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese. The technical implementation was done with the Kobo Toolbox, a survey tool allowing for both online and offline use (www.kobotoolbox.org, accessed on 1 August 2024).

The survey was rolled out as a global online survey accessible via the link <https://hu.berlin/corona-survey> (accessed on 1 June 2023). The survey rollout started on 9 June 2020, and the survey was closed on 5 May 2021. It was distributed as a special mailing via the Research Programme RCSD's mailing list on 9 June 2020 and subsequently promoted via social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) and by systematic emails to religious leaders in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas as well as to international confessional, ecumenical and interreligious bodies. Furthermore, three consultants were employed to distribute the survey in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The consultants were specifically tasked with not only distributing the survey online but also directly approaching religious leaders in their context in order to avoid a potential bias caused by restricting the respondents to those with a stable internet connection. A small number of responses were thus obtained in face-to-face interviews and recorded in the database by the consultants. Due to limited resources, the specific efforts to promote the survey were mainly focused on Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, which constitute the main geographic focus areas of the Research Programme RCSD and the international network it is embedded in, the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (IN//RCSD). Therefore, the majority of responses were obtained from those regions. However, the survey was accessible to respondents from across the globe, and a smaller number of responses came from other regions of the world.

The frequency of survey responses varied over time (see Figure 3). An initial wave of 195 responses received until August 2020 was followed by a brief phase of few responses until the end of September. The daily number of responses increased again at the end of September 2020, when the consultants were engaged to specifically distribute the survey in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, and continued to come in at a relatively constant average rate into 2021 before peaking at the end of February and the beginning of March 2021 due to substantially increased efforts in the promotion of the survey. Nearly half of the overall responses (549) were received in February and March 2021 alone.

Overall, the survey received 1223 responses from different parts of the world. As the survey was freely accessible online and no specific sampling frame was used, the resultant sample is statistically non-representative. However, as a survey specifically targeted at persons in religious leadership positions, it is quite comprehensive. As such, the dataset provides a fairly good picture of this group of persons regarding religious affiliation, particularly for Islam and Christianity, and geographic distribution, particularly for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

The following section proceeds to provide an item-by-item outline of the questionnaire and, where necessary, additional explanations on each item.

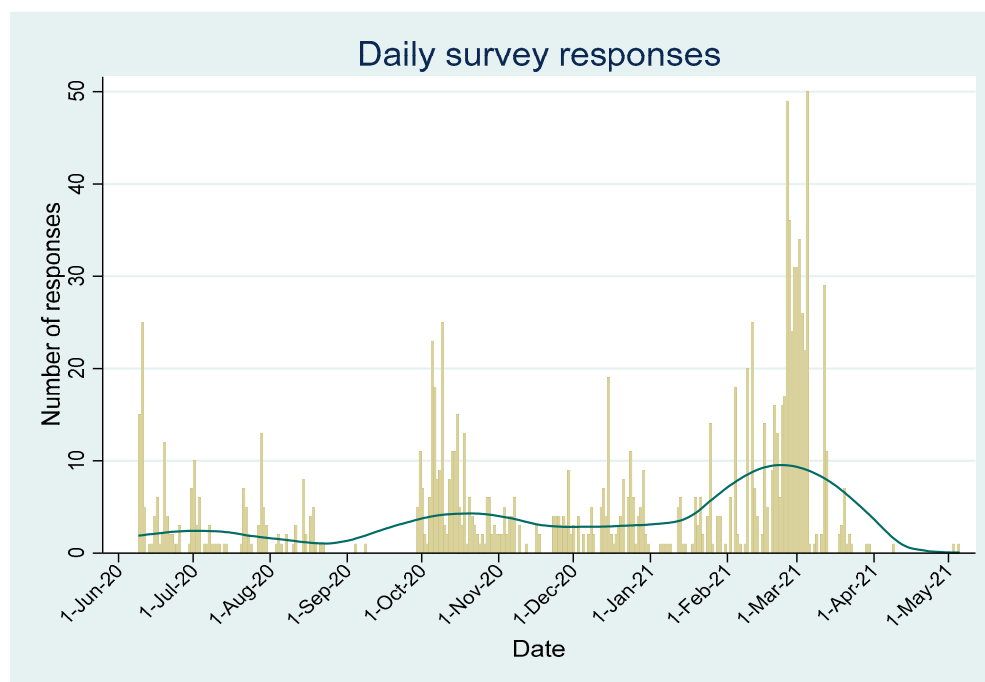


Figure 3. Survey responses over time.

2.4. Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was divided into five sections: an introductory section, a section about the respondent and their religious community, a section on the respondents' assessment of the situation in their community, a section about religious messaging during the pandemic, and a section on the respondents' normative views on the post-pandemic future.

2.4.1. Questionnaire Section 1: Welcome

The questionnaire was introduced with the following introductory text:

This survey aims to explore the perspectives of religious leaders on the current coronavirus pandemic. It is conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Theology of Humboldt Universität zu Berlin (Germany), led by Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Gräb and Philipp Öhlmann.

Any information provided will be solely used for the purposes of academic research. The findings will be published on the research programme's website and also used for subsequent academic research and publications.

Questions can be skipped. You can choose to participate anonymously if you wish.

Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact the lead researchers of the survey, Marie-Luise Frost and Dr. Ekkardt Sonntag (corona-survey.theology@hu-berlin.de).

We would greatly appreciate to include your expertise and insight in our assessment and thank you for taking part in the survey.

Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Gräb, Philipp Öhlmann, Marie-Luise Frost, Juliane Stork, Dr. Ekkardt Sonntag.

By continuing, you indicate your consent for using your answers for academic research and publications.

2.4.2. Questionnaire Section 2: About You and Your Community

Item 1: "Which of the following applies to you?"

Type: Multiple choice (multiple selections possible)

Answer options:

- (1) I am a leader or functionary in my religious community.
- (2) I am a social service or development practitioner in a religious NGO/FBO.
- (3) I am a leader or functionary in an interconfessional or interreligious organization.
- (4) I am an ordinary member of my religious community.
- (5) I am not a member of a religious community.
- (6) Please specify “other” [opens Item 1a—open ended].

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate their position in the religious community. To be able to filter out any respondents who do not fall into the category of persons in religious leadership positions, answer options (4) and (5) were included. Functionaries of religious organizations might not hold leadership positions in their religious communities, but in accordance with the definition of persons in religious leadership positions outlined above, they were included in the survey. Hence, the selection of multiple answer options was possible. Moreover, option (6) opened a subitem (Item 1a), allowing the free-text specification of the respondent’s position.

Item 2. “Some of the questions are open ended. In case we quote any of your statements, would you prefer to be quoted by name or anonymously (e.g., one leader said . . .)? Answers to multiple choice questions will always remain anonymous”.

Type: Multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options:

- (1) “Quote me by name”
- (2) “Quote me anonymously”

Note: To give the respondents the possibility of receiving recognition for any statements made in the framework of the survey, respondents were given the choice to indicate their preference of being quoted by name or anonymously. If option (1) was selected, a subitem (Item 2a) opened, allowing the free-text specification of the name by which the respondent preferred to be quoted.

Item 3. “Which statement describes your religious community or organization best? My community/organization . . .”

Type: Multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options:

- (1) “. . . is local”.
- (2) “. . . is national”.
- (3) “. . . stretches over more than one country”.
- (4) “. . . is global”.
- (5) “Not applicable/no answer”.

Note: Item 3 asked for the geographic scope of the religious community, thereby obtaining an indication of the size and the scope of representation.

Item 4. “Please indicate the country in which you are based”.

Type: Multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options: list of all countries.

Item 5. “Gender”

Type: Multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options: f/m/d

Item 6. “Name of your religious community or organization”

Type: open ended

Item 7. “Which of these terms describes best the religious community or organization you represent?”

Type: multiple choice (multiple selections possible)

Answer options:

- (1) Religious community (e.g., church, mosque etc.)

- (2) Association of different religious communities within the same religious tradition (interconfessional/ecumenical/Islamic supreme councils etc.)
- (3) Interfaith association
- (4) Not applicable/no answer

Note: Item 7 provided information on the type of organization in which the respondent has their leadership position. If option (1) was selected, Item 7a opened, which asked for the approximate membership figure of the religious community.

Item 7a. "Approximately how many members does your religious community have?"

Type: multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options:

- (1) Less than 100
- (2) 101–1000
- (3) 1001–10,000
- (4) 10,001–100,000
- (5) More than 100,000
- (6) Not applicable/no answer

Note: Item 7a (conditional on the selection of option (1) in Item 7) provided an indication of the size in terms of membership of the respondent's religious community.

Item 8. "Your position in your religious community/organization"

Type: multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options:

- (1) Top leadership level
- (2) Intermediate leadership level
- (3) Local leadership level
- (4) Ordinary member
- (5) I am not a member of any religious community
- (6) Please specify "other" [opens Item 8a—open ended]

Item 9. "Which of the following describes the tradition of your community or organization best? (Choose multiple for multi-faith or ecumenical associations)"

Type: multiple choice (multiple selections possible)

Answer options:

- (1) Muslim: Sunni
- (2) Muslim: Shia
- (3) Christian: Orthodox (including both Eastern and Oriental)
- (4) Christian: Roman (Latin) Catholic (including Eastern Rite)
- (5) Christian: Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, etc.)
- (6) Christian: African Independent
- (7) Christian: Evangelical
- (8) Christian: Pentecostal, Charismatic
- (9) Druze
- (10) Yazidi
- (11) Alawi, Alewi
- (12) Bahai
- (13) Buddhist
- (14) Hindu
- (15) African Traditional Religion
- (16) Jewish

Note. Multiple selections of religious traditions were allowed to cater for interconfessional or interreligious organizations.

2.4.3. Questionnaire Section 3: Your Community

Item 10. “What are the biggest problems your community is facing at the moment? (Please choose the top five priorities out of the following options)”

Type: multiple choice (up to five selections possible)

Answer options:

- (1) Closure of public service providers
- (2) Fear that family members might get sick or die
- (3) Prohibition of religious gatherings
- (4) Mistrust
- (5) Closure of educational institutions
- (6) Unemployment
- (7) Lack of faith
- (8) Fear of getting sick or dying
- (9) Insufficient access to hospitals
- (10) Crime
- (11) Poverty
- (12) Movement restrictions
- (13) Lack of hygiene equipment (e.g., hand sanitizers, masks, disinfectants)
- (14) Closure of businesses
- (15) Insufficient access to water and sanitation
- (16) Solitude
- (17) People falling sick or dying
- (18) Lack of hope

Note: Answer options in Item 10 were randomized to prevent bias toward the options listed at the top. The answer options were developed by the research team based on earlier research on religious leaders’ responses on what constituted the major problems in their communities (Öhlmann et al. 2021, p. 26) and were expanded and adapted in light of the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Item 11. “What is your assessment of domestic violence in your community during the coronavirus pandemic?”

Type: open ended

Note: Item 11 was originally not included in the survey. It was added a few months into the survey, as domestic violence emerged as one of the most important problems during lockdowns in the pandemic (UN Women 2021).

Item 12. “In your view, how high is the risk to get infected with the coronavirus in your city, town or local community?”

Type: Likert scale (very low/low/medium/high/very high)

Note: Item 12 served to assess the respondents’ perception of the risk of infection with COVID-19.

Item 13. “How does the coronavirus affect religious practice in your faith community?”

Type: multiple choice (one selection possible)

Answer options:

- (1) We still come together for religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer, much in the same way as always.
- (2) We come together for religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer but in much smaller numbers than before.
- (3) We hold our regular religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer online.
- (4) We do not hold religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer at all.
- (5) Not applicable/no answer.

Note: Item 13 served to assess the impact of COVID-19 and the related lockdowns on religious gatherings.

Item 14. “Have you done any of the following in relation to the coronavirus?”

- (1) Preaching on topics related to the coronavirus pandemic

- (2) Specific prayer related to coronavirus
- (3) Specific ceremonies or events, e.g., prayer nights relating to coronavirus
- (4) Food distribution to persons in need due to coronavirus
- (5) Financial support to persons in need due to coronavirus
- (6) Distribution of hand sanitizers, disinfectants or masks
- (7) Specific counseling for people affected by coronavirus
- (8) Other (please specify)

Notes: Answer option (3) opened Item 14a: “Which specific ceremonies have you held?” This question was open ended, providing the opportunity to specify further activities embarked upon during the pandemic.

Answer option (8) opened Item 14b, which was open ended, providing the opportunity to specify further activities embarked upon during the pandemic.

Item 15. “Is there a specific reference from scripture and/or tradition that you have used in relation to the coronavirus pandemic?”

Type: open ended

Note: Item 15 allowed respondents to refer to specific scriptures from their religious tradition (e.g., Bible verses, Quranic suras)

2.4.4. Questionnaire Section 4: Messages to Your Community

Item 16. “What is the most important message you have given to your religious community concerning the coronavirus pandemic and the related measures?”

Type: open ended

Note: In light of ambiguous messaging by religious leaders at the beginning of the pandemic, Item 16 probed into what kind of messages religious leaders spread during the pandemic.

Item 17. “What is the most important message you would like to give your government regarding the pandemic and related measures?”

Type: open ended

Note: Item 17 relates to the relationship of religious communities to the state with the aim of finding out whether religious leaders supported or criticized the government’s actions during the pandemic.

Item 18.

Type: multiple choice (multiple selection possible)

Question: “Have you told your religious community to do any of the following?”

Answer options:

- (1) Pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic.
- (2) Pray for those affected by the coronavirus.
- (3) Pray for those affected by the measures taken by the government related to the pandemic.
- (4) Come together for prayer meetings.
- (5) Wash hands regularly.
- (6) Wear masks when leaving the home.
- (7) Stay at home.
- (8) Help people in need (e.g., share or buy food for others).

Note: Item 18 was intended to find out what kind of messages religious leaders promoted during the pandemic and, in particular, whether these messages related to spirituality, health measures, or social behavior.

Item 19. “Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements”.

Statements provided:

- (1) We need to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic.
- (2) My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well.
- (3) The measures taken by the government are increasing the gap between rich and poor.
- (4) Domestic violence has increased during the coronavirus pandemic.
- (5) The people in my community expect support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders.

- (6) Other religious communities have given their members the right advice with regard to the coronavirus.
- (7) Most of the information on the coronavirus in the media in my country are reliable.
- (8) Measures taken by my government (lockdown, movement restrictions, closures etc.) are a necessary response to the coronavirus.
- (9) The health care system in my country is able to handle the coronavirus pandemic well.
- (10) The coronavirus is a divine punishment.
- (11) Religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence.
- (12) Environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus.

Type: Likert scale (strongly agree/agree/undecided/disagree/strongly disagree)

Note: Item 19 provided 12 statements and asked respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statement on a five-point scale. The statements appeared in randomized order. Subitems (4) and (11) were included at a later stage, at the same time as Item 11 was added to the survey.

Item 20. "From your perspective, how important will it be to do the following after the coronavirus pandemic?"

Statements provided:

- (1) Reduce inequalities between rich and poor.
- (2) Increase international cooperation.
- (3) Reduce globalization.
- (4) Strengthen national borders.
- (5) Substantially change the way the economy works.
- (6) Strengthen environmental protection.

Type: Likert scale (not important at all/not very important/moderately important/quite important/extremely important)

Note: Item 20 provided six statements and asked respondents to indicate the importance of each on a five-point scale. Answer options were randomized.

2.4.5. Questionnaire Section 5: Vision for the Time After the Coronavirus Pandemic

Item 21. "What is your vision for your country and the world after the coronavirus pandemic?"

Type: open ended

Note: Item 21 served to explore the normative notions on post-Covid society held by religious leaders. Hence, an open ended question was chosen.

2.4.6. Questionnaire Sections 6 and 7

In Section 6, participants were asked whether they would want to receive the survey results. Moreover, they had the opportunity to sign up for the Research Programme RCSD's newsletter. Section 7 provided a brief note of thanks and technical remarks and indicated the contact email of the research team again.

3. Description of the Data

3.1. Descriptive Statistics; Regional and Religious Distribution

After data cleaning procedures, such as the elimination of duplicates and the removal of cases without responses to any of the content-related questions (Items 10 to 21), the dataset consisted of a total of 1223 valid cases. The number of observations for most of the variables was slightly lower than the overall number due to missing cases in those variables. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Variable	N	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max
1	Position					
	1.1 Leader or functionary in religious community	1211	48.22		0	1
	1.2 Social service or development practitioner in rel. NGO/FBO	1211	13.38		0	1
	1.3 Leader or functionary in interconfessional or interreligious organization	1211	11.23		0	1
	1.4 Ordinary member of religious community	1211	14.70		0	1
	1.5 Not a member of religious community	1211	1.65		0	1
	1.6 Other	1211	22.63		0	1
	1a Specify other	20		Qualitative		
2	Quote by name	1223	38.84		0	1
	2a Name	423		Qualitative		
3	Geographic scope of religious community	1185	2.40	0.98	1	4
4	Country	1187	See appendix for per-country figures			
5	Gender					
	5.1 Diverse	1214	0.25		0	1
	5.1 Female	1214	33.77		0	1
	5.1 Male	1214	65.98		0	1
6	Name of religious community / organization	1111		Qualitative		
7	Type of religious community or organization					
	7.1 Religious community	1206	79.35		0	1
	7.2 Association of different religious communities within same religious tradition	1206	13.76		0	1
	7.3 Interfaith association	1206	6.22		0	1
	7.4 Not applicable	1206	4.73		0	1
	7a Size of religious community	923	3.80	1.42	1	5
8	Leadership level					
	8.1 Top leadership level	1216	34.13		0	1
	8.2 Intermediate leadership level	1216	24.84		0	1
	8.3 Local leadership level	1216	23.93		0	1
	8.4 Ordinary member	1216	14.31		0	1
	8.5 I am not a member of any religious community	1216	1.56		0	1
	8.6 Other	1216	1.23		0	1
	8a Specification of other	14		Qualitative		
9	Religious affiliation					
	9.1 Muslim: Sunni	1198	26.63		0	1
	9.2 Muslim: Shia	1198	9.60		0	1
	9.3 Christian: Orthodox	1198	4.51		0	1
	9.4 Christian: Roman Catholic	1198	12.10		0	1
	9.5 Christian: Protestant	1198	31.30		0	1
	9.6 Christian: African Independent	1198	9.02		0	1
	9.7 Christian: Evangelical	1198	9.52		0	1
	9.8 Christian: Pentecostal, Charismatic	1198	10.10		0	1
	9.9 Druze	1198	0.75		0	1
	9.10 Yazidi	1198	0.33		0	1
	9.11 Alawi, Alewi	1198	0.42		0	1
	9.12 Bahai	1198	0.92		0	1
	9.13 Buddhist	1198	4.42		0	1
	9.14 Hindu	1198	0.42		0	1
	9.15 African Traditional Religion	1198	0.67		0	1
	9.16 Jewish	1196	0.59		0	1
10	Biggest problems					
	10.1 Closure of public service providers	1214	20.43		0	1
	10.2 Fear that family members might get sick or die	1214	19.03		0	1
	10.3 Prohibition of religious gatherings	1214	21.33		0	1
	10.4 Mistrust	1214	18.70		0	1
	10.5 Closure of educational institutions	1214	15.90		0	1
	10.6 Unemployment	1214	14.66		0	1
	10.7 Lack of faith	1214	12.36		0	1
	10.8 Fear of getting sick or dying	1214	27.51		0	1
	10.9 Insufficient access to hospitals	1214	26.03		0	1
	10.10 Crime	1214	18.29		0	1
	10.11 Poverty	1214	48.27		0	1
	10.12 Movement restrictions	1214	40.94		0	1
	10.13 Lack of hygiene equipment	1214	19.93		0	1
	10.14 Closure of businesses	1214	32.29		0	1
	10.15 Insufficient access to water and sanitation	1214	14.50		0	1
	10.16 Solitude	1214	27.18		0	1
	10.17 People falling sick or dying	1214	29.74		0	1
	10.18 Lack of hope	1214	27.68		0	1
11	Domestic violence in community	676		Qualitative		
12	Perceived risk of infection	1207	2.69	1.07	1	5
13	How does the coronavirus affect religious practice in your faith community?					
	13.1 We still come together for religious services (...) much in the same way as always	927	5.29		0	1
	13.2 We come together for religious services (...) but in much smaller numbers than before	927	44.77		0	1
	13.3 We hold our regular religious services (...) online	927	17.69		0	1
	13.4 We do not hold religious services (...) at all	927	32.25		0	1

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	N	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max
<i>14 Actions in relation to the pandemic</i>					
14.1 Preaching on topics related to the pandemic	1204	52.08		0	1
14.2 Specific prayer related to coronavirus	1204	45.27		0	1
14.3 Specific ceremonies or events	1204	11.71		0	1
14.4 Food distribution to persons in need due to coronavirus	1204	53.82		0	1
14.5 Financial support to persons in need due to coronavirus	1204	51.08		0	1
14.6 Distribution of hand sanitizers, disinfectants or masks	1204	51.41		0	1
14.7 Specific counseling for people affected by coronavirus	1204	43.44		0	1
14.8 Other	1204	5.23		0	1
14a Specific ceremonies	94		Qualitative		
14b Specification of other	58		Qualitative		
15 Reference from scripture and/or tradition used in relation to the coronavirus pandemic	723		Qualitative		
16 Most important message to religious community	880		Qualitative		
17 Most important message to government	838		Qualitative		
<i>18 Messages to religious community</i>					
18.1 Pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic	1204	57.89		0	1
18.2 Pray for those affected by the coronavirus	1204	59.88		0	1
18.3 Pray for those affected by the measures taken by the government related to the pandemic	1204	37.79		0	1
18.4 Come together for prayer meetings	1204	22.01		0	1
18.5 Wash hands regularly.	1204	67.52		0	1
18.6 Wear masks when leaving the home	1204	66.78		0	1
18.7 Stay at home	1204	59.88		0	1
18.8 Help people in need	1204	50.00		0	1
<i>19 Agreement with various pandemic-related statements</i>					
19.1 We need to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic	1198	4.13	1.22	1	5
19.2 My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well	1,203	3.05	1.34	1	5
19.3 The measures taken by the government are increasing the gap between rich and poor	1198	3.53	1.23	1	5
19.4 Domestic violence has increased during the coronavirus pandemic	818	3.48	1.19	1	5
19.5 The people in my community expect support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders	1193	3.78	1.16	1	5
19.6 Other religious communities have given their members the right advice with regard to the coronavirus	1199	3.45	1.10	1	5
19.7 Most of the information on the coronavirus in the media in my country are reliable	1198	3.54	1.20	1	5
19.8 Measures taken by my government are a necessary response to the coronavirus	1201	3.69	1.20	1	5
19.9 The health care system in my country is able to handle the coronavirus pandemic well	1199	3.37	1.29	1	5
19.10 The coronavirus is a divine punishment	1188	2.60	1.48	1	5
19.11 Religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence	804	3.74	1.24	1	5
19.12 Environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus	1198	3.38	1.24	1	5
<i>20 Importance after the pandemic</i>					
20.1 Reduce inequalities between rich and poor	1201	3.80	1.41	1	5
20.2 Increase international cooperation	1198	3.88	1.23	1	5
20.3 Reduce globalization	1177	3.05	1.32	1	5
20.4 Strengthen national borders	1177	3.08	1.43	1	5
20.5 Substantially change the way the economy works	1187	3.72	1.30	1	5
20.6 Strengthen environmental protection	1200	3.88	1.32	1	5
21 Vision for country and world after the pandemic	814		Qualitative		

Information on the Respondents

In terms of their positions, nearly half of the respondents answered the survey from their perspective as a leader or functionary of a religious community (48.22%), with the categories “social service and development practitioner”, “interconfessional” or “interreligious organizations’ leader” chosen by close to a quarter (24.61%). Interestingly, a relatively high percentage of respondents (22.4%) chose “other” when asked about the role they fulfilled in their organization or religious community, but most did not make use of the text field to provide details. This attests to the diversity of religious leadership functions, which is not easily captured in categorizations (cf. [Goodwin and Kraft 2022](#)). One possible explanation could be that a considerable number of respondents fulfill informal leadership roles that are not captured by the given categories. While multiple roles could be chosen, the vast majority (90.92%) indicated one single role. A total of 14 respondents indicated that they were not a member of any religious community as their single choice. However, for 13 of these cases, a religious affiliation was provided in Item 6. Therefore, we assume that the majority of the 14 respondents who indicated that they were not members of a religious community still spoke from a religious perspective (even while not being a member of a

specific religious community) or chose this response by mistake. Moreover, 146 respondents indicated being an ordinary member of their religious community as their single choice. While it might be opportune to omit these cases for specific analyses, they were kept in the dataset as they can be safely assumed to speak from a religious perspective. Moreover, they might also have informal leadership roles not captured by the other categories. However, the dataset, of course, allows for filtering according to specific leadership positions.

Nearly 39% of the respondents indicated a preference for being quoted by name in their responses to the qualitative items. Consequently, almost 91% of those (432) specified their name. In future analyses of the qualitative data, the statements will be identified with the respondents' names in accordance with their preferences.

In terms of the geographic expansion of the religious communities, prompted on a four-point scale, the mean value of 2.40 is made up of the following distribution: local 18.31%, national 41.10%, more than one country 22.78%, and global 17.81%. Regarding the countries in which the respondents are based, responses were received from 95 different countries. For the purposes of regional analyses, countries were subsequently categorized into the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa (MENA), Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania.² In terms of the regional distribution, the majority of responses came from Sub-Saharan Africa (54.93%), followed by the MENA region (20.05%), Europe (17.52%), and the Americas (6.24%). Responses from each other world region remained below 1% of the dataset. Table 2 displays the responses received by regional classification and the responses by country in that region. While the figures for Asia and Oceania are too low for any meaningful analysis, the regional distribution allows for regional analyses for Africa (Sub-Saharan), MENA, Europe, and the Americas. It is important to note that the sample is not distributed equally or proportionally to population size across countries in a given region. Hence, the number of responses varies substantially by country. The highest number of single-country responses were received from Germany (N = 97), Nigeria (N = 89), and Jordan (N = 49). Overall, the regional distribution reflects the distribution channels. While the survey was advertised as widely as possible online, responses are concentrated in those regions in which specific efforts were made to promote the survey through the three consultants specifically tasked with this and through the collaborative network of the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (IN//RCSD).

Table 2. Responses by region.

Region	N	%	Countries (N _{country})
Africa	652	54.93	Nigeria (89), Kenya (37), Namibia (36), Cameroon (29), South Africa (26), South Sudan (26), Botswana (25), Liberia (25), Ethiopia (24), Ghana (24), Lesotho (23), Uganda (23), Chad (22), Comoros (the), (22), Malawi (22), Angola (21), Guinea-Bissau (21), Congo (the), (20), Eswatini (20), Mali (20), Sudan (the), (20), Gambia (15), Benin (14), Rwanda (12), Eritrea (5), Togo (5), United Republic of Tanzania (5), Burkina Faso (3), Democratic Republic of the Congo (3), Sierra Leone (3), Zambia (3), Mozambique (2), Zimbabwe (2), Burundi (1), Central African Republic (1), Gabon (1), Sao Tome and Principe (1), Seychelles (1)
Middle East and North Africa	238	20.05	Jordan (49), Morocco (42), Egypt (34), Iraq (33), Djibouti (21), Tunisia (16), Lebanon (14), Qatar (8), Algeria (6), Syria (4), Palestine (3), Bahrain (2), Oman (2), Iran (1), Kuwait (1), Libya (1), Saudi Arabia (1)
Europe	208	17.52	Germany (97), Switzerland (34), United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (32), Austria (21), France (5), Belgium (3), Italy (3), Spain (3), Netherlands (2), Denmark (1), Finland (1), Greece (1), Iceland (1), Luxembourg (1), Malta (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1)
Americas	74	6.24	Brazil (21), United States of America (10), Uruguay (9), Argentina (8), Colombia (5), Mexico (5), Chile (3), Costa Rica (2), Cuba (2), Ecuador (2), El Salvador (2), Venezuela (2), Canada (1), Guatemala (1), Nicaragua (1)
Asia	10	0.84	India (3), China (2), Malaysia (2), Azerbaijan (1), Indonesia (1), Myanmar (1)
Oceania	5	0.42	Australia (4), New Zealand (1)

The gender distribution (Item 5) of roughly one-third female and two-thirds male is likely reflective of the male dominance in religious leadership positions. To achieve a more gender-balanced view, weighting of the responses by gender would be an option in future analyses.

Regarding the type of organization or religious community represented, nearly 80% of the respondents identified with a single religious community, with about 20% identifying with interconfessional or interreligious organizations. Subitem 7a, probing for the size of the religious community in case respondents indicated to represent a religious community, shows that most respondents represented large religious communities (mean value of 3.80 on a five-point scale from “less than 100” = 1 to “more than 100,000” = 5). The proportion of those indicating that they represent religious communities with 100,001 or more members is 50.27%.

In terms of religious affiliation, the responses indicate a high proportion of respondents from Christian denominations (59.03%) and Islam (Sunni and Shia, 33.06%). There is a smaller percentage of Buddhists (4.17%), while the remaining categories taken together make up less than 3% of the total dataset. For the purposes of the analysis of the data, the various Christian denominations and Sunni and Shia Muslims were grouped into the overarching categories “Christian” and “Muslim”, respectively. The categorization is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Responses by religion.

Religion	N	Percent	Categories Included
Christian	718	59.93	Christian: Orthodox; Christian: Roman Catholic; Christian: Protestant; Christian: African Independent; Christian: Evangelical; Christian: Pentecostal, Charismatic
Muslim	396	33.06	Muslim: Sunni; Muslim: Shia
Buddhist	50	4.17	Buddhist
Other	34	2.84	Druze; Yazidi; Alawi, Alewi; Bahai; Hindu; African Traditional Religion; Jewish

While the aim of the survey was to obtain an overview of religious leaders’ perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic from an international perspective, the data on the information on the respondents show that there are numerous possibilities for focused analyses in terms of regions and countries, religious affiliation, gender, position and leadership level of the respondents, the type of organization represented and size of the religious community. However, in the analysis, one needs to take into account that some of the variables are highly correlated. Religious affiliation, for instance, differs substantially by region. To elucidate this relationship a bit better, Table 4 provides an overview of the distribution of religious affiliation for each region.

Table 4. Distribution of responses by region and religion.

	Christian	Muslim	Buddhist	Other	Total
Africa	402 (63.21%)	222 (34.91%)	0	12 (1.89%)	636
Middle East and North	56 (24.14%)	163 (70.26%)	0	13 (5.60%)	232
Europe	154 (74.40%)	3 (1.45%)	44 (21.26%)	6 (2.90%)	207
Latin America and the Caribbean	60 (96.77%)	0 (0.00%)	0	2 (3.23%)	62
North America	9 (81.82%)	1 (9.09%)	1 (9.09%)	0	11
Asia	8 (88.89%)	1 (11.11%)	0	0	9
Oceania	5 (100.00%)	0	0	0	5
Total	694 (59.72%)	390 (33.56%)	45 (3.87%)	33 (2.84%)	1162

3.2. Religious Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section proceeds to present the results of the content-related questions (from survey Item 10). Where feasible, not only are the aggregated global results outlined, but they are also presented as disaggregated by region and religion. The section focuses on the quantitative items, while the qualitative items will be analyzed and presented in a separate publication.

3.2.1. The Biggest Problems During the Pandemic [Item 10]

Respondents were asked to choose the five biggest problems their community is facing due to corona out of a list of 18 options. Figure 4 provides the percentages of respondents indicating the respective option as one of their five choices. The options are sorted in descending order based on how frequently they were chosen. Figure 4 provides the totals as well as disaggregated figures by region.

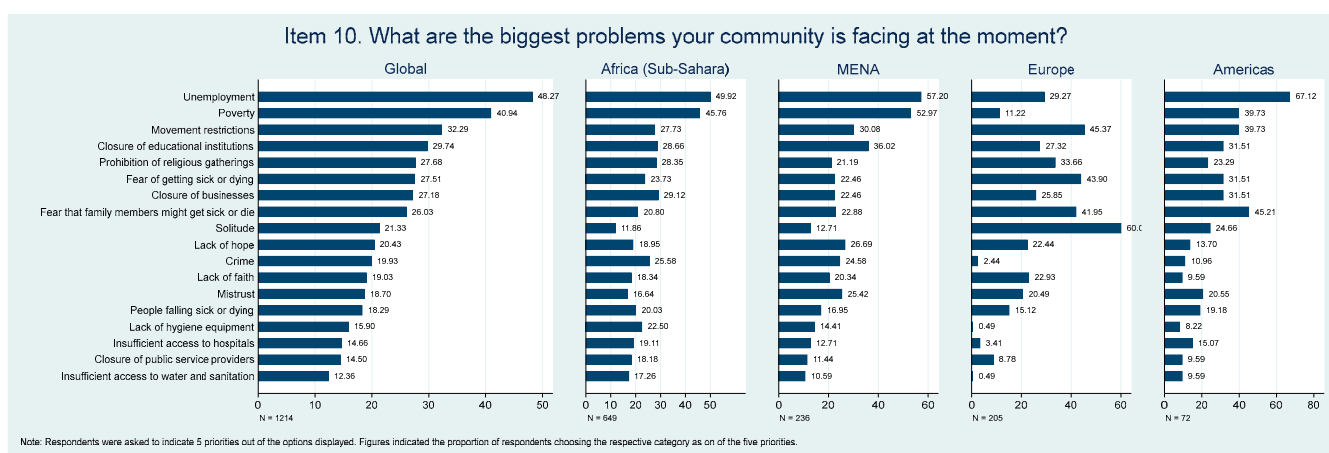


Figure 4. Religious leaders’ assessments of the biggest problems during the pandemic.

When asked about the five biggest problems their communities are facing during the time of the pandemic, close to half (48.27%) of respondents worldwide named unemployment, which tops the list of the 18 choices. Poverty, ranking at number 2, was mentioned by 40.94%. Thus, the two main concerns discerned in religious communities are economic in nature. Problems ranking in the middle third of the scale are, in order, movement restrictions, closure of educational institutions, prohibition of religious gatherings, fear of getting sick or dying, closure of businesses, and the fear for family members’ health or life. Problems at the bottom of the scale (chosen by 25% of the respondents or less) include some challenges that have at times been discussed as very prominent problems of the pandemic era: solitude (21.33%), actual sickness and death (18.29%—as opposed to the fear of it, 27.51%, and the fear of family members getting sick or dying, 26.03%), insufficient access to hospitals (third from the bottom, 14.66%).

Disaggregating the answers by region reveals stark differences. Economic hardship (unemployment and poverty) ranks in the first two places in Africa, MENA, and the Americas, but only 5th (unemployment) and 13th (poverty) among European respondents.³ In Europe, solitude ranks by far the highest (60% of respondents counting it as one of the five biggest problems, offset by almost 15 percentage points from the second placed, movement restrictions), while in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA it ranks lowest and third-lowest, respectively. Interestingly, the fear of getting sick or dying or that family members get sick or die seems to be substantially higher in Europe and the Americas. The respective options were indicated by over 43.90% and 41.95% of the respondents in Europe and between 31.51% and 45.21% of the respondents in the Americas, but only by between 20.80% and 23.73% of the respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA.

At the same time, people actually falling sick and dying is consistently mentioned less frequently than the fear of it in all four regions. We interpret this as potentially indicating that religious leaders consider the perceived insecurity a major problem. Other sentiments seem to be consistent throughout the four regions as well: for instance, the frequency of the closure of businesses ranges close to the global value (deviating by a maximum of 4 percentage points); a similar case is the closure of educational institutions.

3.2.2. Risk of Infection [Item 12]

The perceived risk of infection, as captured in Item 12, was not generally considered very elevated (response analysis shown in Table 5). Only about 21% of the survey respondents considered the risk to be high or very high, while almost 45% indicated a low or very low perceived risk of infection. Comparing the mean values across regions (Table 6) shows that this seems to be relatively consistent throughout the regions, with similar mean values for Europe and Africa indicating between medium and low risk, the mean value for MENA being close to medium risk perception and only the value for the Americas indicating an average risk perception between medium and high (value above 3).

Table 5. Item 12: “In your view, how high is the risk to get infected with the coronavirus in your city, town, or local community?”.

Value	Percentage of Responses (Global)
5 = very high	5.55
4 = high	15.66
3 = medium	34.96
2 = low	29.74
1 = very low	14.08

Note: N = 1207; mean = 2.69; SD = 1.07.

Table 6. Item 12, mean values by region.

Region	Mean	SD	N
Africa	2.61	1.09	645
MENA	2.95	1.07	233
Europe	2.45	0.86	206
Americas	3.34	1.03	73

Note: analysis of variance shows mean values to be statistically different from the sample average (F = 19.12).

3.2.3. Effects of the Pandemic on Religious Practice [Item 13]

Respondents were asked how the pandemic affects religious practice in their religious community (see Table 7). Globally, only 5.29% reported that meetings continued unchanged. A total of 44.77% of all participants responding to the question indicated they came together in smaller numbers than before the pandemic, and 32.25% responded that physical gatherings had stopped altogether. A total of 17.69% of respondents pointed to regular events having moved to the virtual space. The online trend played out differently by region and group. Expectedly, online meetings were more common in Europe (27.33%) than in Africa (9.96%) or the Middle East (13.89%). They were most common in the Americas with over 64.29% (albeit this number might again be less reliable due to the low number of observations from this region).

Table 7. Item 13: “How does the coronavirus affect religious practice in your faith community?”.

	Percentage of Responses by Region				
	Global	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas
13.1 We still come together for religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer, much in the same way as always.	5.29	3.11	5	8.14	1.79
13.2 We come together for religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer but in much smaller numbers than before.	44.77	39.21	47.22	62.79	25
13.3 We hold our regular religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer online.	17.69	9.96	13.89	27.33	64.29
13.4 We do not hold religious services/ceremonies/events/prayer at all.	32.25	47.72	33.89	1.74	8.93
N	927	482	180	172	56

The figures clearly show the unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practice globally, with particularly adverse effects in some world regions. Nearly half of the respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa (47.72%) and more than one-third of the respondents from the MENA region (33.89%) indicated that their religious gatherings had stopped entirely, while the same figures for Europe and the Americas are only at 1.74% and 8.93%, respectively. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practice hence seems to be much more severe in the Global South.

3.2.4. Services Provided During the COVID-19 Pandemic [Item 14]

Figures 5 and 6 display the results of Item 14, which asked respondents to indicate services provided by their religious communities in relation to the pandemic. The results, global as well as disaggregated by region and religion, are displayed in Figures 5 and 6. From a global perspective, the responses are distributed relatively evenly, with the percentage of respondents indicating checking the respective option ranging from 53.82% (food distribution) to 43.44% (counseling). The disaggregation by region, however, brings out substantial differences. While in Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region, and the Americas, activities catering for people’s material needs, such as food distribution and financial support, seem to have been prioritized, in Europe, the top three items selected relate to spirituality (prayer, preaching, counseling). The figures for the Americas deviate somewhat from either pattern, with both high values for material and spiritual support. In general, the services provided are consistent with the needs and problems identified in the previous items.

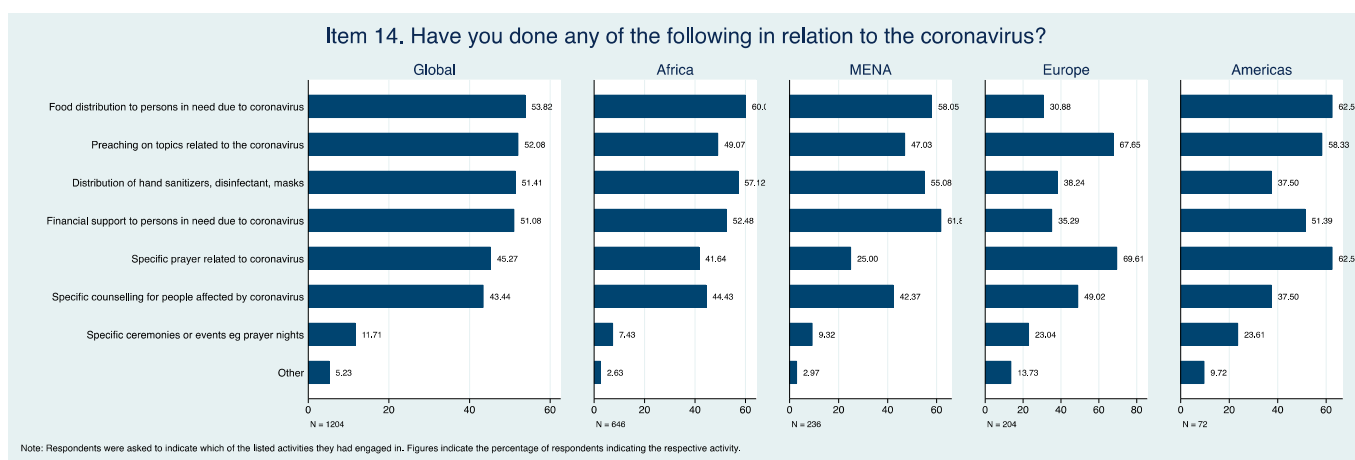


Figure 5. Item 14: “Have you done any of the following in relation to the coronavirus?”, responses by region.

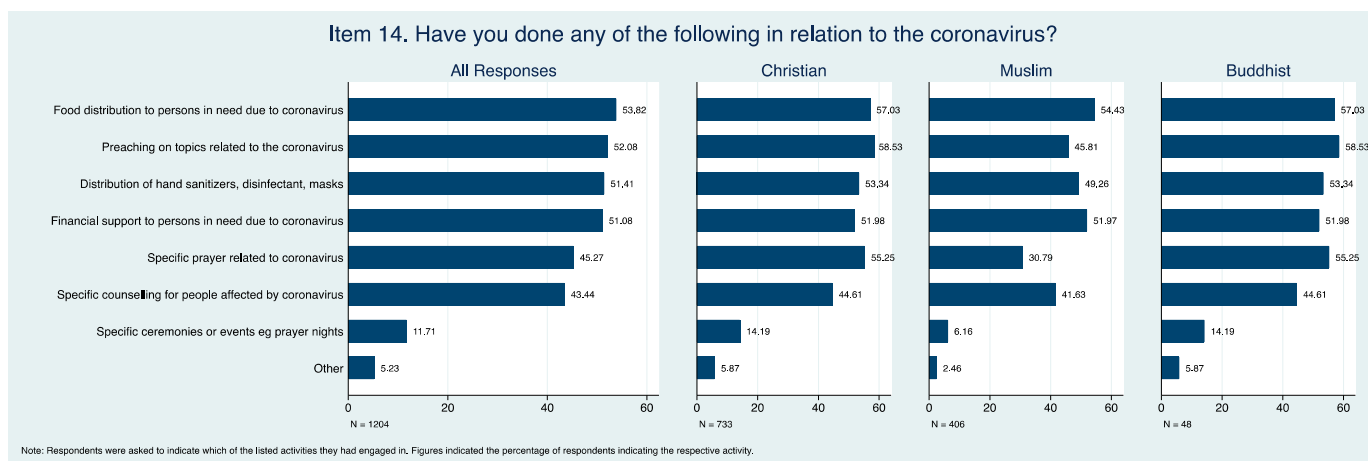


Figure 6. Item 14, Have you done any of the following in relation to the coronavirus?”, responses by religion.

In addition, the option “other” was provided, allowing respondents to specify additional activities embarked on during the pandemic. We take the fact that only 5.29% of the respondents made use of this option to indicate that the seven options provided relevant thematic choices that covered a substantial part of religious leaders’ and communities’ activities in response to the pandemic.

Disaggregating the responses by religion indicates that Christian respondents were more likely to include the pandemic in their preaching and teaching (58.53%, rank 1) than Muslims (45.81%, rank 4). Similarly, a substantially higher proportion of Christian than Muslim respondents indicated specific prayer in relation to the coronavirus as an activity embarked on (55.25% vs. 30.79%). However, the commonality across both religious traditions seems to be the care for people’s material needs: food distribution and financial support are ranked similarly high in both categories.

3.2.5. Messages to the Community [Item 18]

Having looked at respondents’ activities in response to the pandemic, the subsequent questions sought to explore what messages religious leaders spread during the pandemic. Figures 7 and 8 display the results. Overall, religious leaders indicated to have spread messages of compliance with hygiene regulations as well as spiritual responses to the pandemic, such as praying for those affected by COVID-19 and for the pandemic to end. Looking at the regional disaggregation, some differences emerge. Praying for those affected by the pandemic seemed to have been much more relevant in Europe and the Americas (selected by 84.90% and 83.10%, respectively) than in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA (54.10% and 45.99%, respectively). Similarly, helping people in need seemed to have been a prominent message to the religious community in Europe and the Americas than in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA (around 80% vs. around 40%). The list of options included a question intended to assess to what extent religious communities encouraged adherence to the widespread restrictions on social gatherings, also in light of criticisms that religious communities are inadvertent drivers of the pandemic because they constitute large gatherings. The results show that overall, there seemed to have been little encouragement to come together physically by religious leaders. However, a significant minority of 22.01% of the respondents indicated that they had encouraged people to come together for prayer meetings.

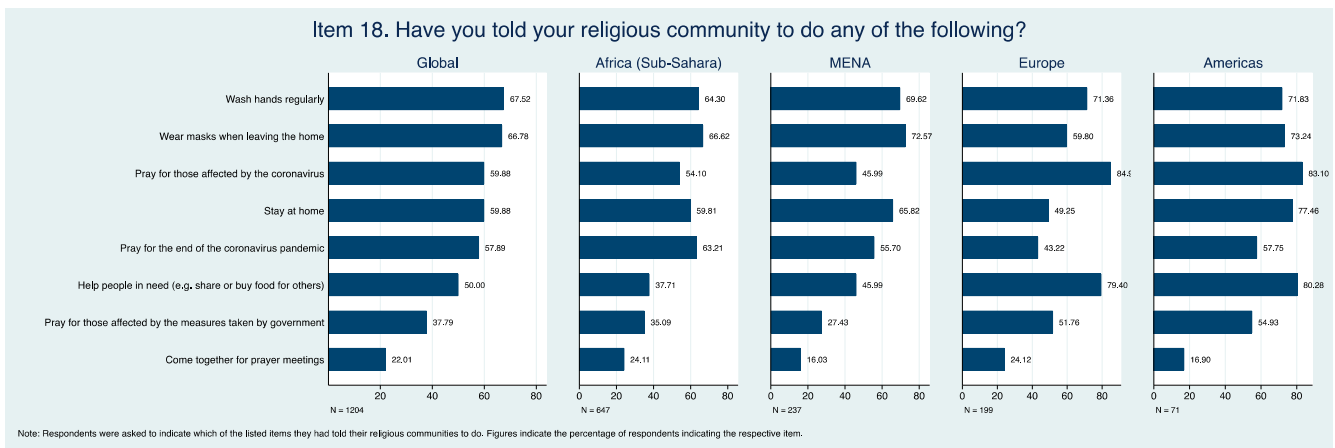


Figure 7. Item 18: “Have you told your religious community to do any of the following?”, responses by region.

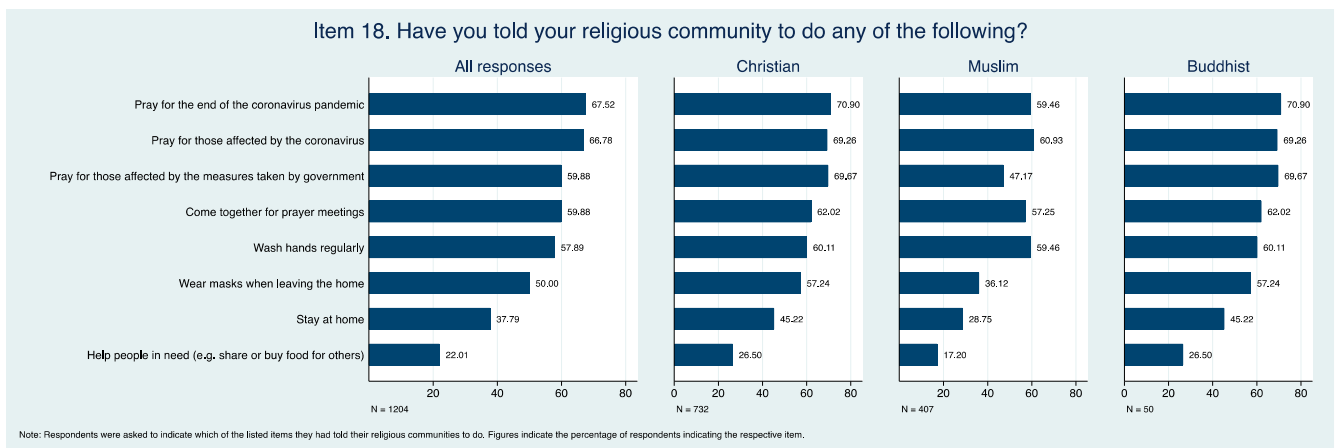


Figure 8. Item 18: “Have you told your religious community to do any of the following?”, responses by religion.

3.2.6. Attitudes and Views [Item 19]

Religious leaders’ attitudes and views on how the pandemic impacted public and community life, as well as the respondents’ interpretation of the pandemic and their assessment of the government’s handling of the pandemic, were the content of Item 19, with the results depicted in Figure 9. In the global set, the statement drawing the strongest agreement was “we need to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic” (sub-item 19.1), with a mean agreement of 4.13 and 78.54% of respondents choosing agree or strongly agree. Overall, religious leaders seem to see the pandemic as an important field of action for themselves. After the need to pray for the end of the pandemic, the mean agreement is highest for sub-item 19.5, “The people in my community expect support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders” (Mean: 3.77, 67.93% agree/strongly agree), closely followed by 19.11, “Religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence” (mean: 3.77; 66.79% agree/strongly agree). On a related note, 54.40% of the respondents are in agreement with the statement that “domestic violence has increased during the coronavirus pandemic” (mean: 3.18).

The measures taken by governments in response to the pandemic are generally seen as necessary (sub-item 19.8)—even though they are considered to increase the gap between rich and poor (sub-item 19.3). However, views on governments’ and health systems’ capacity to deal with the pandemic in an adequate way are more mixed (sub-item 19.2 and 19.9, respectively).



Figure 9. Item 19: Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

Regarding public information on the pandemic, a majority of the respondents considered the information on the pandemic in the media in their country reliable (sub-item 19.7), and a majority also agreed that other religious communities had given their members the right advice with regard to the coronavirus (sub-item 19.6).

Aiming to assess the relative importance of different concurrent crises, sub-item 19.12 asked for religious leaders’ opinions on the relative importance of climate change vis-a-vis the pandemic. Strikingly, even at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and early 2021, 52.34% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the assessment that “environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus” (Mean: 3.38).

While the mean agreement was lowest for the statement “the coronavirus is a divine punishment” (2.60), and a majority of the respondents (51.54%) indicated disagreement with the statement, almost one-third (32.47%) of the respondents indicated agreement with it. Hence, a substantial number of religious leaders seemed to interpret the pandemic, at least partially, in a religious way.

Of course, for many of these questions, an analysis by region or country would be interesting. Hence, Table 8 provides disaggregated figures by region and religion.

Table 8. Item 19: “Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements”, responses by region and religion.

	By Region				By Religion	
	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas	Christian	Muslim
19.1 We need to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic						
5 = strongly agree	67.24	42.98	29.21	47.89	55.70	58.42
4 = agree	15.53	35.32	36.14	29.58	24.50	23.47
3 = undecided	6.37	11.06	13.86	7.04	6.98	8.16
2 = disagree	3.11	6.38	12.87	4.23	4.99	4.85
1 = strongly disagree	7.76	4.26	7.92	11.27	7.83	5.10
Mean	4.31	4.06	3.66	3.99	4.15	4.25
SD	1.21	1.09	1.24	1.33	1.23	1.12
N	644	235	202	71	702	392
19.2 My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well						
5 = strongly agree	12.89	15.38	23.08	11.11	16.57	12.56
4 = agree	21.58	27.35	52.88	27.78	29.32	25.38
3 = undecided	19.57	13.25	10.1	13.89	14.59	19.23
2 = disagree	26.4	30.77	9.13	19.44	24.65	24.10
1 = strongly disagree	19.57	13.25	4.81	27.78	14.87	18.72
Mean	2.82	3.01	3.8	2.75	3.08	2.89
SD	1.32	1.32	1.05	1.41	1.34	1.32
N	644	234	208	72	706	390
19.3 The measures taken by the government are increasing the gap between rich and poor						
5 = strongly agree	26.45	30.04	12.08	35.14	25.64	25.45
4 = agree	31.3	36.48	38.65	24.32	32.05	34.96
3 = undecided	20.5	16.74	24.15	16.22	19.23	20.05
2 = disagree	12.21	10.73	20.29	13.51	14.39	12.08
1 = strongly disagree	9.55	6.01	4.83	10.81	8.69	7.46
Mean	3.53	3.74	3.33	3.59	3.52	3.59
SD	1.26	1.17	1.08	1.37	1.25	1.2
N	639	233	207	74	702	389
19.4 Domestic violence has increased during the coronavirus pandemic						
5 = strongly agree	19.25	27.08	27.14	42.86	26.06	19.58
4 = agree	29.81	27.6	48.57	33.33	30.05	31.93
3 = undecided	22.98	20.83	15.71	17.46	19.72	23.49
2 = disagree	21.33	18.75	8.57	3.17	18.54	18.98
1 = strongly disagree	6.63	5.73	0	3.17	5.63	6.02
Mean	3.34	3.52	3.94	4.1	3.52	3.4
SD	1.2	1.23	0.88	1.01	1.22	1.17
N	483	192	70	63	426	332

Table 8. Cont.

	By Region				By Religion	
	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas	Christian	Muslim
19.5 The people in my community expect support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders						
5 = strongly agree	35.57	25.65	18.05	50.68	35.70	25.65
4 = agree	31.98	36.09	51.71	32.88	36.42	36.01
3 = undecided	14.51	17.83	18.54	12.33	13.94	16.84
2 = disagree	12.17	15.22	9.27	4.11	9.39	16.06
1 = strongly disagree	5.77	5.22	2.44	0	4.55	5.44
Mean	3.79	3.62	3.74	4.3	3.89	3.6
SD	1.21	1.17	0.94	0.84	1.13	1.18
N	641	230	205	73	703	386
19.6 Other religious communities have given their members the right advice with regard to the coronavirus						
5 = strongly agree	22.14	17.83	6.83	8.11	18.48	17.88
4 = agree	33.59	33.04	36.59	36.49	33.00	36.53
3 = undecided	23.07	29.13	42.93	36.49	28.49	24.87
2 = disagree	15.17	13.91	11.71	16.22	14.67	15.54
1 = strongly disagree	6.04	6.09	1.95	2.7	5.36	5.18
Mean	3.51	3.43	3.35	3.31	3.45	3.46
SD	1.17	1.12	0.85	0.94	1.11	1.11
N	646	230	205	74	709	386
19.7 Most of the information on the coronavirus in the media in my country are reliable						
5 = strongly agree	22.93	18.1	22.71	18.06	24.89	16.93
4 = agree	36.19	34.05	58.45	33.33	41.73	34.64
3 = undecided	17.78	19.4	13.04	16.67	14.57	20.05
2 = disagree	14.98	17.24	3.86	25	12.87	17.97
1 = strongly disagree	8.11	11.21	1.93	6.94	5.94	10.42
Mean	3.51	3.31	3.96	3.31	3.67	3.3
SD	1.22	1.26	0.83	1.23	1.16	1.24
N	641	232	207	72	707	384
19.8 Measures taken by my government are a necessary response to the coronavirus						
5 = strongly agree	26.55	22.94	37.02	28.77	30.88	23.20
4 = agree	33.23	39.83	50.48	45.21	37.96	39.18
3 = undecided	15.37	13.85	6.73	12.33	12.32	14.95
2 = disagree	17.86	16.02	2.88	6.85	13.03	16.24
1 = strongly disagree	6.99	7.36	2.88	6.85	5.81	6.44
Mean	3.55	3.55	4.16	3.82	3.75	3.56
SD	1.25	1.21	0.89	1.13	1.19	1.19
N	644	231	208	73	706	388
19.9 The health care system in my country is able to handle the coronavirus pandemic well						
5 = strongly agree	15.91	15.88	48.56	16.44	23.72	14.91
4 = agree	30.42	30.9	40.87	31.51	33.10	31.88
3 = undecided	22.31	19.31	5.29	12.33	16.34	21.34
2 = disagree	19.81	17.6	3.37	28.77	17.61	18.51
1 = strongly disagree	11.54	16.31	1.92	10.96	9.23	13.37
Mean	3.19	3.12	4.31	3.14	3.44	3.16
SD	1.25	1.33	0.87	1.31	1.28	1.27
N	641	233	208	73	704	389

Table 8. Cont.

	By Region				By Religion	
	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas	Christian	Muslim
19.10 The coronavirus is a divine punishment						
5 = strongly agree	19.65	18.06	0.48	2.78	12.98	19.63
4 = agree	24.06	24.23	1.44	4.17	14.55	26.70
3 = undecided	19.81	18.06	5.77	8.33	13.69	21.47
2 = disagree	16.35	21.59	10.58	15.28	14.69	19.90
1 = strongly disagree	20.13	18.06	81.73	69.44	44.08	12.30
Mean	3.07	3.03	1.28	1.56	2.38	3.21
SD	1.41	1.38	0.68	1.01	1.48	1.3
N	636	227	208	72	701	382
19.11 Religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence						
5 = strongly agree	31.3	32.11	31.88	66.67	38.81	27.78
4 = agree	29.62	33.68	55.07	23.33	31.19	33.64
3 = undecided	14.08	15.26	11.59	1.67	11.43	15.43
2 = disagree	16.6	12.11	1.45	6.67	12.62	15.74
1 = strongly disagree	8.4	6.84	0	1.67	5.95	7.41
Mean	3.59	3.72	4.17	4.47	3.84	3.59
SD	1.31	1.23	0.69	0.95	1.23	1.25
N	476	190	69	60	420	324
19.12 Environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus						
5 = strongly agree	20.4	22.08	18.84	19.18	19.86	19.38
4 = agree	28.35	37.23	39.61	27.4	28.23	37.98
3 = undecided	18.69	20.78	29.47	27.4	21.84	19.90
2 = disagree	20.87	15.58	8.21	19.18	19.43	15.76
1 = strongly disagree	11.68	4.33	3.86	6.85	10.64	6.98
Mean	3.25	3.57	3.61	3.33	3.27	3.47
SD	1.31	1.12	1.01	1.19	1.27	1.17
N	642	231	207	73	705	387

Regarding the regionally disaggregated figures, confidence in the government's pandemic handling, health care system, and media is consistently higher among the European sample. At the same time, respondents from Europe and the Americas are substantially less likely to consider the pandemic a divine punishment (mean agreement: 1.28 and 1.56, respectively, vs. 3.07 and 3.03 in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA).

The disaggregation by religious tradition yields that for some questions, the responses by Christian and Muslim religious leaders are relatively close together, while for others, they deviate more. However, due to the nature of the sample and the fact that religious affiliation and region are correlated, these figures should be interpreted with caution. While the statements referring to the situation in the respondents' country are likely to be influenced by the regional variables, a closer look at the more general questions, in particular those relating to aspects of religion, shows interesting results: Muslim respondents are slightly more likely to agree with the statement "we need to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic" (difference in means: 0.1) and substantially more likely to consider the pandemic a divine punishment (difference in means: 0.83). However, this might be driven by the geographic correlation. Agreement with this statement is substantially lower in Europe and the Americas (where the majority of responses are Christian) than in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA. At the same time, Muslim respondents are slightly more likely to consider environmental destruction a greater concern than COVID-19 (difference in means: 0.2). However, the descriptive mean comparisons cannot be taken as evidence of any causal relationship. The cultural and geographic heterogeneity of the samples would not allow

such conclusions. Future research should take these figures as a starting point and perform regression analyses to further elucidate the drivers of the trends visible.

3.2.7. Perspectives on the Post-Pandemic Future [Item 20]

Looking into the post-pandemic future, the survey was intended to also assess what religious leaders considered important in the post-covid world. Figure 10 displays the responses to the six items whose importance respondents were asked to indicate. In the global sample, all statements received a mean importance rating between 3.05 (“reduce globalization”) and 3.88 (“strengthen environmental protection” and “increase international cooperation”), showing that, on average, they are all considered between moderately important and quite important. In terms of the mean values, respondents assigned the highest importance (mean: 3.88) to “increase international cooperation” and “strengthen environmental protection”, while “reduce globalization” and “strengthen national borders” received the lowest importance ranking (3.05 and 3.08, respectively). It is noteworthy that these are two important measures taken by many governments around the world. Border closures and the disruption of global trade and value chains, as well as international mobility, were essential characteristics of the 2020/2021 COVID-19 period. The view of religious leaders seems to be that these should not be priorities in the post-Covid age. In the perspective emerging from the data in Figure 10, religious leaders rather consider the opposite important: increasing international cooperation. Moreover, the reduction of inequalities and substantial changes to economic structures are considered quite or extremely important by around two-thirds of the respondents. Here, a divergence is clearly visible between the policy prioritizations by governments during the pandemic and what is needed in the perspectives of religious leaders for the post-pandemic epoch.

The high importance that is furthermore assigned to strengthening environmental protection—receiving the overall highest percentage of mentions as extremely important (47.25%)—resonates with the high agreement in the previous question set that environmental destruction is of greater concern than COVID-19.

Table 9 again provides a disaggregation by region and religion. Overall, the Muslim respondents in the sample place higher importance on reducing globalization and strengthening national borders than Christian respondents (difference in means 0.24 and 0.44, respectively). As mentioned above, these simple mean comparisons should be interpreted cautiously. In this case, the figures might be driven by the low importance assigned to these two statements by European respondents, who are mainly Christian. A similar trend might be behind the difference between Christian and Muslim respondents in their assessment of the importance of environmental protection, the increase of international cooperation, and the reduction of economic inequalities. Their importance is ranked higher by the Christian sub-sample, potentially driven by the higher-than-sample-average importance rating among (mainly Christian) European respondents. A relative consensus seems to be regarding the need to substantially change the economy. Here, the mean importance between Christians and Muslims is only 0.13 points apart.

Table 9. Item 20: “From your perspective, how important will it be to do the following after the coronavirus pandemic?”, responses by region and religion.

	By Region				By Religion	
	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas	Christian	Muslim
20.1 Reduce inequalities between rich and poor						
5 = extremely important	41.59	37.50	56.25	73.97	51.49	32.13
4 = quite important	17.91	26.72	34.62	16.44	20.85	25.45
3 = moderately important	10.75	16.38	5.77	4.11	8.23	14.14
2 = not very important	12.15	10.78	1.92	1.37	8.37	12.85
1 = not important at all	17.6	8.62	1.44	4.11	11.06	15.42
Mean	3.54	3.74	4.42	4.55	3.93	3.46
SD	1.54	1.30	0.81	0.96	1.39	1.44
N	642	232	208	73	705	389

Table 9. Cont.

	By Region				By Religion	
	Africa	MENA	Europe	Americas	Christian	Muslim
20.2 Increase international cooperation						
5 = extremely important	37.81	41.56	41.06	58.90	43.00	34.11
4 = quite important	28.75	25.54	40.10	27.40	31.26	26.56
3 = moderately important	11.09	15.15	13.04	8.22	10.18	15.10
2 = not very important	15.00	10.39	4.35	4.11	10.18	16.41
1 = not important at all	7.34	7.36	1.45	1.37	5.37	7.81
Mean	3.75	3.84	4.15	4.38	3.96	3.63
SD	1.3	1.27	0.91	0.91	1.19	1.31
N	640	231	207	73	707	384
20.3 Reduce globalization						
5 = extremely important	19.81	24.77	6.83	16.18	16.86	21.90
4 = quite important	19.34	25.23	18.54	20.59	18.44	24.80
3 = moderately important	20.91	22.07	32.68	26.47	25.22	19.00
2 = not very important	23.11	17.12	30.24	22.06	24.21	21.11
1 = not important at all	16.82	10.81	11.71	14.71	15.27	13.19
Mean	3.02	3.36	2.79	3.01	2.97	3.21
SD	1.38	1.31	1.09	1.3	1.31	1.35
N	636	222	205	68	694	379
20.4 Strengthen national borders						
5 = extremely important	28.08	26.82	1.46	10.00	21.41	24.80
4 = quite important	26.34	25.00	6.31	14.29	18.97	27.20
3 = moderately important	18.61	26.82	9.22	21.43	17.39	22.67
2 = not very important	14.51	14.09	34.95	24.29	20.40	15.47
1 = not important at all	12.46	7.27	48.06	30.00	21.84	9.87
Mean	3.43	3.50	1.78	2.50	2.98	3.42
SD	1.36	1.23	0.96	1.33	1.46	1.28
N	634	220	206	70	696	375
20.5 Substantially change the way the economy works						
5 = extremely important	33.28	41.56	35.78	55.56	36.51	33.94
4 = quite important	23.66	24.24	39.22	22.22	27.56	23.32
3 = moderately important	15.93	15.58	18.63	13.89	15.87	18.39
2 = not very important	16.72	12.12	3.43	4.17	11.11	16.58
1 = not important at all	10.41	6.49	2.94	4.17	8.95	7.77
Mean	3.53	3.82	4.01	4.21	3.72	3.59
SD	1.37	1.27	0.97	1.1	1.30	1.31
N	634	231	204	72	693	386
20.6 Strengthen environmental protection						
5 = extremely important	37.13	47.62	64.9	73.97	50.57	36.79
4 = quite important	20.59	18.61	25.48	16.44	21.53	19.43
3 = moderately important	16.07	16.45	4.33	4.11	9.92	19.95
2 = not very important	15.6	12.55	2.88	1.37	9.77	15.80
1 = not important at all	10.61	4.76	2.40	4.11	8.22	8.03
Mean	3.58	3.92	4.48	4.55	3.96	3.61
SD	1.39	1.25	0.90	0.96	1.32	1.33
N	641	231	208	73	706	386

Regionally, the general picture seems to be that respondents from Europe and the Americas place a higher above-sample average importance on increasing cooperation and reducing inequalities and a substantially lower-than-sample average importance on strengthening national borders and reducing globalization. One of the most striking figures in this regard is the mean importance of strengthening national borders for the European sub-sample of only 1.78—a Figure 1.4 points below the sample average and only about half the value of Sub-Saharan and MENA.

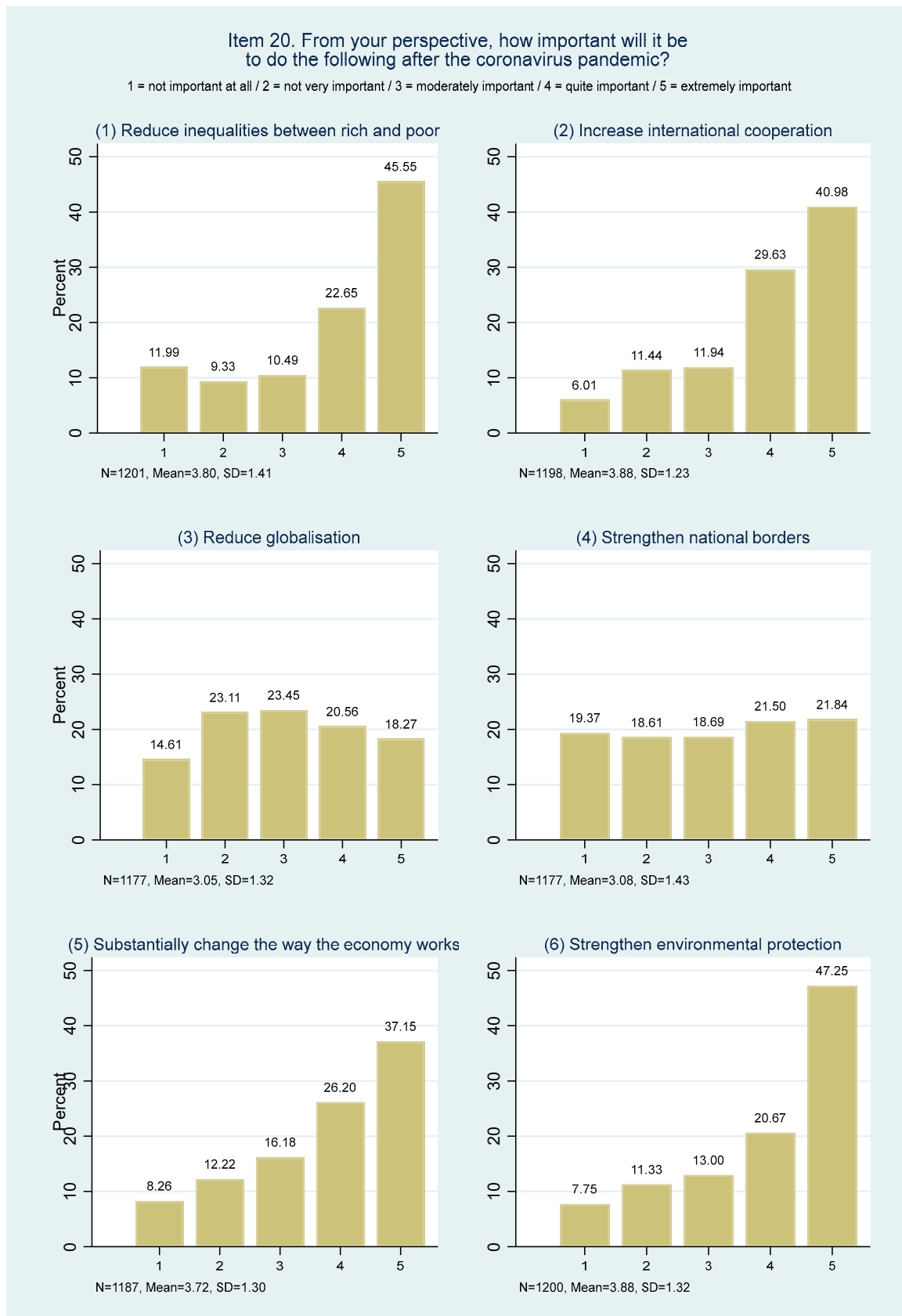


Figure 10. Item 20: “From your perspective, how important will it be to do the following after the coronavirus pandemic?”.

4. Discussion

This article set out to introduce the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey, outlining its rationale, detailing its methods, and presenting summary results of the quantitative variables in the survey data, thereby serving as the basis for further analyses of the quantitative and qualitative survey data. The discussion section is divided into two parts in accordance with the twofold aim of the article to, firstly, outline and reflect upon the survey methodology and, secondly, highlight a first set of key findings. The following subsection, therefore, discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the dataset in light of the methodological advantages and limitations of the survey. Thereafter, key findings of the survey are highlighted and discussed, and possible pathways for further research using the survey data are identified.

4.1. Strengths and Limitations of the Survey Dataset

The dataset emerging from the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey provides a unique resource for the role of religious leaders and religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-Covid world. With over 1200 responses and its representation across multiple continents, it is, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive survey on religious leaders and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Religious Leaders Perspectives on Corona Survey provides insights about the perception of the pandemic by religious leaders, thereby allowing us to elucidate its impact on societies across the globe—which, as it emerges, was characterized by substantial differences. In a similar vein, the survey provides important indications of the impact of the pandemic on religious practice. Secondly, the data provides important insights into religious leaders' views on the pandemic, government measures implemented in response to it, and religious messaging during the pandemic, thereby allowing us to investigate to what extent religious leaders had constructive or obstructive roles during COVID-19. A crucial and unique feature of the survey and the resultant dataset, however, is that it acknowledges the contribution of religion and religious leaders in shaping the normative notions of society. During the coronavirus crisis, which was a crucial juncture that opened up the possibility and necessitated the re-alignment of societal priorities, religious leaders contributed to co-shaping the normative notions of what the desirable imaginaries of the post-Covid society should be, i.e., what kind of world we would want to live in after the pandemic. Analyses of the survey data, therefore, bear substantial relevance beyond the context and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. They can serve to further elucidate the interface of religion and society and deepen scholarship's understanding of the interdependencies of the two.

The key strength of the survey, in our view, lies in the globally aggregated data. It provides unique material on the role and views of religious leaders—as key influential stakeholders in many societies around the globe—during one of the most exceptional global crisis events of recent decades.

The data provide important insights particularly for the geographical focus areas of the survey, i.e., Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the Middle East and North Africa. The survey thereby complements other studies engaging with the nexus of religion and COVID-19 in a more geographically focused perspective, for instance, by focusing on a specific country (e.g., [Kanol and Michalowski 2023](#); [Hillenbrand 2023](#); [Hillenbrand et al. 2023](#); [Osei-Tutu et al. 2021](#); [Hopgood et al. 2024](#); [Ruan et al. 2023](#)). The survey adds to existing studies furthermore through its focus on religious leaders. Most quantitative surveys investigating the role of religion do so with general population samples not explicitly focused on persons in religious leadership positions (e.g., [Kanol and Michalowski 2023](#); [Hillenbrand 2023](#)). Only a few studies exist with a specific focus on religious leaders. The perspectives and roles of religious leaders in the COVID-19 perspective have mainly been investigated in selected national contexts (e.g., [Osei-Tutu et al. 2021](#); [Essa-Hadad et al. 2022](#); [Nche et al. 2024](#)) or studies with a more specific scope, such as [Goodwin and Kraft's \(2022\)](#) study on the role of faith communities in providing psychosocial support.

The dataset makes disaggregation of the data and analyses according to specific sub-groups and key variables possible, inter alia along the following lines: First, the survey encompasses responses from different religions and multiple world regions, thereby providing the basis for region-specific analyses. It contains relatively large subsets of data, particularly for the Europe, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa regions, across which comparisons can be made and for which region-specific analyses can be conducted. Furthermore, the data can be disaggregated even further, allowing analyses at the country level, especially for those countries with a relatively high number of observations, such as Germany (N = 97), Nigeria (N = 89), and Jordan (N = 49). Second, the dataset allows for sub-group analyses of different religious traditions, particularly Christianity and Islam, and comparisons across different religious communities. Thereby, the religion variables are more refined than the broad categories of major world religions and therefore allow differentiation and analyses according to specific religious groups within the same religious tradition. Third, the data can be differentiated according to gender dimensions, yielding insights into the different perceptions and views of women and men in religious leadership (cf. Frost 2023). Fourth, the data allows for differentiation according to different levels of religious leadership and the size of religious communities. Fifth, the time factor can be taken into account, yielding information about the changing perspectives of religious leaders over the course of the ten months from June 2020 to March 2021, during which the survey was conducted and which was marked by varying pandemic waves in different regions. Sixth, the survey combines the quantitative data presented in this paper with several additional qualitative variables, thereby providing not only additional variables for analyses but also enabling further in-depth exploration of some of the quantitative variables, for instance, justifications of why high importance was assigned to specific responses. Lastly, the dataset allows multidimensional analyses, for instance, through regression analysis, in order to assess the determinants of specific responses and results visible in the data. An example thereof would be whether a specific variable is predominantly driven by responses from a specific region or from a specific religious tradition.

The following limitations need to be highlighted. As with most online surveys, it is difficult to ascertain statistically how representative the data are (cf. Andrade 2020). While the survey was circulated widely and key stakeholders such as interreligious networks, religious umbrella organizations, and religious leaders were purposefully approached and requested to participate in the survey as well as circulate it in their networks, it is impossible to determine what proportion of religious leaders in a given context or globally were reached. To some extent, this is due to the challenge that simply no sampling frame exists for religious communities or for religious leaders, at least not beyond single religious communities or beyond very specific local community contexts. Moreover, as sampling is not random, sample selection bias might arise. This might be the case at two stages. First, bias might arise at the level of the distribution of the survey. An online survey can, by design, only reach persons who have access to an electronic device connected to the internet. This might make the participation by people in rural areas or people with low financial means less likely. Second, bias might arise at the level of the decision to participate. Once they have received the information about the survey, potential respondents self-select into the sample by choosing whether to take part or not. To mitigate these issues, we tried to disseminate the survey as widely as possible. By striving to increase the survey's reach as widely as possible and to achieve a large sample size, we sought to minimize the potentially distorting effects of the non-random sample. To that effect, the survey was not only disseminated online but in selected regions (MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America) in which we contracted consultations to specifically disseminate the questionnaire to religious leaders as widely as possible. A further limitation is the geographic reach. While the survey was available in six languages, this potentially discouraged the participation of speakers of other languages. Financial and logistical constraints at some point inevitably limited the number of languages the survey could be translated into and the targeted efforts that could be made to invite religious leaders across the globe to participate. This resulted in a

geographic distribution focusing on Europe, MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa, and, to a lesser extent, the Americas.

Another caveat of the survey is the temporal distribution of the responses during the time frame of the survey between June 2020 and March 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic was not a uniform event. Different waves of infections—and of restrictions of religious activities (cf. [Pew Research Center 2024](#))—occurred at different points in time in different countries and regions. Moreover, the measures implemented against the pandemic not only differed by country but changed over time, even within the same country. Responses might, hence, not only be influenced by country and religious affiliation but also by the specific point in time at which a respondent filled in the questionnaire. In addition, the geographic spread was not uniform throughout the time period of the survey. Responses came in waves from different world regions. Due to the different patterns of pandemic waves in different contexts, this correlation of time and geography might also influence responses to a certain extent.

Finally, it is vital to note that the survey data and the results do not per se provide a basis for causal interpretations. Differences in responses, for instance, by religious tradition, do not necessarily mean that this difference is caused by the respondents' religion. As indicated in previous sections, the geographic and the religious distribution are correlated. Responses in a given religious tradition might be driven by the region these responses came from or vice versa. Factors such as country/region, religion, respondent's gender, etc., need to be taken into account when interpreting the survey data.

Notwithstanding the limitations highlighted above, the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey yielded a versatile dataset that provides the basis for various in-depth analyses of the roles and views of religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. A key strength of the survey is that it provides an overarching perspective based on comprehensive data from three world regions. The survey data provides important insights into the roles of religious communities and the views of religious leaders during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic from a global perspective. The data furthermore offer manifold possibilities for analyses of specific survey themes (see, for instance, Frost's analysis focusing on domestic violence; [Frost 2023](#)), focusing on specific regions, exploring specific religious traditions, or analyzing the different stages of the pandemic within the survey time frame. It thereby constitutes a valuable repository for further exploration of the role of religion in society during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section now summarizes the key findings of the survey.

4.2. Key Findings

The first key finding of the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey is that the pandemic was perceived by religious leaders in very different ways across the globe. When asked about the major problems caused by the COVID-19 crisis, respondents in the Global South indicated different perceptions from those in the Global North. In the Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, and Latin America regions, economic problems such as unemployment and poverty were considered the main concerns, whereas religious leaders in Europe identified solitude as the single most important challenge during the pandemic (which, in turn, was hardly indicated as constituting a major problem in Sub-Saharan Africa or MENA). Interestingly, the fear of getting sick or dying is neither in the Sub-Saharan African regions nor in the European regions mentioned most frequently among the biggest problems. In Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA, only about a fourth of the respondents chose it as one of the major problems. Particularly in the Global South, the COVID-19 pandemic seems not to be viewed as exclusively or even primarily a health crisis. Rather, the economic crisis caused by the consequences of the pandemic, as well as the measures implemented to curb the disease's spread, seem to be viewed as much greater problems. The different perceptions of the biggest problems during the pandemic between the Sub-Saharan African and MENA regions on the one hand and the European region on the other are likely also due to the fact that governments in the Global South were only to

a lesser extent able to cushion the negative economic effects of lockdown measures than governments in the Global North. Moreover, in the Global South, the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated already substantially higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality than in the Global North, where the health-related consequences of the pandemic were viewed as substantially more of a problem. However, even in Europe, where the fear that people might get sick or die from COVID-19 seemed to have been substantially higher than in the Global South, religious leaders more often mention solitude as a major problem. Therefore, even in the Global North, the non-health-related consequences of the pandemic seemed to be viewed as having a greater impact than the immediate health-related ones. This is coherent with religious leaders' assessments of the risk of getting infected with the coronavirus, which, in the global average, respondents rank to be between low and medium (with only about a fifth of the respondents perceiving the risk of infection to be high or very high). Overall, therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic emerges as a multidimensional crisis with vastly different impacts in different contexts. It emerges as a primarily economic crisis in the Global South and as a socio-psychological crisis in the Global North.

Second, it clearly emerges from the survey data that the COVID-19 pandemic had a fundamental impact on religious practice globally. Here, our survey data corroborates previous studies showing drastic changes in religious practice, such as the Pew Research Center's study on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on religious communities (Pew Research Center 2023) and Frahm-Arp's (2024) impressive case study on South African Pentecostal Church Rabboni Centre Ministries, whose practice and theology changed fundamentally during and because of the pandemic. In our dataset, globally, only a little over 5% of the respondents indicated that their religious activities continued to remain largely unchanged. In almost all religious communities the survey respondents represent, religious gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic either took place in smaller numbers, online, or not at all. When looking at the responses by region, stark differences become apparent. Among the European respondents, 90% indicated that services either took place in smaller numbers (63%) or online (27%), the overall figure was only around 40% for Sub-Saharan Africa (with 39% indicating gatherings take place in smaller numbers and less than 10% online) and about 51% for the MENA region (with 47% gathering in smaller numbers and 14% online). The difference between the figures from Europe and those from Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA is threefold. First, the percentage of those who indicated that their religious communities gathered in smaller numbers is lower in the latter two regions. Second, the percentage of those who moved to the online space was nearly twice as high in Europe as in MENA and nearly three times as high as in Africa. Third, and this is the most pronounced difference, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, close to half, and in MENA, more than a third of the respondents indicated that their religious gatherings had stopped altogether. This figure is only less than 2% among the European respondents. Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on religious practice seemed to have been highly unequal across the globe, in the sense that it was much stronger in the Global South, bringing substantial parts of religious life to a standstill. Surely, this might, in part, be due to the lesser availability of the technical infrastructure to do online activities (for instance, the availability of mobile data on the part of the members). Another explanation might be that restrictions on movements and gatherings imposed by governments were stricter in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA than in Europe, inhibiting religious communities from holding gatherings in smaller numbers. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that the impact of the pandemic on religious practice was highly unequal.

Third, religious communities emerge as important civil society actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has highlighted the important role of religious communities in providing spiritual and psychosocial support (see, for instance, Goodwin and Kraft 2022). However, it emerges from our data that they provided both material and spiritual support—with material support even being mentioned more frequently than spiritual support in the Global South. Globally, over half of the respondents indicated that their religious communities supported people materially through food distribution,

financial support, or by handing out sanitizer, masks, and disinfectant. In terms of spiritual engagement with the pandemic, more than 50% of the respondents said they took up COVID-19 as a topic in their preaching, 45% conducted specific prayers in relation to the coronavirus, and 43% offered specific counseling. We again see a divergent picture between Europe on the one hand and Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA on the other. In Europe, elements of spiritual support such as preaching and prayer in relation to the coronavirus were mentioned by nearly 70% of the respondents (more than twice as often as elements of material support). In Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA, the material dimensions take precedence over the spiritual ones.⁴ In this, religious communities' actions are coherent with the identified challenges (see first point above)—material support in the Global South and spiritual support in the Global North. These results solidify the picture emerging above of the pandemic as an economic crisis in the Global South and a spiritual crisis in the Global North.

Fourth, although there were instances of religious leaders providing misinformation about the coronavirus, defying or obstructing governments' hygiene regulations (cf. [DeMora et al. 2021](#); [Gonzalez et al. 2021](#)), or fueling vaccine hesitancy (cf. [Kanozia and Arya 2021](#); [Sisti et al. 2023](#); [Omidvar Tehrani and Perkins 2022](#)), the picture emerging from our results shows a generally constructive role of religious communities during the pandemic. The vast majority of religious leaders consider government measures to curb the pandemic as necessary and most information on the coronavirus in the media as reliable. Religious leaders generally indicated to have spread messages that are in line with public health imperatives necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as washing hands regularly, wearing masks, staying at home, etc., along with the advice to also take spiritual action by praying for the end of the pandemic, ranking similarly high as the aforementioned hygiene measures. Only about a fifth of the respondents reported encouraging people to come together for prayer meetings, a relatively low number in light of the widespread cessation of religious gatherings. However, the respondents are not uncritical of governments' handling of the pandemic. While about 45% of the respondents agree that their government was handling the pandemic well, almost the same proportion (40%) disagree with this proposition. The challenges brought upon by lockdowns and related measures implemented against COVID-19 are also reflected in the responses to two other questions. The majority of the respondents consider economic inequality to have increased due to government measures against COVID-19. Similarly, most respondents share the assessment that domestic violence has increased during the pandemic.

Fifth, regarding the spiritual interpretation of the pandemic, about one-third of the respondents globally indicated that they considered the COVID-19 pandemic a divine punishment. However, the interpretation diverges between the Global South, where the percentage is higher (around 45%), and the Global North, where the percentage is substantially lower (for instance, less than 2% in Europe). While this result points to different frameworks of religious worldviews in the Global South and North, there is no indication that the spiritual interpretation of the pandemic might have led to fatalism or an exclusive or even primary recourse to spiritual remedies. On the contrary, as evident from the points above, religious communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA were actively engaged in working against the problems and social rifts brought upon by the pandemic. At the same time, nearly 80% of the responding religious leaders considered it important to pray for the end of the pandemic. Material support and spiritual action seem not to be alternatives to go together from the perspective of many religious leaders.

Sixth, a crucial point of interest in the survey was religious leaders' vision for the post-pandemic future. As influential actors in many contexts and in light of religion's transformative potential, we aimed to find out what directions religious leaders would like their societies to move in in the post-pandemic world. In many ways, the results point in the opposite direction of what was done by governments across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a newfound relevance of the nation state. Measures against the pandemic were determined at the national level, even in contexts where policy

is harmonized in many sectors such as the European Union. Suddenly, in the middle of Europe, borders were closed, something that had been unthinkable for decades. Religious leaders do not seem to see this trend as desirable for the post-pandemic future. Responses to the questions on reducing globalization and strengthening national borders are relatively evenly distributed, with roughly the same number of respondents considering these items important and not important. In contrast, reducing inequalities between rich and poor, increasing international cooperation, substantially changing the way the economy works, and strengthening environmental protection are all considered quite important or highly important by a majority of about two-thirds of the responding religious leaders. Emerging from these responses is a world in which international cooperation takes precedence over nationalism, in which societies are more equal, the economic system is substantially revised, and the protection of the environment is a priority.

Especially the last point is very interesting. In fact, of all the options, “strengthening environmental protection” was considered extremely important by more respondents than any of the other answer options in the post-pandemic questions. Its mean importance ranks highest (along with “increase international cooperation”). Ecological sustainability thereby emerges as a theme of high importance from the data. Even at the height of the pandemic, more than half of the responding religious leaders considered environmental destruction a more important issue than the coronavirus, and two-thirds consider environmental protection as quite or extremely important—this is quite significant considering the survey took place in 2020 and early 2021, a time period in which the pandemic was at its height in many contexts across the globe (cf. Öhlmann and Swart 2022). The emergent importance of ecological questions opens up an interesting interpretation of the question mentioned earlier of whether COVID-19 is a divine punishment. Interpreted in light of the next point mentioned below, i.e., the importance religious leaders attributed to ecological sustainability even during the pandemic, a possible interpretation is that the pandemic is a punishment for the destruction of creation. Such interpretation would draw a similar line of effect as natural scientific explanations of the pandemic, arguing that viruses such as COVID-19 emerge from zoonoses that are at least in part influenced by human intrusion into and destruction of the natural environment (Lawler et al. 2021).

5. Conclusions

This article outlined the rationale, methodology, and data of the Religious Leaders’ Perspective on Corona Survey. It reflected on the results of the survey and their limitations. By presenting the quantitative survey data, the article provides an important resource for research on religion and COVID-19. It furthermore lays the foundation for further in-depth analyses of the quantitative data as well as the qualitative components of the survey (which were beyond the scope of this article). Future research can use this article as a basis when conducting in-depth investigations of specific themes covered in the survey, analyses with a specific regional focus, or more methodologically complex analyses using, for instance, multivariate regression or mixed methods approaches complementing the quantitative data with the qualitative.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/religious-and-faith-leaders-join-hands-protect-women-and-children> (accessed on 1 June 2024); <https://www.afro.who.int/news/religious-leaders-join-covid-19-fight-africa> (accessed on 1 June 2024); <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2023/03/07/faith-leaders-in-the-fight-against-the-pandemic/> (accessed on 1 June 2024); cf. also DeMora et al. (2021).
- 2 In some of the analyses and overviews to follow, Latin America and the Caribbean and North America were grouped together as the Americas.
- 3 It should be noted that the figures for the Americas are less robust due to the relatively low number of observations in the region (N = 72).
- 4 Interestingly, in the Americas elements of both spiritual and material support are mentioned frequently (by around 60% of the respondents; but these figures have to be treated with extra care due to the low number of responses from the region).

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