

## Has there been spiritual awakening in lockdown?

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Leslie Francis and Andrew Village examine how the first months of the pandemic affected churchgoers' faith



THE pandemic offered both challenges and opportunities for theological reflection. The Christian conceptualisation of the nature of God is sophisticated, complex, and diverse. Some aspects of the Christian understanding of God may be more resilient to the challenges of the pandemic than others. Those who build their faith on an all-powerful creator God who intervenes powerfully and decisively on the stage of human experience might be driven to proper and serious lamentation, or to serious repentance in sackcloth and ashes. Indeed, some might drift further from belief in such a God. Those who build their faith on a compassionate and suffering God who revealed solidarity with the vulnerable human condition, who accepted impoverished birth in the manger and humiliating death on the cross, may be driven to deep and sincere appreciation. Some may draw closer to belief in such a God.

ONE of the theories that the *Coronavirus, Church and You* survey was designed to test was the thesis that committed churchgoers (those likely to respond to the survey presented by the *Church Times*, or through some Roman Catholic dioceses) would experience the initial days of the pandemic as a time of spiritual awakening. In our research, we argue that spiritual awakening occurs as a function of changing human experience (in this case caused by the pandemic), interpreted through the lenses of lived religious tradition.

We tested this theory by including the Lewis Index of Spiritual Awakening (LISA). This index contained just four items, and asked people how they would rate the effect of the lockdown on four aspects of their spiritual experience: prayerfulness; closeness to God; closeness to the Church; and personal faith. Was the effect positive, negative, or neutral? To address this question, we drew on data provided by 3678 lay people (who identified as Anglican or as Roman Catholic, living in England or in Wales) who had not been involved in offering ministry during the pandemic, but who had participated in online services. Of these participants, 2280 were Anglicans and 1393 Roman Catholics; 34 per cent were male and 66 per cent female; 11 per cent were under age of 40, and 57 per cent were aged 60 or over.

The data indicate that more participants experienced an improved sense of spiritual awareness during lockdown (a sense of spiritual awakening) than experienced a deteriorating sense of spirituality. Thus, 57 per cent reported enhanced personal faith, compared with seven per cent who reported deterioration in personal faith; 50 per cent reported enhanced prayerfulness, compared with 12 per cent who reported less prayerfulness; and 43 per cent reported feeling closer to God, compared with ten per cent who reported feeling more distant from God. Perhaps as an inevitable consequence of being locked out of their churches, just 25 per cent reported feeling closer to the Church, compared with 37 per cent who reported feeling more distant from the Church.

Further analyses identified the kind of people who were more likely to experience spiritual awakening during the pandemic. Personal factors were important: women were more likely to experience spiritual awakening than men, and older people more likely than younger people. Psychological factors were important: intuitive types and feeling types were more likely to experience spiritual awakening than sensing types or thinking types.

Denomination was important: Roman Catholics were more likely to experience spiritual awakening than Anglicans. Geographical location was, however, not important: those living in rural areas or in inner-city areas were neither more nor less likely to experience spiritual awakening than those living in towns or suburbs.

How people engaged with online services also correlated with spiritual awakening. From the survey, we learned that, during participation in online services, 38 per cent prayed aloud, 34 per cent recited parts of the service, 24 per cent sung, 12 per cent lighted candles, six per cent typed in prayer requests, and six per cent took communion from their own bread and wine. Just two of these activities were associated with higher scores of spiritual awakening: lighting candles, and typing in prayer requests.

TWO main conclusions can be drawn from these findings. During the initial days of the pandemic, Christian theology, reflected in belief and practices, led to spiritual awakening rather than to loss of faith, among committed churchgoers. Forced to migrate from their local churches to online worship, committed churchgoers flourished best when they were actively engaged in preparing for and contributing to the service. Lighting candles and typing in prayers are emblematic of such active engagement.

The present data tell us how things looked by the end of July 2020. The current *Covid-19 and Church-21* survey provides the opportunity to update these findings. Please make your contribution by visiting the Coronavirus, Church and You website of York St John University.

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