

## Notes on a Survey Among Religious Studies Scholars

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**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the results of a survey among speakers at CESNUR's 33<sup>rd</sup> international conference, held in Turin in 2019. By using questions from the 2017 European Values Study, the survey assessed the scholars' religious (and political) opinions. While the number of those who answered (77) hardly allows for generalizations, the survey was a good starting point to study the community of scholars interested in new religious movements.

**KEYWORDS:** Sociology of Religions, Religious Studies Scholars, Academic Study of New Religious Movements, Sociology of New Religious Movements, History of New Religious Movements.

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From September 5-7, 2019, CESNUR's 33<sup>rd</sup> international conference was held in Italy, at Turin University's Campus Luigi Einaudi. Its theme was *Re-enchanting the World: Spiritualities and Religions of the Third Millennium*. It was organized by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), in cooperation with Turin University's Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, the same department's CRAFT (Contemporary Religions And Faiths in Transition) research centre, AIS' (*Associazione Italiana di Sociologia*; Italian Sociological Association) "Religion" section, the *Centro di Scienze Religiose* (Religious Sciences Centre) *Erik Peterson*, and ISSNR (International Society for the Study of New Religions). The conference enjoyed broad success as to the number of participants (about 230 people from 28 countries, of whom 160 speakers—the

highest numbers in the history of CESNUR's international conferences), national and international media coverage, and the quality of work presented.

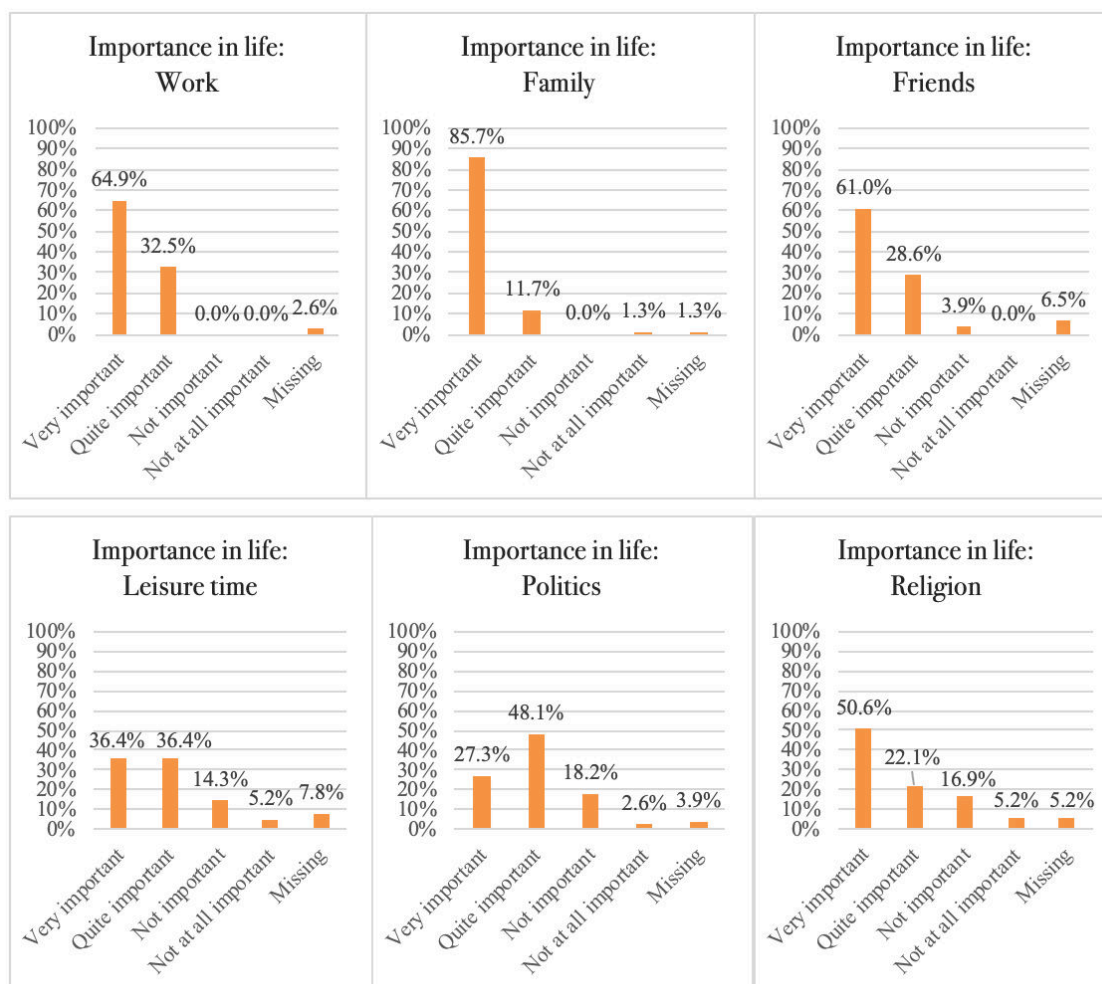
Considering the importance of the number of participants, and their qualifications as scholars in the field of religious studies, we considered it might be interesting to submit a questionnaire to participants (or, rather, to the speakers only, in order to avoid sample confusion), to find out some salient aspects of their approach to religion and spirituality, considered in their belonging, behaving and believing dimensions. The aim was to seek to approximately (and in the absence of similar attempts, as far as we know) understand the religious attitude of the community of people professionally dedicated to studying the religious behaviour of human communities, with particular reference to new religious movements and contemporary spiritualities.

To this end, we extrapolated from the 2017 European Values Study master questionnaire questions related to religion and spirituality, accompanied by some essential socio-demographic questions, and a complementary query concerning political preferences—which seemed useful to us to complete the axiological frame. We chose to use EVS survey items in the interests of uniformity, as it is a widely known and shared model among the community of scholars.

77 conference speakers (almost half) answered the questionnaire. While this was more or less the result we had expected, we are aware that our sample does not in any way allow us to generalise, or to claim to have analysed a representative sample of the universe being investigated. That would be possible only if all, or at least a sizeable proportion, of our respondents had answered. We therefore realise that, from an epistemological perspective, the theoretical problem of this survey must be consigned to the “induction category,” as a cognitive claim to refer to a greater number of people than those interviewed. Thus, it should be borne in mind that the only assessable finding from this survey refers to the sample of respondents belonging to the specific social group examined. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that in the light of the number of questionnaires received—insufficient to make wide-ranging statistical generalisations—we have decided to elaborate the data while remaining on the level of univariate analysis.

Q1: Please say, for each of the following, how important it is in your life.

	Very important	Quite important	Not important	Not at all important	Missing	Total
<b>Work</b>	50 64.9%	25 32.5%	.	.	2 2.6%	77 100%
<b>Family</b>	66 85.7%	9 11.7%	.	1 1.3%	1 1.3%	77 100%
<b>Friends</b>	47 61%	22 28.6%	3 3.9%	.	5 6.5%	77 100%
<b>Leisure time</b>	28 36.4%	28 36.4%	11 14.3%	4 5.2%	6 7.7%	77 100%
<b>Politics</b>	21 27.3%	37 48%	14 18.2%	2 2.6%	3 3.9%	77 100%
<b>Religion</b>	39 50.6%	17 22.1%	13 16.9%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	77 100%

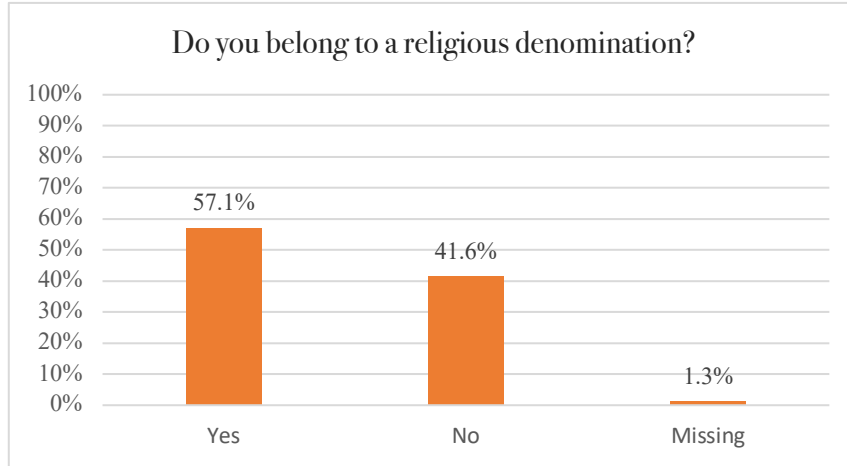


The first table suggests that work (97.4% or 75/77), family (97.4% or 75/77), and friends (89.6% or 69/77) are aspects of their lives most interviewees consider fairly or very important. Most also attribute importance to leisure time (72.8% or 56/77), with “fairly” and “very” important being finely balanced. It is worth noting that 19.5% (15/77) do not attribute importance to leisure time. Most answers agree on the importance of politics (75.3% or 58/77), but the majority considers it only fairly important. The fact that as many as 20.8% of interviewees say that politics is unimportant in their lives is noteworthy. Finally, religion: the majority of the sample (72.7% or 56/77) considers it fairly or very important (with a preponderance of “very”); but even here, a good portion (22.1% or 17/77) deny its relevance. In short, interviewees—albeit with varying distribution—consider work, family, friends, leisure time, politics and religion as important aspects of their lives. Most respondents leave very few questions unanswered, and the majority of these refer to friends and leisure time. It is interesting to observe that, although most interviewees consider religion in some way important in their lives, about one-fifth deny its relevance for them—and this excluding the fact that they are scholars with an academic interest in the subject.

Q2: Do you belong to a religious denomination?

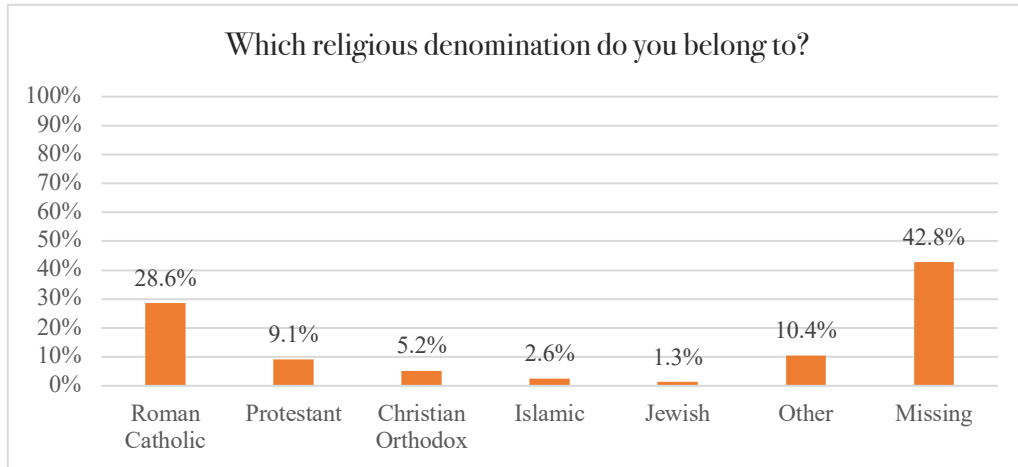
Yes	No	Missing	Total
44 57.1%	32 41.6%	1 1.3%	77 100%

The second table shows that little more than half (57.1% or 44/77) of the interviewees say they belong to a religious denomination, while little less than half (41.6% or 32/77) say they do not belong to one. Only one answer is missing. It is curious to note that fewer people declare affiliation to a religious denomination than those who say religion is important in their lives. This may indicate a shift between religious convictions and identification with a specific denomination.



Q3: Which denomination do you belong to?

Roman Catholic	Protestant	Christian Orthodox	Islamic	Jewish	Other	Missing	Total
22 28.6%	7 9.1%	4 5.2%	2 2.6%	1 1.3%	8 10.4%	33 42.8%	77 100%

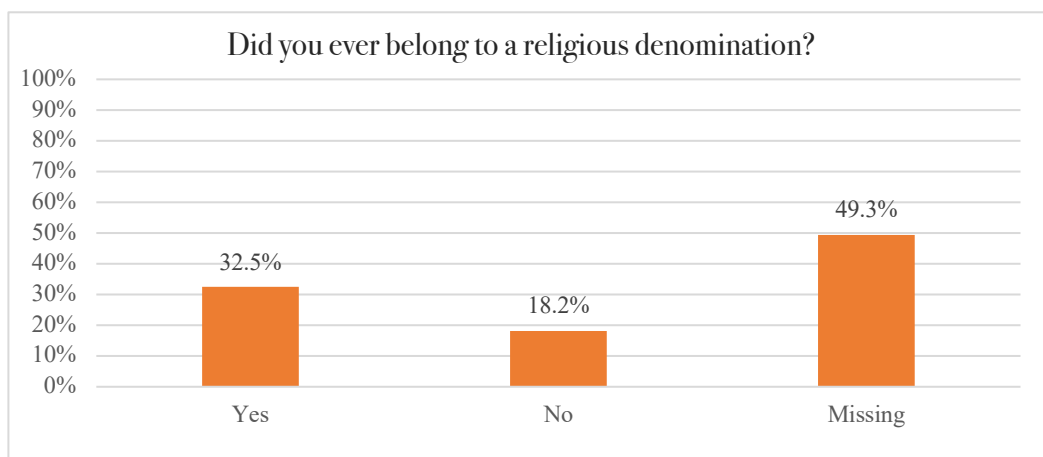


The third table indicates that more interviewees belong to Catholicism (28.6% or 22/77) than to any other denomination. Second comes Protestantism (9.1% or 7/77), followed by Eastern Orthodox Christianity (5.2% or 4/77), Islam (2.6% or 2/77), and Judaism (1.3% or 1/77). It is noteworthy that “Other” (referring to denominations not specified in the questionnaire) was the second most numerous category (10.4% or 8/77): among them two belong to Weixinism, a Taiwanese new religious movement, others to the Anglican

Communion, the Unification movement, Scientology, or even movements with parodistic origins such as the Church of the SubGenius and Discordianism. The high incidence of missing answers (42.8% or 33/77) is due to the fact that many interviewees affirm they do not belong to any religious denomination (as we have already seen). The high number of Catholics may be due to the presence of numerous Italians in the sample. Nobody responded to the options of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Jehovah’s Witnesses, also present in the questionnaire.

Q4: [*If respondent is currently not a member*] Did you ever belong to a religious denomination?

Yes	No	Missing	Total
25 32.5%	14 18.2%	38 49.3%	77 100%

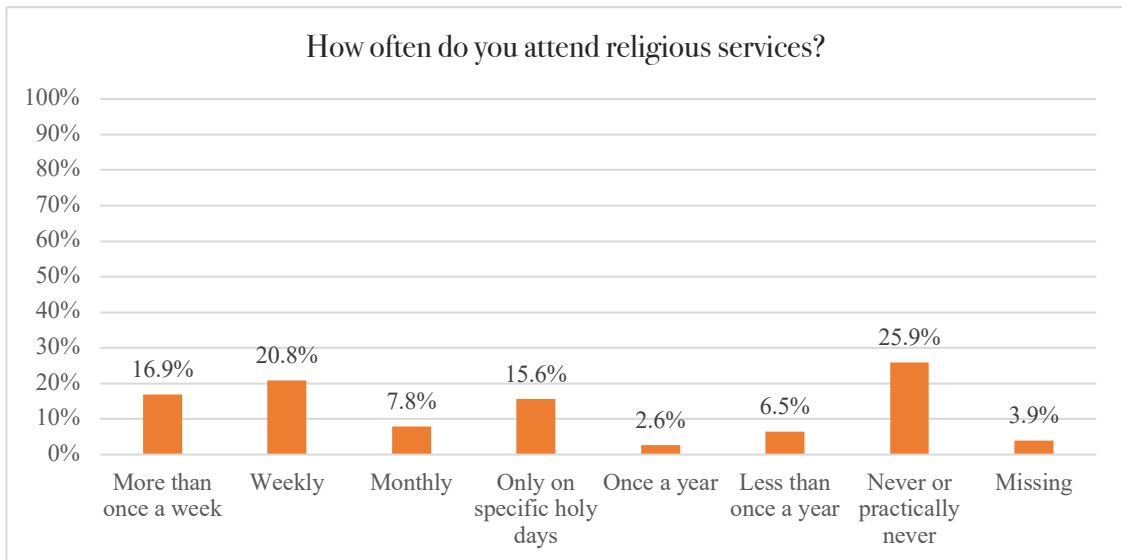


For those who answered in the negative to the second question, “Do you belong to a religious denomination?”, there was the added question, “Did you ever belong to a religious denomination?”. About one-third (32.5% or 25/77) answered in the affirmative, whereas 18.2% (14/77) said no. There were 39 valid answers to this question, meaning that even some of those who had answered affirmatively to the second question responded to this one also, a mistake making it difficult to compare these answers. On the surface, it appears that those who claim to have belonged to a denomination in the past are more numerous than those who deny it (among those who do not at present belong to a religious group). This may mean a greater frequency of abandonment, with respect to a

distant stability of religious denominations; in any case, the “supplementary” answers make it impossible to be sure.

Q5: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings/baptism, how often do you attend religious services these days?

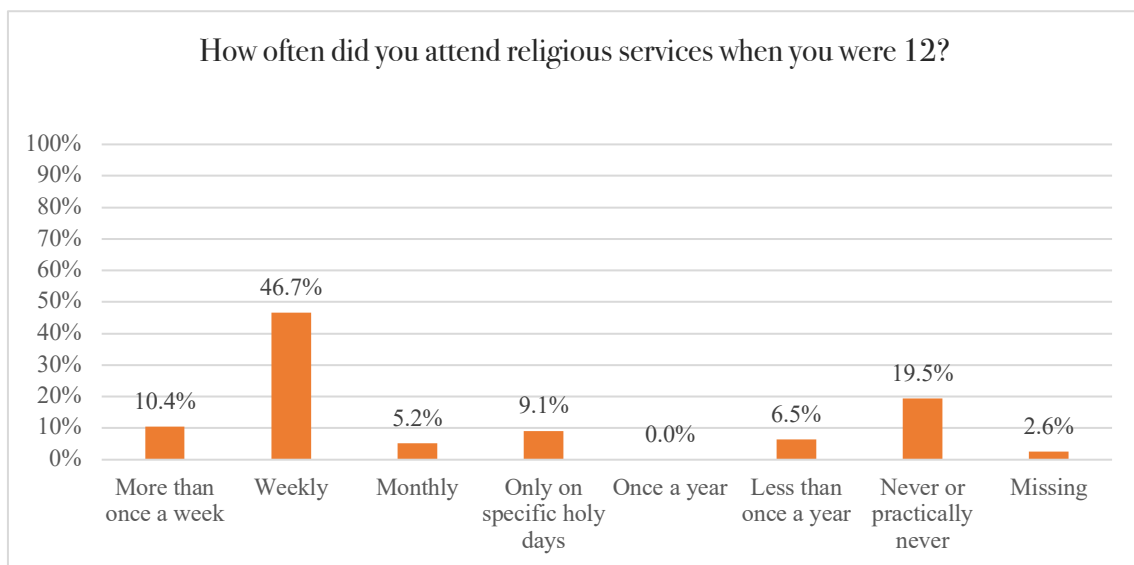
More than once a week	Once a week	Once a month	Only on specific holy days	Once a year	Less often	Never, practically never	Missing	Total
13 16.9%	16 20.8%	6 7.8%	12 15.6%	2 2.6%	5 6.5%	20 25.9%	3 3.9%	77 100%



The fifth table demonstrates that 16.9% (13/77) of the sample say they attend religious functions more than once a week, 20.8% (16/77) once a week, and 7.8% (6/77) once a month. Taken together, these statistics sum up to almost half (45.5% or 35/77) of the sample claiming to attend religious functions assiduously or, at least, with a significant measure of regularity. 15.6% (12/77) say they attend only on specific feast-days. 6.5% (5/77) say they take part once a year. The category with most answers is those who say they never—or practically never—attend ceremonies (25.9% or 20/77). There were only three missing answers out of 77 (3.9%).

Q6: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings/baptism, how often do you attend religious services when you were 12 years old?

More than once a week	Once a week	Once a month	Only on specific holy days	Once a year	Less often	Never, practically never	Missing	Total
8 10.4%	36 46.7%	4 5.2%	7 9.1%	.	5 6.5%	15 19.5%	2 2.6%	77 100%



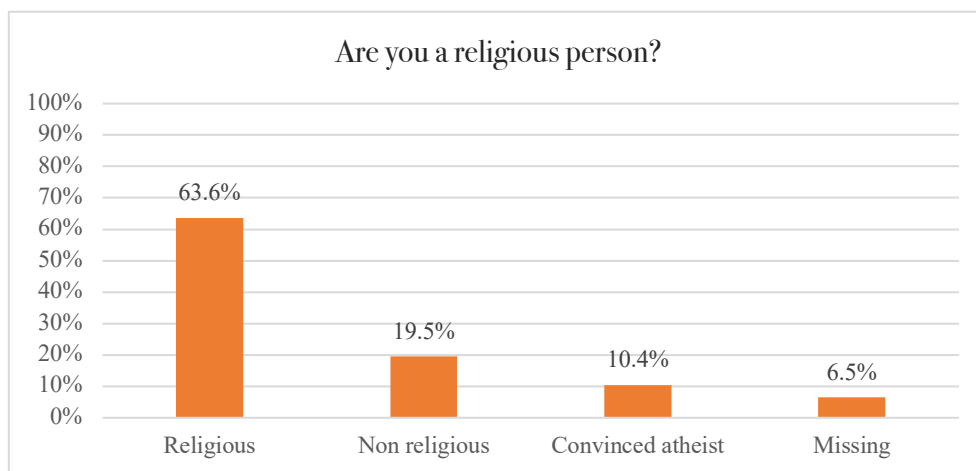
In order to understand more fully the course of religious behaviour in the interviewees' lives, we also asked the previous question from a retrospective angle. The table shows that 10.4% (8/77) declare that they attended religious functions more than once a week when they were 12 years old. The category with most answers is that referring to weekly attendance (46.7% or 36/77). Those who attended monthly are as low as 5.2% (4/77). Together, these three categories account for more than half of the sample, with 62.3% of the answers (48/77), revealing that a good part of respondents declared a more or less regular attendance at religious functions at the age of 12. Differently from the previous question, here we notice greater concentration in the category concerning weekly attendance, which may be due to the presence in the sample of many Italians, who probably grew up in a Catholic environment where weekly practice is considered the norm. 9.1% (7/77) say they participated only on specific feast-days; and 6.5% (5/77) less than once a year. Even with regard to the past, various interviewees (19.5% or 15/77) declared they had never, or



hardly ever, attended a religious function. There were only 2 (2.6%) missing answers.

Q7: Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are...

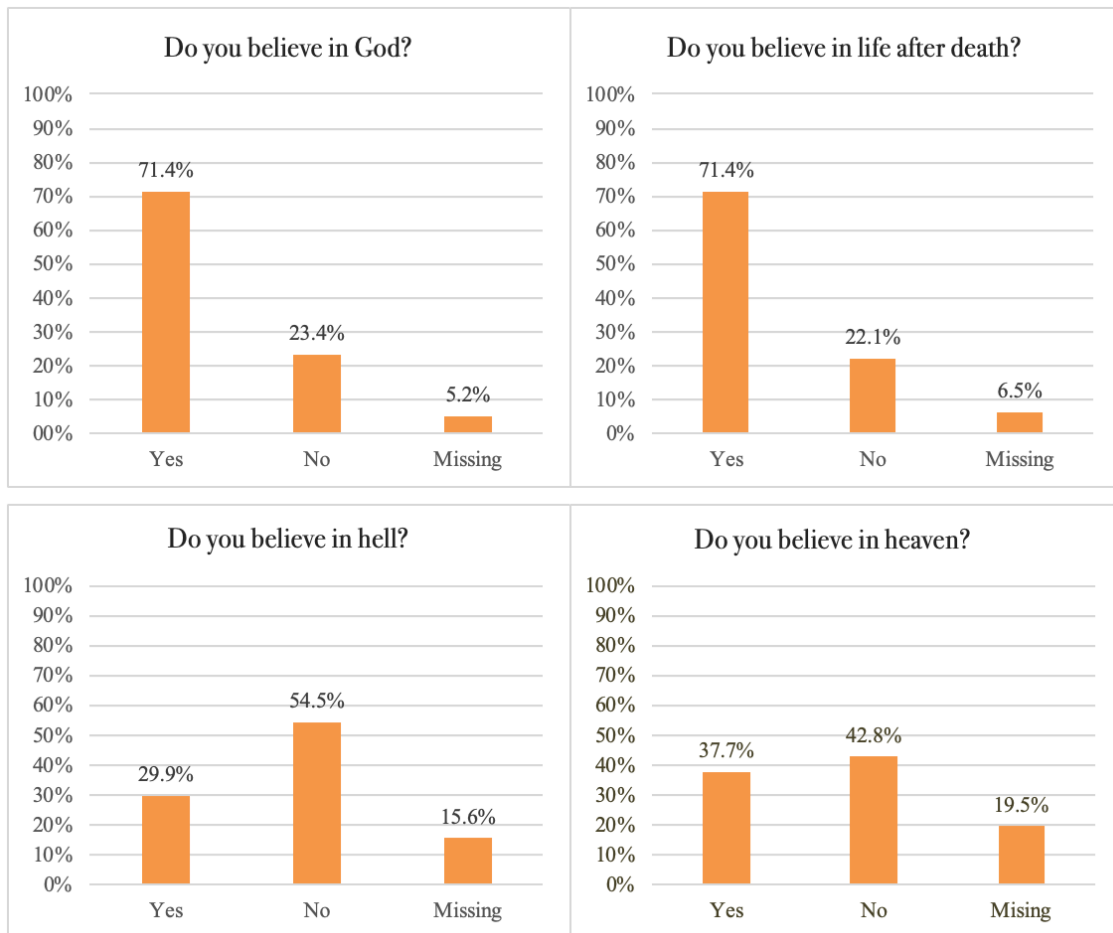
A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Missing	Total
49 63.6%	15 19.5%	8 10.4%	5 6.5%	77 100%



Most respondents (63.6% or 49/77) consider themselves religious, again a slightly higher percentage (with 5 more cases) than those who declare affiliation to a religious denomination, which indicates that some who nurture a religious sentiment do not identify with a particular denomination. 19.5% (15/77) say they are not religious, whereas 10.4% (8/77) claim to be convinced atheists. Together, these last two categories amount to almost one-third of the sample (29.9% or 23/77). As we have already seen for other questions, this distribution shows that a considerable portion of our sample takes its distance from a faith perspective while exhibiting an academic interest in religion.

Q8: Which, if any, of the following do you believe in?

	Yes	No	Missing	Total
<b>God</b>	55 71.4%	18 23.4%	4 5.2%	77 100%
<b>Life after death</b>	55 71.4%	17 22.1%	5 6.5%	77 100%
<b>Hell</b>	23 29.9%	42 54.5%	12 15.6%	77 100%
<b>Heaven</b>	29 37.7%	33 42.8%	15 19.5%	77 100%

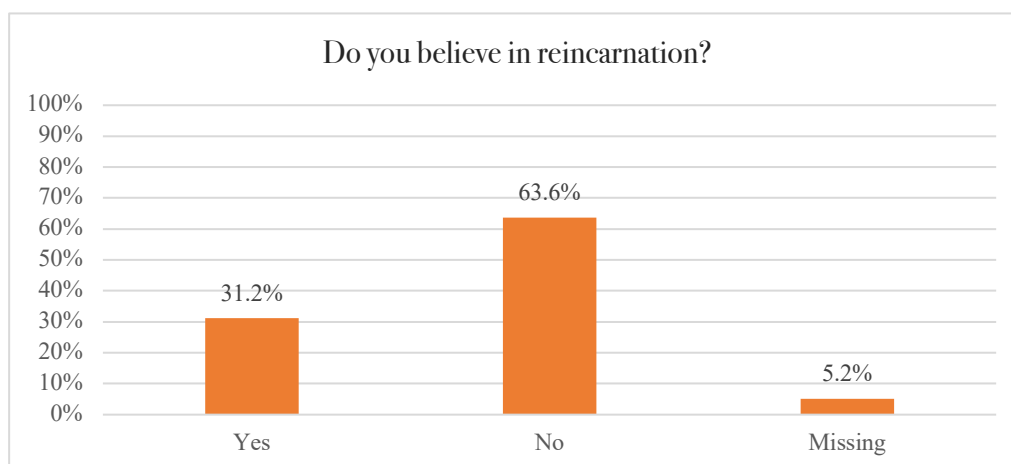


From the above table, it can be seen that a sizeable majority of interviewees (71.4% or 55/77) declares belief in God and life after death. On the contrary, 23.4% (18/77) deny belief in God and 22.1% (17/77) in life after death. However, questions referring to belief in heaven and hell resulted in a different

distribution. Most answers are negative, which is to say most respondents say they do not believe in heaven (42.8% or 33/77) or hell (54.5% or 42/77). In addition, there is a high incidence of missing answers to the questions about heaven (19.5% or 15/77) and hell (15.6% or 12/77).

Q9: Do you believe in reincarnation, that is, that we had past lives and will be born into this world again?

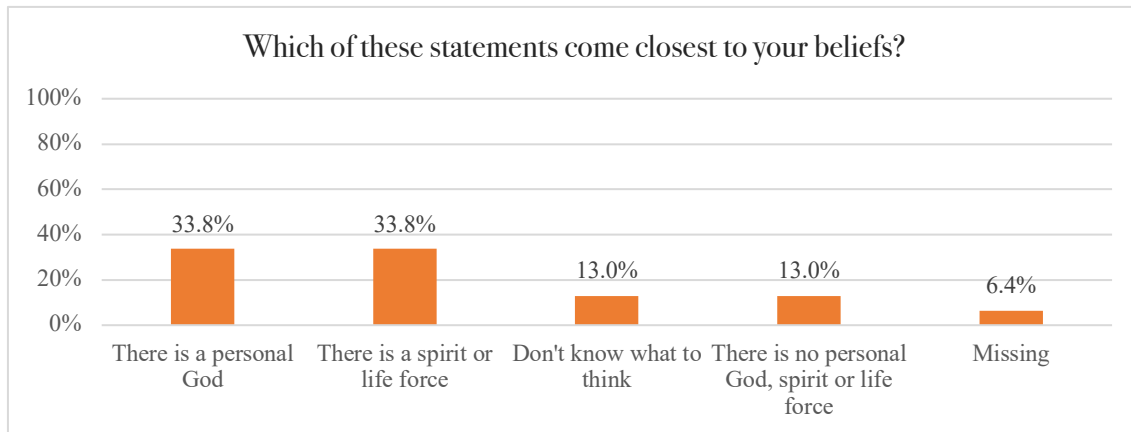
Yes	No	Missing	Total
24 31.2%	49 63.6%	4 5.2%	77 100%



More than twice as many people (63.6% or 49/77) say they do not believe in reincarnation as those who say they do (31.2% or 24/77). The number of believers in reincarnation is, at any rate, significant.

Q10: Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?

There is a personal God	There is some sort of spirit or life force	I don't really know what to think	I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force	Missing	Total
26 33.8%	26 33.8%	10 13%	10 13%	5 6.4%	77 100%



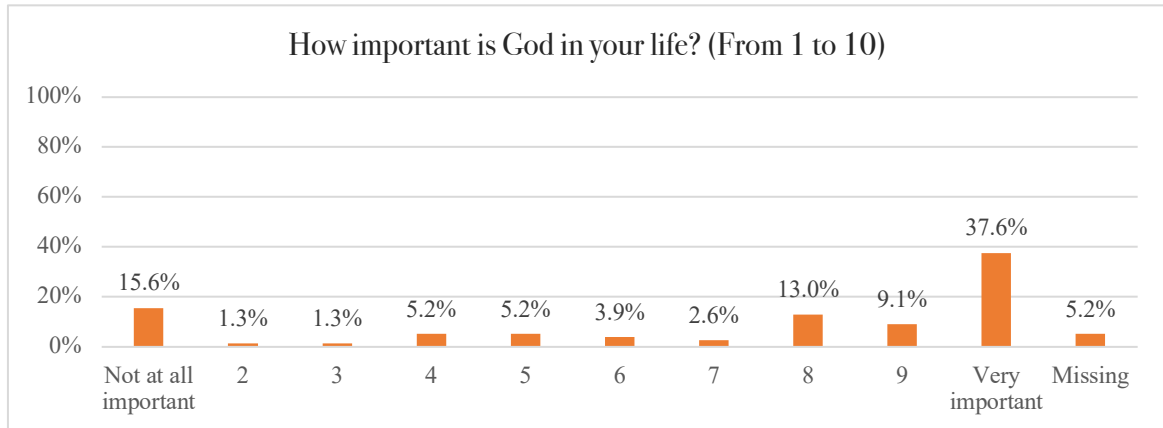
The table shows that about one-third (33.8% or 26/77) state that it is the affirmation of a personal God that draws one close to one’s personal beliefs. The same percentage asserts the existence of a vital force or spirit. 13% (10/77) say they have no opinion on the matter, the same number as those who claim not to believe in God nor in a vital force or spirit. It is interesting to note that a considerable portion of our sample believes in a vital spirit notwithstanding the fact that many interviewees declare that they identify with a revealed religion. Once again, this may be a sign among some interviewees of the incongruity between religious feeling and affiliation to a “traditional” religion.

Q11: And how important is God in your life? 10 means very important and 1 means not at all important.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Missing	Total
12 15.6%	1 1.3%	1 1,3%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	3 3.9%	2 2.6%	10 13%	7 9.1%	29 37.6%	4 5.2%	77 100%

The above table shows that a majority of interviewees attribute importance to God in their lives, with 59.7% (46/77) of the answers collocated between 8 and 10 points on the scale. It is noteworthy that the number of answers is highest in the category attributing great importance to God (equal to the highest point of the scale), with 37.6% (29/77). Few cases fall within the central categories, with a fairly uniform distribution. Altogether the answers referring to low points (from 1 to 3) reach 18.2% (14/77) of the total, where those who collocate themselves

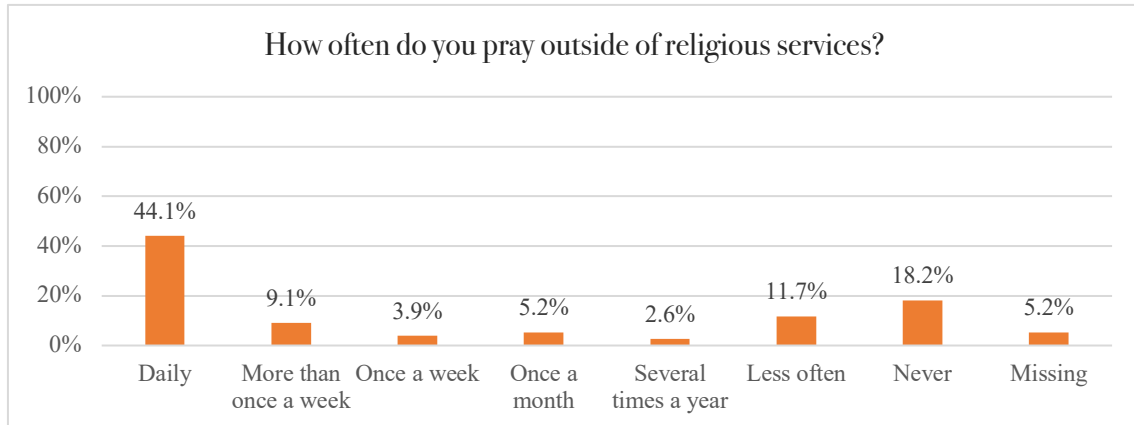
to the lowest point of the scale correspond to 15.6% (12/77) of cases. Observation of the distribution of answers reveals their concentration at the extremes of the scale; the two most numerous categories referring to the maximum and minimum points.



Q12: How often do you pray outside of religious services? Would you say...

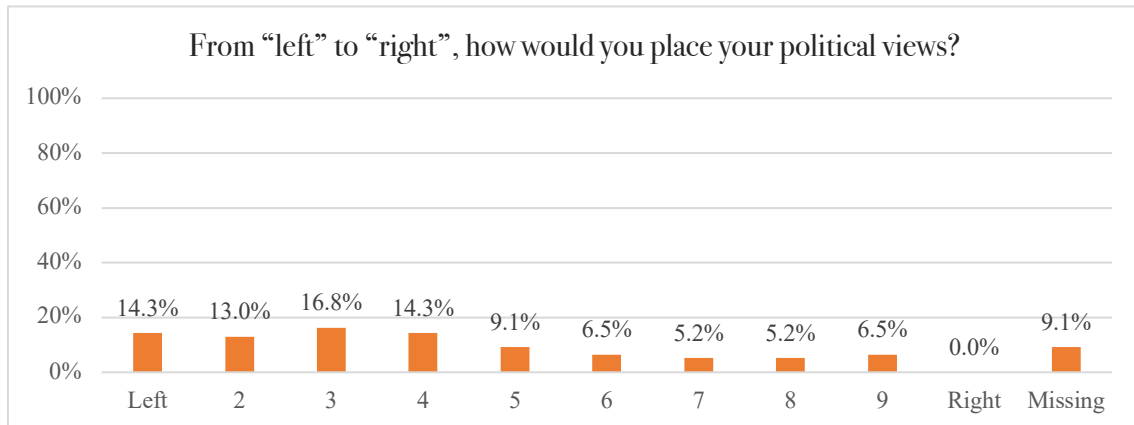
Every day	More than once a week	Once a week	At least once a month	Several times a year	Less often	Never	Missing	Total
34 44.1%	7 9.1%	3 3.9%	4 5.2%	2 2.6%	9 11.7%	14 18.2%	4 5.2%	77 100%

From the table, it can be seen that less than half of the sample (44.1% or 34/77) claim to pray daily. 9.1% (7/77) claim to dedicate time to prayer more than once a week, but those who do so once a week are only 3.9% (3/77). 5.2% (4/77) say they pray every month, and 2.6% (2/77) a few times a year. 11.7% (9/77) say they pray hardly ever or almost never, and 18.2% (14/77) never. The distribution of answers reveals that most of the interviewees claim they pray with some regularity, at least once a week or more often, for a total of 57,1%, as many as the other three categories combined.



Q13: In political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right”. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?

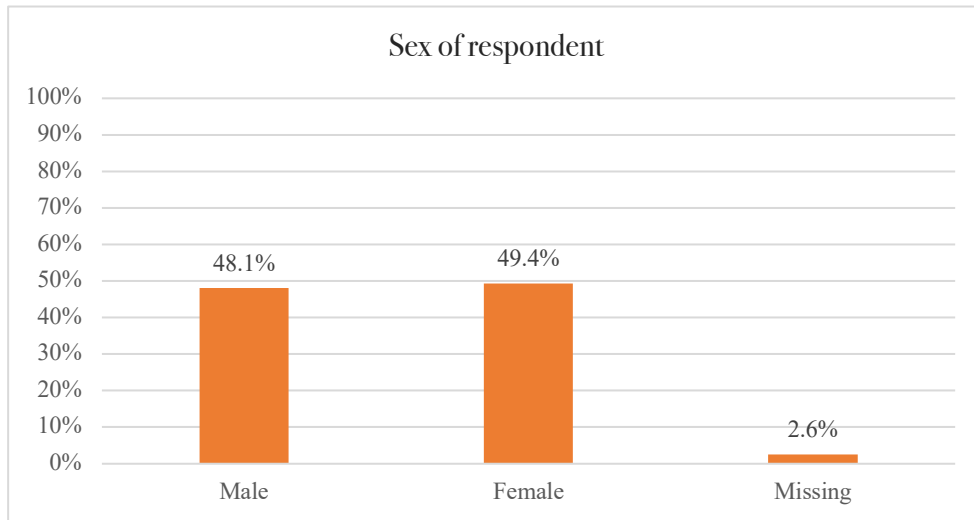
(Left) 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	(Right) 10	Missing	Total
11 14.3%	10 13%	13 16.8%	11 14.3%	7 9.1%	5 6.5%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	5 6.5%	.	7 9.1%	77 100%



As the above table shows, many interviewees demonstrate a political orientation tending towards the left. More than half of respondents are collocated between points 1 and 4, with a fairly equal distribution of 58.4% of the answers: only 14.3% goes to 1, the most extreme point. Fewer collocate themselves at the centre of the scale (15.6% between points 5 and 6), or show a political orientation tending towards the right: in the latter case, 16.9% position themselves between points 7 and 10, and nobody at point 10. With regard to this question, there is a substantial level (9.1% or 7/77) of missing answers.

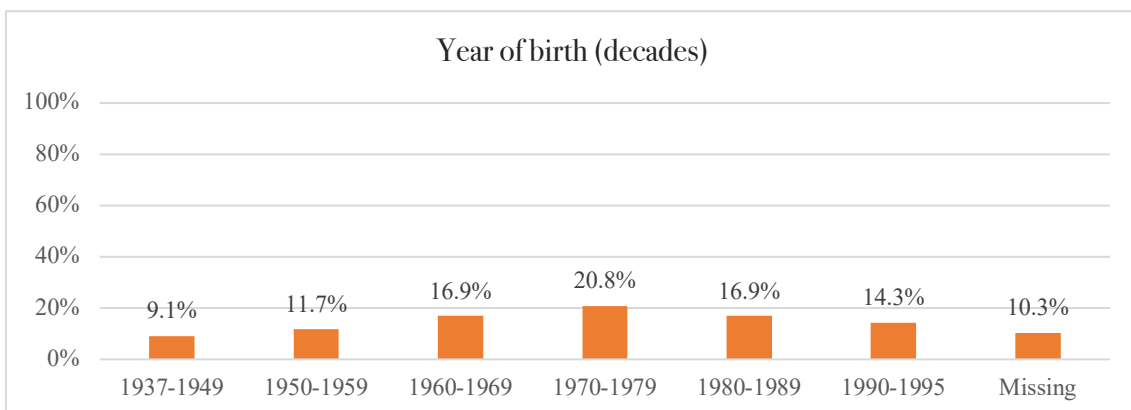
Q14: Sex of respondent.

Men	Women	Missing	Total
37 48%	38 49.4%	2 2.6%	77 100%

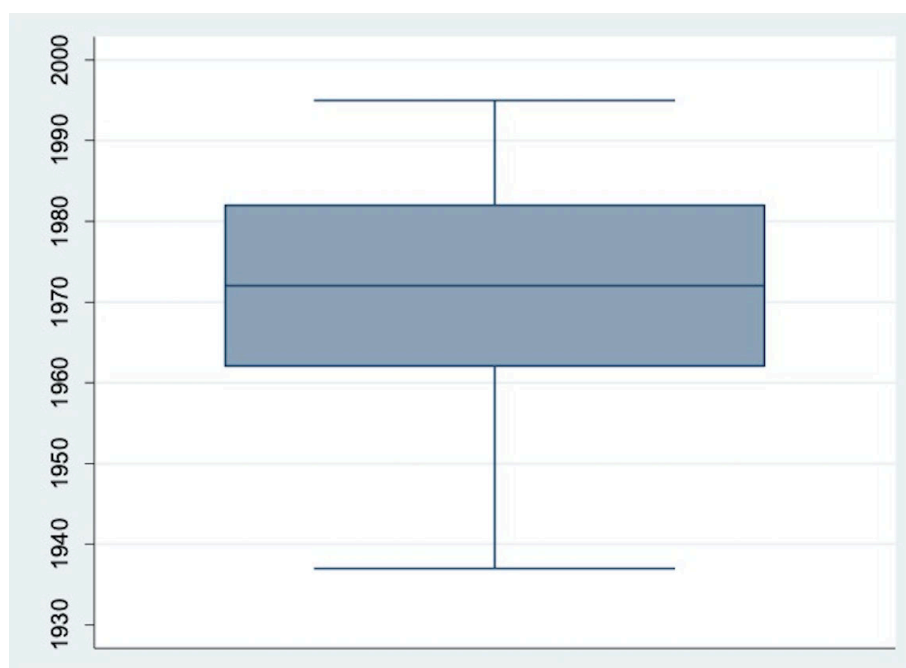


The sample is divided equally between men and women, who supply respectively 48% (37/77) and 49.4% (38/77) of the answers.

Q15: Can you tell me your year of birth, please?



<b>1937</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1963</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1981</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1942</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1965</b>	4 5.2%	<b>1982</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1944</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1967</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1984</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1945</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1968</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1985</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1947</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1969</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1986</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1950</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1970</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1988</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1951</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1971</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1989</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1952</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1972</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1990</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1956</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1973</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1991</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1957</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1975</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1992</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1958</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1976</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1993</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1960</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1977</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1994</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1961</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1978</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1995</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1962</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1980</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Missing</b>	8 10.3%
				<b>Total</b>	77 100%



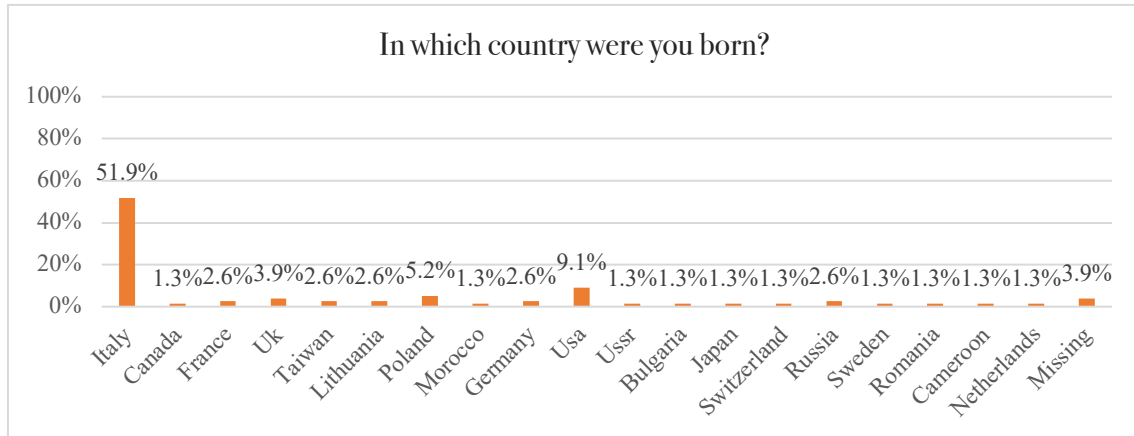


As can be observed from the above table and graphics, the distribution of answers to this question is close to average, with a slight shift towards younger interviewees (more easily seen in the above box plot). It is worth noting that most cases affirm that they are younger than 50 (52% or 40/77; 2019 data), and a little fewer than one-sixth is under 30. Given the cardinal nature of the variable, it is possible to calculate its central tendency and dispersion: the mean year of birth is 1971, with a standard deviation of about 15 years (15.3); the case that divides the sample in half answered 1972 (the average). 8 interviewees (10.3%) did not answer.

Q16: In which country were you born?

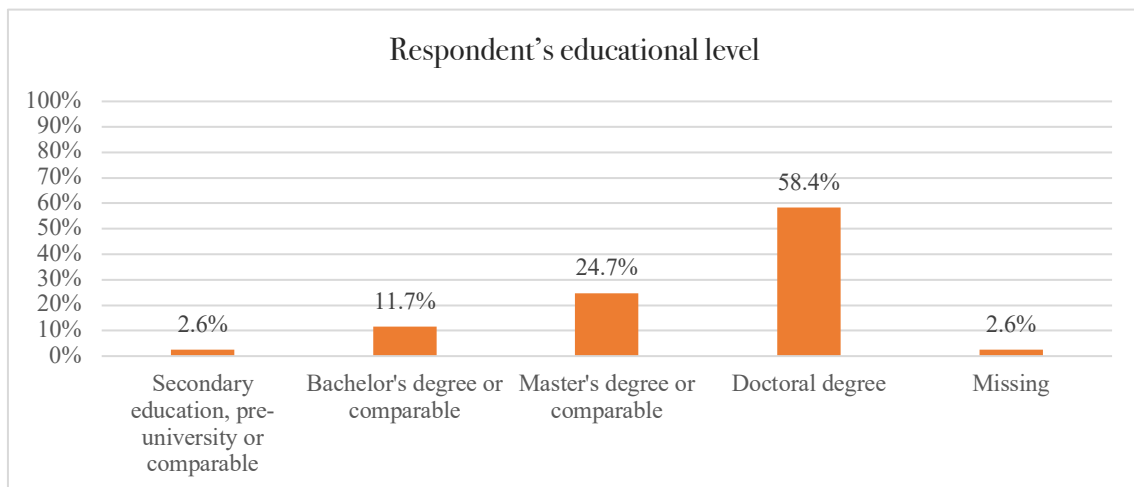
<b>Italy</b>	40 51.9%	<b>USSR</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Canada</b>	1 1.3%	<b>Bulgaria</b>	1 1.3%
<b>France</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Japan</b>	1 1.3%
<b>UK</b>	3 3.9%	<b>Switzerland</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Taiwan</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Russia</b>	2 2.6%
<b>Lithuania</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Sweden</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Poland</b>	4 5.2%	<b>Romania</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Morocco</b>	1 1.3%	<b>Cameroon</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Germany</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Netherlands</b>	1 1.3%
<b>USA</b>	7 9.1%	<b>Missing</b>	3 3.9%
		<b>Total</b>	77 100%

As the above table shows, the majority of respondents were born in Italy (51.9% or 40/77). The others are fairly evenly distributed among a total of 19 countries, the only ones having more than 2 interviewees being the USA (7 cases, 9.1%), Poland (4, 5.2%), and the UK (3, 3.9%).



Q17: What is the highest educational level that you have attained?

Secondary or post-secondary	Bachelor's degree or comparable	Master's degree or comparable	Doctoral degree	Missing	Total
2 2.6%	9 11.7%	19 24.7%	45 58.4%	2 2.6%	77 100%



The table shows that the majority of interviewees have a PhD (58.4% or 45/77) or a Master's degree (24.7% or 19/77): together these two categories make up 83.1% (64/77) of respondents, indicating the high educational level of the sample. 11.7% (9/77) have a primary degree, and only 2 (2.6%) do not have a university qualification.

## *Conclusions*

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this survey was to investigate the religious attitudes of a group of religious studies scholars, in the three contexts of belonging, behaving, and believing. Because of the sample's nature, generalizations would not be appropriate. Rather, the results may offer some suggestions for further research. It is in this spirit that, in addition to the comments offered in connection with each item, some general conclusions are proposed.

The answers evidence that a significant number of respondents are engaged in a process of distancing themselves from the very religion they study as scholars. Some were never personally close to religion. There is another significant segment of respondents, perhaps the majority, depending on what questions we consider, who are personally involved in religion, besides studying it. There are more respondents who claim they believe in God (71.4%) in comparison to those who regard themselves as religious (63.6%), or belong to a religious group (57.1%). 46.8% reported an identification with a monotheist tradition (Christianity, Judaism, or Islam). However, a smaller number of scholars in our sample accept the core doctrines of these traditions. 42.8% do not believe in heaven, and 54.5% do not believe in hell. 31.2% believe in reincarnation.

As we can see, even when studied only at the univariate analysis level, data are complicated, and offer a rich array of suggestions. It would certainly be worthwhile to follow up with similar studies, if possible with larger samples. One question to be discussed will be whether being personally involved in subjects scholars are studying would be useful or detrimental for monitoring, understanding, and explaining religion. A parallel question is what leads scholars to choose religion as their preferred academic field. Perhaps belonging to one religious tradition, or rejecting religion as a whole, may be relevant factors for this choice. In their 2000 book *Acts of Faith*, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke noted that sociology of religion was once dominated by those intent at “developing social science to attack religion,” but in recent years a growing number of religious believers had entered the field, notwithstanding the initial risk of being discriminated or marginalized by the anti-religious majority (Stark and Finke 2000, 1 and 14–6). This was written twenty years ago, and their conclusions may

now be reconsidered and tested empirically by surveying religious studies scholars.

It would also be interesting to ask whether studying religion from an academic perspective and reflecting on one's own faith and religious affiliation are connected, and whether encountering different religions may reinforce or change the scholar's own beliefs. The relevance of all these questions was the theoretical framework of the research, aimed at understanding whether "researching those who do research" may lead to a better understanding of the research field in itself.

## **References**

Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.