Routledge Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Edited by
Tornike Metreveli

Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This book probes into the dynamics between Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 pandemic, unravelling a profound transformation at institutional and grassroot levels. Employing a multidisciplinary approach and drawing upon varied data sources, including surveys, digital ethnography, and process tracing, it presents unprecedented insights into church-state relations, religious practices, and theological traditions during this crisis. The chapters in this book analyse divergent responses across countries, underscore religious-political interplay, and expose tensions between formal and informal power networks. Through case studies, the book highlights the innovative adaptability within the faith, demonstrated by new religious practices and the active role of local priests in responding to the pandemic. It critically examines how the actions of religious and political figures influenced public health outcomes. Offering a fresh perspective, the book suggests that the pandemic may have permanently influenced the relationship between Orthodox Christianity, public health, and society.

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To the people of Ukraine, this work is dedicated to you, in honor of your bravery and resilience

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Introduction

In an unprecedented global crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, how do Orthodox Christian churches reconcile their age-old practices with the urgent mandates of public health and safety? This is the central question at the heart of this book. The aim is to investigate the interactions between Orthodox Christianity, a faith deeply intertwined with tradition and rituals,[1] and the extraordinary demands of a global pandemic. The scope of this book includes a comprehensive examination of how these intersections have affected the practices, beliefs, and community dynamics within Orthodox Christianity.[2]This manuscript primarily provides a deep-dive into the churning turmoil that unfolded as COVID-19 embarked on its grim trajectory, radically altering the world's social practices. In this vortex of change, Orthodox Christianity, steeped in a cultural landscape of tradition, encountered a unique kaleidoscope of challenges and paradoxes. The church, traditionally a sanctuary of solace for Orthodox Christians,[3] found itself precariously balanced on the knife-edge of a conundrum, requiring adaptability and transformation in unprecedented ways. With global chaos whirling around them, believers sought solace within the comforting walls of the church.[4] This underscored the faith's crucial role as an anchor amidst stormy seas of uncertainty. However, navigating the turbulent waters raised provocative questions: how did the Orthodox churches adapt age-old rituals in the face of socially distanced mandates necessitated by the pandemic? How did Orthodox Christians reconcile their fervent religious beliefs and practices with the stringent health mandates laid down by their governments?

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an excess of formidable structural challenges.[5] This book dissects the structural and historical complexities of church–state relations, focusing on the tripartite intersection of faith, politics, and society in the midst of the COVID-19 storm that overwhelmed the world. Of prime significance for this volume is the delicate balance between individual liberties and collective welfare, an issue that gained particular importance with the spread of the coronavirus disease and subsequent vaccination efforts[6]. To elucidate these interdependencies, the book delves into specific controversies that arose during the pandemic, such as the practice of Holy Communion within the Orthodox tradition. Holy Communion, a deeply rooted Orthodox practice, became a contentious battleground for these deliberations, with healthcare experts raising concerns about its potential role as a conduit for virus transmission.[7] Two diametrically opposed narratives emerged: religious adherents, who vehemently advocated for their

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individual right to partake in the ritual as traditionally conducted, and governmental authorities, who pressed for modifications or restrictions on traditional practices to protect the broader populace. This book wades into these overlapping and contentious domains, shedding light on the negotiations between religious traditions and state policies amidst a crisis of unparalleled proportions. This narrative unveils instances where Orthodox churches permitted alterations to long-standing rituals, and how populist politicians sometimes hindered these processes with strategic calculations. Seemingly inconsequential, these adaptations offer a rich scholarly avenue for examining the interaction between individual agency, communal identity, and institutional authority in the context of faith. These decisions, by shedding light on the flexibility within Orthodox Christianity, underscore the pivotal role of local priests and amplify individual agency within the church.

As the pandemic unfolded, Orthodox churches found themselves caught in a paradox: on the one hand, they were under government pressure to advocate for stringent safety measures and maintain limited public access, while on the other they faced demands from their parishioners to continue religious practices that potentially raised public health concerns. To understand this dynamic, the book focuses on this dichotomy, probing the intersection between religious rituals, public health guidelines, and perceived threats. Throughout this exploration, the concept of 'lived religion' gains prominence, highlighting the dynamic adaptation of religious practices and the negotiation of faith under extraordinary circumstances. Yet, the book prompts a re-evaluation of this approach, arguing that an exclusive focus on the agency of lay believers and lived practices may overlook the critical interplay between individuals and institutional structures. This interplay has been particularly evident in the response to the COVID-19 crisis. The book scrutinises the strategic approaches of churches as they adapted rituals and narratives to convey a semblance of safety. However, the manuscript uncovers that these adjustments often arose less from a genuine commitment to health measures and more from external pressures, such as organisational interests, financial constraints, and political compromises.

Building upon these findings, the book then explores how these pressures influenced Orthodox churches' responses to the COVID-19 vaccine. As the book navigates through the varied responses within the Orthodox churches to the COVID-19 vaccine, it reveals novel intersections between these traditionally separate domains. In particular, the book finds instances where politicians exploited religious sentiment for political gain, sometimes at the cost of potential public health risks, even in contradiction to scientific advice. These dynamics should compel readers to engage in a comprehensive evaluation of the role of religion in society, particularly in times of public health crises. Moreover, the findings prompt a reassessment of the boundaries between faith and science, emphasising the need to examine the influence of external factors on religious institutions and their complex role in shaping public health responses. This critical analysis, which sheds light on interactions of faith, science, and politics, illuminates potential pathways for mitigating health risks while respecting religious traditions in future crises.

Methods and Case Studies

In order to effectively explore the dynamics at play, the contributors of this book employed a mixed-method approach,[8] leveraging both qualitative and quantitative strategies.[9] The aim was to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences while also providing the depth of understanding necessary for such a complex subject. The authors of each chapter conducted interviews in each of the chosen countries, focusing on several central themes such as the changes in religious rituals due to the pandemic, the dynamics between parishes and authorities, the church's stance on public health measures and vaccination (see Figure 0.1), financial challenges and fluctuating church attendance, and perceived threats and opportunities brought on by the pandemic. Most cases represented the states where Orthodox Christianity is a majority religion with considerable social presence.

The data collection process also involved surveys, aiming to capture a broader sociological picture. In Ukraine, the contributors of this book employed partnered with Gradus Research, a Kyiv-based company, to conduct three representative in-country surveys. In addition, the authors initiated online surveys in Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine, and Georgia. These countries were selected for the online survey because of their significant Orthodox Christian populations, logistical convenience, high internet accessibility, and their diverse responses to the pandemic, thereby providing a broad perspective on Orthodox churches' adaptation in various socio-political contexts. Both Gradus and online surveys were timed to coincide with key religious periods—Easter and Christmas—and periods of significant governmental policy change and public debate, providing a unique lens through which to observe the interplay between the church, government policy, and public sentiment. The timeline of data collection spanned from the pandemic's onset to the lifting of official restrictions.

In choosing the case studies, the contributors of this book aimed to provide a broad cross section of the Orthodox world. The selected countries—Finland and Sweden—offer diverse political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts, crucial for understanding how religious institutions respond to crises. The volume consciously focused on geographical scope, deliberately excluding countries like Ethiopia and Armenia from the analysis partly due to their divergent Orthodox traditions. For instance, Ethiopia is home to the Oriental Orthodox Church, not the Eastern Orthodox communion, and Armenia, too, belongs to the Oriental Orthodox communion, distinct from the Eastern Orthodox churches.

In Finland, the Orthodox Church, despite being a minority, is an officially recognised religious institution. It occupies a unique place in Finnish society, benefiting from state recognition and support, but also navigating its existence among diverse religious and non-religious perspectives in a largely secular society. The Finnish case provides an opportunity to examine how such an institution operates and adapts in the face of a global crisis. On the other hand, in Sweden, Orthodox Christianity represents a smaller, more marginal religious community with a different historical trajectory and societal position. This offers a contrasting perspective to Finland, enriching the analysis by introducing diverse aspects of the effects of the global crisis

on different scales of religious communities. Moreover, both Finland and Sweden have comprehensive social security systems and high levels of digitalisation, which may have shaped the ways their religious communities responded to the pandemic, potentially providing a blueprint for how digitally advanced societies with robust social systems respond to global crises within the sphere of religion.

Mapping the Terrain: Research Themes and Directions

The research strategy focused on three key themes: the impact of institutional structures and theological perspectives on Orthodox churches' responses to the pandemic, the relationship between religious institutions and state policies, and the societal implications of these interactions. In terms of institutional structures, the contributors of this book observed how the status of various Orthodox churches (e.g., more centralised versus decentralised) influenced their responses to the pandemic. Differing theological views of the virus, its origins, and the role of faith in combating it further affected these reactions. The chapters provide a comprehensive exploration of how these differences in structure and theology manifested in churches' responses, using specific case studies to illustrate this dynamic.

The second theme centres on the interplay between religious institutions and state policies, particularly in navigating religious motivations and public health mandates. The book provides detailed accounts of both cooperative and contentious scenarios and explores the varying roles of religious hierarchies and local parishes, revealing the complex relationship between tradition, innovation, and public health needs. The final theme examines the societal implications of the pandemic and the church's response to it. This includes shifts in public opinion and political alignments, the rise of conspiracy theories[10] and anti-vaccine sentiments,[11] and the role of religious and political factions in spreading these views.

One particularly contentious issue among states where Orthodox Christianity, a branch of Christianity known for its adherence to ancient traditions and rituals,[12] is the majority religion revolved around traditional practices, such as the common use of a single spoon for communion, a sacred Christian ritual involving bread and wine. This conflict between religious practice and public health measures provides a compelling exploration of the tension between Orthodox Christianity and public health mandates.

Throughout the book, the contributors illuminate how churches and parishioners demonstrated adaptability and resilience in the face of the pandemic's constraints. The chapters examine the shifts in public trust and political alignment induced by the pandemic, situations where religious organisations established themselves as refuges in the face of faltering governmental structures, and the role of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine sentiments in shaping the pandemic response. This volume provides an extensive exploration of these themes, through sociological, anthropological, and theological analyses of the dynamics at play. By reflecting on how the pandemic has reshaped the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and society and considering what these changes may signify for the future of public health, religion, and public policy, the book seeks to shed light on the transformative practices and theological perspectives that have emerged in this crisis.

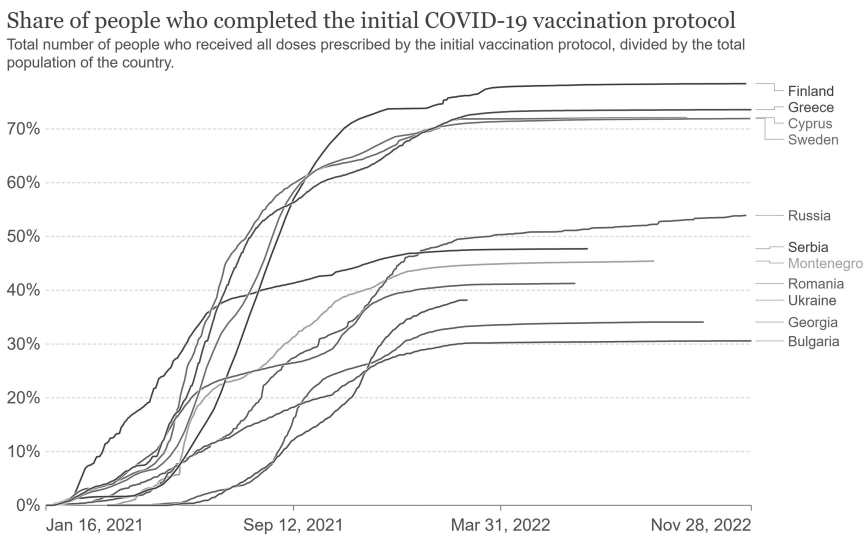

Figure 0.1 Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol.
Source: Our World in Data.

Synopses of Chapters: Diverse Orthodox Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

This volume brings together a diverse group of sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, theologians, and historians for an examination of how the pandemic has reshaped religious practices, surfaced intra-organisational tensions, and prompted a reassessment of the role of the Orthodox Church in society.

In Chapter 1, Tetiana Kalenychenko, Cyril Hovorun, and Tymofii Brik delve into the considerable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on four eastern Christian communities in Ukraine.[13] They meticulously unravel the complexities that arose from both intra- and inter-denominational conflicts and a significant crisis of communication, trust, and coordination. This web of issues led to a spectrum of responses from these religious entities, adding another layer of institutional ambiguities to the pandemic's overall impact. However, the authors also shine a light on the resilience of these communities in the face of adversity. They provide compelling evidence of how the pandemic served as a catalyst for the introduction of new practices among the parishioners. The chapter highlights the significant shift in the church hierarchy, demonstrating an uncharacteristic openness to these grassroots initiatives born out of necessity. Drawing attention to the structural and theological elements of these religious institutions, the authors make evident the integral role these facets play in shaping responses to crisis situations. Their nuanced examination extends to scrutinising the relationships these religious institutions share with state bodies, further emphasising the tricky dynamics at play. The chapter suggests that the crisis didn't just affect Ukrainian churches but also initiated a

transformation within them. Traditional norms of worship and communal practice were challenged, leading to changes that may hold far-reaching implications. These adaptations, born out of global crisis, impact the strive to maintain the balance between preserving the core essence of Orthodox faith practices while being flexible enough to adapt to the unavoidable necessities posed by the pandemic.

In Chapter 2, Lucian Leustean explores the functions and actions of Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating their crucial roles in shaping public compliance with national health measures. Through Leustean's analysis, readers witness the intriguing and diverse responses of these two Orthodox churches under crisis. The Romanian Orthodox Church's division, particularly the schism between its formal structures and informal power networks, unintentionally provided fertile ground for the growth of far-right movements. This situation showcases a church grappling with internal politics, which reverberates beyond its walls into the wider socio-political landscape. On the other hand, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, aligning itself more with the government's directives, supported public health measures enacted to curb the spread of the virus. This seemingly unified stance, however, was not free of controversy as it faced significant pushback from political protests, notably those linked to anti-vaccination campaigns. These actions underscore the potential pitfalls and societal discord that can arise when religious and health directives intersect and when public sentiment is divided. Despite these controversies and internal challenges, both churches managed to maintain a high level of public trust, often surpassing confidence in the government and military. This phenomenon attests to the enduring societal influence and the moral authority these religious institutions wield. However, a critical issue Leustean raises is the ambiguous stance taken by these churches on health measures and vaccines during the pandemic. This uncertainty, according to Lucian Leustean, could potentially undermine effective public health strategies, casting a shadow over the role of religious institutions in shaping public health perception.

In Chapter 3, Vasilios N. Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou use Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'rhythmanalysis' to provide an in-depth examination of the Greek and Cypriot Orthodox churches' institutional attitudes and grassroots reactions to the pandemic. They argue that the pandemic, by disrupting and transforming religious life in these societies, instigated what they refer to as a 'ritual arrhythmia'. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified divisions within the Greek and Cypriot Orthodox churches, demonstrating a deep rift between traditional, conspiracy-driven fundamentalism and a more moderate, pragmatic, and liberal approach to faith. This divide has been evident in responses to the pandemic, specifically in attitudes towards vaccination, the handling of religious rites, and the balancing of traditional faith practices with public health guidelines. The pandemic has disrupted the 'normal rhythm' of religious life, fostering both individual and communal adaptations in worship, which have resulted in new forms of both 'sacral individualism' and 'sacral communitarianism'. The pandemic also shifted the locus of religious worship to the home, challenging traditional hierarchies. The chapter underscores the impact of historically rooted, religiously tinged conspiracy theories on the churches' early responses to the pandemic, ranging from denial of

the virus to opposition to perceived anti-Orthodox plots in the form of lockdown measures.

Chapter 4 focuses on the church–state relations in Georgia during the pandemic. It frames the response of the Georgian Orthodox Church as a form of performative security practice. Under this concept, the church is seen to be projecting an image of safety and compliance amidst the pandemic, but this projection is juxtaposed with the continuation of certain religious practices which may pose a risk of infection. This performative practice creates inconsistency, where the religious institution appears to endorse public health protocols superficially, yet persists with potentially risky traditional practices beneath this facade. Further exploration of this dynamic reveals the Georgian government's struggle in addressing the church's assertive political demands during this health crisis. Initially, the government faced challenges navigating the balance between public health and religious autonomy. Yet, over time, it seemed to succumb to 'performative security' practices and started to imitate them. This strategic approach, adopted by the government, involved upholding the image of a capable crisis manager, despite the inability to handle the risks posed by the church's stance on religious practices during the pandemic. This exploration unravels the clientelist nature of church–state relations under the pressure of a global crisis, offering readers the nuances about the church–state interdependencies, tensions, and adaptations involved.

In Serbia, Kosovo-Metohija, and Montenegro, different legal, political, and demographic contexts resulted in varying responses of the Orthodox Church. In spite of differences and adjustments in practices across various churches and regions, as Stefan Radojkovic's research reveals, the Serbian Orthodox Church's core of communion remained unshaken. Chapter 5 demonstrates when and why in regions such as urban Kosovo-Metohija safety measures were largely disregarded, while in other regions like rural areas and monasteries practices were adapted to minimise risk. Moreover, the adaptations of various religious practices depended not only on structural factors but also bishops' scientific epistemologies, and the relationship between priests and parishioners. Despite these changes, the agency of religious leaders emerged as paramount in guiding the adaptation process. They helped navigate the interface between individuals and institutional structures during the crisis, facilitating changes in rituals and offering guidance on preventive measures. Their role highlighted the sustained desire for communal worship and the innovative ways communities found to maintain a sense of connection on behalf of parishioners. Radojkovic shows that believers who were willing to adapt their practices demonstrated flexibility in reconciling their religious needs with the new health guidelines. This was especially noticeable in the various ways they administered communion, with some changing utensils or modifying physical interactions to maintain social distancing.

In Chapter 6, Maria Toropova delves into the adaptation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the COVID-19 pandemic. In post-Soviet Russia, as Toropova argues, where being Orthodox intertwines with national identity, there are distinct categories of Orthodoxy: private, civil, and deep-rooted. Despite the tensions between these ideal types, the Russian Orthodox Church managed to alter its operations

amidst the crisis. However, the pandemic also brought latent contradictions within the Russian Church to light. It revealed a significant leadership gap, perceived as the church distancing itself from crisis management, intensifying pre-existing tensions between the church, the state, and society. The pandemic also pushed the church towards online practices, marking a shift from individual to collective religious experiences. This transition points towards a widening chasm between those who are culturally Orthodox and those truly religious, signalling the potential secularisation of the Russian Orthodox Church. In addition, the pandemic-related struggles revealed a profound internal discord within the church. A sense of abandonment pervaded among the clergy tasked with managing the crisis on the ground, hinting at possible long-term implications for the church. This chapter concludes with a profound exploration of how the church gained and lost parishioners, supported government policies, and saw fluctuating popularity in its leadership, especially the Patriarch, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 7, co-authored by Tymofii Brik and Tornike Metreveli, investigates the interplay between vaccination behaviour and religiosity within Orthodox Christian communities in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro. By implementing a mixed-methods approach, the chapter uses a representative survey (conducted in Ukraine in three waves between Christmas and Easter) and an online survey (in all four case studies). The results uncovered a notable link between Christian nationalism—a merging of national and Christian identities—and vaccination behaviour, even when accounting for factors like gender and social status. Nevertheless, this relationship was not uniform across the case studies in focus. The influence of Christian nationalism on vaccination attitudes was less pronounced in Ukraine and Georgia, while it was more considerable in Serbia and Montenegro. The findings highlighted that a strong sense of religious commitment and national identification usually promotes positive vaccination behaviour. The chapter also demonstrated how COVID-19 pandemic instigated a transition towards digital worship practices. Despite initial resistance, this shift evolved into a crucial connection and outreach tool, particularly for the younger demographic. However, it simultaneously brought into question the authenticity of religious traditions in an era of necessary change. The pandemic highlighted an ambiguous attitude towards vaccination within Orthodox Christian communities. While individual religious devotion and national identity typically encouraged vaccination, their fusion in the form of Christian nationalism led to contradicting and inconsistent responses.

In Chapter 8, Johan Bastubacka delves into the responses of the Orthodox churches in Finland and Sweden. The chapter explores how unique institutional structures and varying influences, including state connections in Finland and immigration-induced diversity in Sweden, shaped these reactions. Amidst societal pressures, faith-related challenges, and state health directives, Orthodox priests assumed a pivotal role, balancing the preservation of religious traditions with adherence to public health measures. Key actions undertaken by these priests included modifying liturgical practices to ensure safety—such as reducing attendees and modifying sacraments—and providing practical assistance, like delivering medication to remote parishioners. Simultaneously, they maintained their spiritual

guidance role, engaging in theological dialogues about the virus and managing a range of conspiracy theories within their congregations. This balancing act, often in the face of personal and familial health risks, showcased their resilience, adaptability, and sense of duty. Bastubacka argues that the pandemic, while presenting medical-epistemological, political, and logistical challenges, also spurred deep theological introspection within Orthodox communities. The crisis sparked debates on issues such as the anthropology of sickness, the relationship between medical science and theology, and the redefinition of priestly identity in the context of a liturgical emergency. It also propelled changes in religious practices, reshaping pastoral counselling, communication, and community bonds. The COVID-19 crisis did not just disrupt Orthodox practices, but it also triggered their evolution to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic.

In summary, the forthcoming chapters elucidate on institutional and structural factors, the ambiguities of local politics and alliances, as well as the crucial role of religious leaders. These chapters shed light on the tension between faith and public health directives and how it varies significantly across different regions. Throughout these chapters, the profound institutional shifts provoked by the pandemic are revealed, marked by exposed leadership gaps, correlation between Christian nationalism and vaccination, the acceleration of online worship, and the potential tilt towards secularisation.

Implications for Society, Politics, and Welfare

Upon examining the dynamics within Orthodox churches and the profound institutional shifts experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, the book suggests these transformations carry far-reaching implications. The Orthodox churches, particularly in rural regions, played an integral role and their position during the COVID-19 crisis, frequently characterised by ambivalence, was instrumental in shaping people's attitudes towards health measures and vaccinations. This influence led to social repercussions such as the instrumentalisation of religion by the far-right movements and anti-vaccine sentiments, highlighting the capacity of religious institutions to mould societal attitudes and responses during crises.

The pandemic echoed historical relationship between the church and the state, influencing crisis responses and occasionally resulting in conflicts, especially when directives from religious and political institutions seemed contradictory. Nonetheless, this relationship also showcased its potential for crafting innovative solutions that reconcile faith with public safety. Moreover, the pandemic underscored underlying challenges within the Orthodox Church, such as polarisation and political divide among parishioners, conflictual epistemologies, communication gaps among hierarchs of the church, and a disconnect between the church leadership and grassroots reality in the parishes. These issues necessitate a reassessment of the church's societal role and instigated changes in religious practices, indicating a possible transformative shift within the Orthodox world. The Orthodox communities' demonstrated adaptability might hold positive implications for their future resilience.

Understanding this dynamic is critical for managing future crises in these nations, especially when religious duties and political pressures collide. For instance, how can the church balance its religious duties with political pressures during crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine?[14] How can it reconcile its spiritual mandates with political realities? The humanitarian crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents new layers of challenges for Orthodox Christianity, significantly impacting its religious, societal, and political landscapes. The Ukraine crisis has divided global Orthodoxy, with the instrumentalisation of religion by the Kremlin to justify the brutal invasion, thereby impacting the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and other Orthodox churches.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has tested global Orthodoxy, making it even more difficult, if not impossible, to find a balance between religious duties, moral standards, and political pressures. The Orthodox Church's handling of the twin crises—the pandemic and the military conflict—further illuminates its relationship with the state. The compounded crises fuelled theological debates[15] within the Orthodox Church, reflecting on the religious institution's role in societal issues, the ethics of war and peace, and the church's responsibilities in addressing human suffering. The challenge for the Orthodox Church will be to reconcile these debates with the lived realities of its followers, particularly those directly affected by the refugee and humanitarian crises. However, the experience gained from navigating the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially provide valuable insights and guidance. The global function of Orthodox churches has broadened to include meeting the physical needs of refugees, providing emotional and spiritual support, and advocating for peace and reconciliation.

The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine have reshaped the Orthodox Christian world in profound ways. As Orthodox churches navigate crisis situations, its handling of the humanitarian crisis serves as a litmus test, posing an important point of reflection: can the Orthodox Christianity adapt swiftly and effectively to rapidly changing and complex geopolitical scenarios? The Orthodox Church of Ukraine's humanitarian actions highlight a broader theme of religious institutions as essential providers of human security. This extends beyond addressing physical needs, tapping into the emotional solace and stability required during such times of crisis. The church's ability to balance its spiritual mandate while effectively addressing human suffering and promoting peace and reconciliation is an area where further exploration will provide valuable insights. The key lies in understanding how the church can leverage its societal influence while maintaining its spiritual integrity, and in the case of Russian Orthodox Church after the Ukraine invasion—its moral face.

These challenges also brought to the fore the relationship between religion and politics. The complexities of this relationship have been illuminated through the actions and responses of the church to these crises, especially in the Ukrainian context where the geopolitical conflict tested the neutrality of Orthodox churches worldwide. The crisis-induced evolution of religious practices and the reassessment of the church's societal role led us to ponder how these experiences might shape the future of Orthodox theology and practice. The task for the church is to

reconcile these debates with the lived realities of its followers, particularly those directly affected by the crises. By shedding light on the relationship between religion, politics, and society in times of crisis, the volume's findings offer valuable lessons and insights. They encourage to reflect on how faith communities, such as the Orthodox Church, can adapt, evolve, and contribute positively to society amidst unprecedented challenges.

As a foundation for further research, this volume seeks to serve as a stepping stone towards a deeper understanding of the Orthodox Christian world's role during times of crisis. The exploration of themes in-focus and questions this book asks will enhance public understanding of how religious institutions can navigate crises, maintain community cohesion, promote public health, and provide humanitarian aid. This, in turn, has far-reaching implications not only for the Orthodox Church but also for academics, policymakers, religious institutions, and the society at large. How can the Orthodox Church effectively harness its influence to encourage adherence to public health measures in future crises? What strategies can it employ to bridge the gap between religious directives and public health mandates? The Orthodox Church, with its deeply embedded societal role and historical significance, possesses a unique position to utilise its influence and promote adherence to public health measures in times of future crises. This combines religious understanding, public health knowledge, and effective communication strategies. One crucial aspect is education, where the church can play a significant role in enlightening its followers about the nature and implications of health crises, the rationale behind public health measures, and the importance of adhering to these measures.

Aligning religious directives with public health mandates is another key strategy. By integrating faith teachings with evidence-based public health advice, the church can effectively communicate the significance of these measures to its followers. Emphasising the value of compassion, solidarity, and communal responsibility, religious leaders can convey the message that adherence to public health guidelines is an expression of faith and a tangible manifestation of love for one's neighbour. As this book demonstrates, church leaders have a crucial role to play in modelling the behaviour necessary during a health crisis. By adhering to public health measures, themselves, the church leadership can demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of their communities and showcase the importance of collective action. As evidenced in this book, the latter has not always been the case in times of COVID-19 crisis.

The book shows that technology can facilitate community connections and innovative solutions to religious practices. The church can leverage digital platforms, such as live-streaming services, virtual religious gatherings, and online forums, to disseminate public health directives, provide spiritual guidance, and foster a sense of unity and support among its followers. By embracing digital tools, the church can adapt to the changing needs of its congregation and ensure effective communication during times of crisis. A strategic approach to bridge the gap between religious directives and public health mandates involves fostering collaboration with health authorities and public health professionals. By working together, scientifically accurate yet religiously sensitive messaging can be created, and guidelines

can be established that respect both public health and religious considerations. This collaboration can extend to joint initiatives, such as vaccination campaigns and community health programmes, where the church can actively participate and contribute to public health efforts.

In essence, the Orthodox Church, by leveraging its societal influence, historical legacy, and adopting these comprehensive strategies, can play a significant and positive role in encouraging adherence to public health measures during future crises. This approach requires diligent efforts in aligning religious teachings with public health necessities, while fostering understanding, cooperation, and active engagement with the congregation. Through these collective endeavours, the church can continue to be a beacon of faith, resilience, and compassionate leadership in times of uncertainty.

Notes

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2 For Orthodox Christianity and human security, see Leustean, Lucian N. 2019. *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*. Routledge Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States (2019).
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1 Church Fragmentation and the Pandemic

Analysis of Four Eastern Christian Groups in Ukraine

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted religious rituals and traditional ways of gathering in various religious groups worldwide. Some of them voluntarily reduced religious services, while others were forced to do so under lockdown restrictions imposed by national and local governments. Thanks to these new practices of ministry, the pandemic exposed previous problems in the church that existed in hidden forms, and revealed new trends. Additionally, all believers and ministers had to show flexibility and coordinate a common response, at least at the parish level, to understand the new demands of service and spiritual life. This allowed us, within the framework of this study, to monitor certain socio-religious trends that reflect both general social changes and the purely ecclesiastical environment of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. For example, responses to the pandemic were conservative until the entire vertical of the church hierarchy decided how to address the crisis. This, in turn, gave rise to a number of creative solutions at the local level, which reflects manifestations of grassroots democracy and is especially interesting in the context of future changes in the Orthodox environment.

The reactions of the churches to the restrictions were significantly conditioned by their structures. For example, the centralised structure of the Roman Catholic Church helped its local communities to better comply with the hygienic policies promoted by Pope Francis.[1] Orthodox churches are less centralised and cannot impose a common policy for all. Some of them, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, clearly underlined its dangers and suggested restrictive measures soon after the beginning of the pandemic. Others, such as the Orthodox Church of Moldova, issued public statements requesting to exempt its laypeople from mandatory vaccination and to lift the governmental restrictions on religious communities.[2] In Ukraine, Orthodox leaders refrained from making strong anti-vaccination statements. At the same time, they did not encourage vaccination either.[3] Prior to the vaccination debate, some Orthodox communities and even dioceses resisted the lockdown policies.[4] For example, they insisted on gathering in traditional ways and distributing Holy Communion in accordance with the established customs—namely by spoon.[5]

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Such statements and practices can be explained by theological convictions that are popular among those opposing hygienic measures against COVID-19. These convictions can be characterised as fideistic. They state that faith is stronger than physical reality. Therefore, if one believes strongly enough, that person becomes immune to any viruses, including coronavirus. From the same perspective, if one takes sanitary measures, especially in the church, that person demonstrates his or her weak faith.

The theological convictions underpinning COVID-19 dissent have to do with a specific worldview. According to this worldview, sacred spaces and objects remain unaffected by evil. Coronavirus is considered to be such an evil. The most holy object in all Christian traditions is believed to be Eucharist. Fideists perceive it not only as something that cannot be vulnerable to the virus, but also as the ultimate cure for infection. They argue that participating in the Eucharist cannot expose a person to the threat of being infected. Moreover, such participation is the best remedy if a person has become infected. They also argue that churches constitute a safe space for all those who are afraid of being infected. This is because churches are sacred spaces. If churches are safe and protective against coronavirus, then locking them during the pandemic, from the fideistic perspective, contradicts the idea of containing the spread of infection. From this perspective, in sum, the anti-COVID measures that limited the access of the faithful to the churches or the Eucharist, in effect, helped in spreading the disease.

The fideistic perspective on the pandemic has been criticised by theologians who argue that neither sacred spaces nor sacred objects, such as the Eucharist, can neutralise the virus. From their perspective, it is theologically wrong to identify the coronavirus with evil. This virus is a part of God's world, even it is harmful for human beings. They accuse fideists of dichotomising the world into essentially good and essentially evil parts—in a way similar to the ancient Manichaeans and other dualists. They argue that because the virus is not objectively evil and belongs to God's creation, it can be transmitted in holy places and even through the Eucharist. They accuse the fideists of challenging God and having a magic understanding of the holy. In their view, respecting the quarantine measures is about respecting God's order, and not about weak faith.

The issue of vaccination can be explained through the same debates. From the fideistic perspective, taking a vaccine is a token of weak faith. It is also about allowing a suspicious substance to be infused in one's body. Such a substance is often also perceived as ontologically evil, designed with the malicious intent to diminish one's personality and will. The two points are contradictory, because, if one has strong faith, the presumably ill-intended vaccine will not harm the body. Nevertheless, the fideists do not register such contradictions. Their opponents argue that the vaccine, even if ill-intended (which they do not believe to be the case), cannot diminish human personality or will, because the latter are spiritual and not material categories. Moreover, the vaccine is a gift from God, through the enlightened human mind that figured out how to produce it. Therefore, it should be received with gratitude. All these debates and ideas underpin the unofficial,

semi-official, and official statements by the churches, even though these statements do not explicitly refer to them.

Most national Orthodox churches constitute the majority in their respective countries (e.g., from 75 per cent to 90 per cent of Armenians, Georgians, Greeks, Moldovans, Romanians, and Serbs declare that they are Orthodox Christians). This helped the national churches to profoundly influence many citizens in these countries. Ukrainian society is a bit different, as its religious landscape is more fragmented. From the collapse of the USSR up until 2018, four organised Eastern Christian groups competed in exclusivist terms: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP); the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP); the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC); and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). In 2018, the UOC-KP, the UAOC, and parts of the UOC-MP decided to merge into a new autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). This formally happened at a unifying council held in St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv on 15 December 2018. Contrary to the original expectations, however, competition did not cease, but gained new momentum (Brik and Korolkov 2019, 2020). Ukraine still does not have a single national church that would exercise religious monopoly in any region (Brylov, Kalenychenko, and Kryshtal 2021). This enables some scholars to compare the Ukrainian religious model with the one in the United States (Casanova 1996; Brik and Casanova 2021).

To what extent does such fragmentation influence people's responses to the pandemic? Some early surveys have registered that Ukrainians' attitudes varied significantly and were contingent on their belonging to one or another Orthodox Church (Razumkov 2021). For instance, the members of UOC-MP are more likely to agree that prayer can neutralise the coronavirus and that church attendance should be allowed during the pandemic—in contrast to different attitudes among the members of the OCU (Brik 2021). However, to this date, there is no systematic evidence of how the positions of the organised Orthodox groups were shaped during the pandemic and how local communities accepted it. This chapter aims at filling this lacuna. To this end, we have employed a mixed-methods methodology by conducting qualitative interviews with 14 priests and believers and analysing personal and institutional messages from the media, as well as official statements from churches and state representatives. We juxtapose these with quantitative survey data. The qualitative data were collected from March to May 2021 in six regions of Ukraine. We interviewed eight priests and active believers from OCU, three priests from UOC-MP, and two priests from UGCC; additionally, we had one interview with an active believer of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine.

In what follows, we discuss the results for three groups: the OCU, the UOC-MP, and the UGCC. We begin by discussing the Ukrainian religious context; then we proceed with the media and public responses of the mentioned churches; after that we review the results of the in-depth interviews; and we conclude our analysis by briefly discussing the survey data. The results and implications of our findings are discussed in the final part of the chapter.

The Ukrainian Religious Landscape

Ukraine witnessed a significant religious revival after the collapse of the USSR. As Table 1.1 shows, the number of people who identify with any religious group increased dramatically from 1992 to 2021 in all macro-regions. By macro-regions we mean 24 combined micro-regions of Ukraine (oblasts) along with 2 cities and Crimea, for more simple understanding. Moreover, churches in the period before the Russian aggression in February 2022 remained the most trusted institutions in Ukraine. The percentage of those who 'completely trust' and 'somehow trust' their church was stable; it slightly increased from 37 per cent in 1994 to 40 per cent in 2018. This is eight times higher than trust in the Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*), and five times more than trust in the president. Although most Ukrainians are only nominally religious, the number of churchgoers has also increased over time. As Table 1.2 shows, quite a few Ukrainians attend churches on religious holidays. For example, during the period 2007–2011, this number was significantly higher than the relevant numbers among Russians or Romanians. In 2011, the number of such Ukrainians equalled the number of religious Bulgarians. At the same time, the number of people who regularly attended church services beyond special religious feasts constituted about 15–17 per cent from 1994 through 2018 (Brik and Casanova 2021).

According to surveys, about 70 per cent of all religious Ukrainians define themselves as Orthodox, while about 10 per cent identify as Greek Catholics. According to the recent poll in 2021, Orthodox Ukrainians identified with the OCU (48 per cent), the UOC-MP (22 per cent), and as 'simply Orthodox without any specific affiliation' (23 per cent).[6] However, one must keep in mind that the number of people who identify with a particular church does not necessarily correlate with

Table 1.1 The percentage of respondents who identify with any religious group

	1992	*1999*	*2004*	*2018*	*2021*
Centre	57	69	83	80	84
East	33	54	82	79	82
South	36	69	82	84	82
West	89	93	94	93	92

Source: Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Science. Authors' calculations.

Table 1.2 The percentage of respondents who attended church on religious holidays

	2005	*2007*	*2009*	*2011*
Ukraine	37	32	33	41
Russia	–	19	21	23
Romania	–	21	23	–
Bulgaria	–	43	44	39

Source: European Social Survey.[23]

the number of parishes in this church. Despite lower popular support, the UOC-MP still has more registered communities (12,406 compared to 7,188 parishes of the OCU in 2021).[7] At the same time, official statistics may not reflect the actual situation on the ground. For example, in a certain region there may be many registered religious communities which in fact do not function, or which gather a few believers only on major church holidays—that is, when the priest can visit them—two to three times a year. At the same time, there are some communities that operate unofficially, which is also allowed by Ukrainian legislation. That is why we consider the official available statistics only conditionally, understanding that these data have not been updated, and especially not under the conditions of a pandemic and war, and that the situation on the ground may differ. More important for us in this study are real examples of services, their modifications, and the perception of these modifications by both ministers and believers. This is important because we focus our attention on the lockdown policies, which affected actual communities with physical places for gatherings.

There are abundant explanations in the literature for why the religious revival was so successful in Ukraine and why competing Orthodox churches could not achieve a monopoly on its religious landscape. Researchers agree that the growth of religious organisations and mass religiosity can be explained by the crucial role of religion in (1) providing spiritual and emotional support to people during the hard times of socio-economic transition after the collapse of the USSR (also called 'reassurance' and 'existential security' in sociological scholarship); (2) sustaining national identity and supplying narratives during the state-building process; (3) the historical strength of some churches before the Soviet era; and (4) the gradual increase in economic resources and political capital amassed by the churches (through donations by oligarchs and wealthy parishioners, political and foreign support) (see Brik and Casanova 2021 for a review). All these explanations are important in making sense of increases in both religiosity and church competition. While many papers address the consequences of religiosity for the social, political, and economic views of the Ukrainians (e.g., Borowik 2020; Gatskova 2014; Yelensky 2010), the possible consequences of competition between the churches have not been covered sufficiently. There is only one empirical study that shows that church competition has been a significant factor in increasing religious identities and church attendance in Ukraine from 1994 to 2012 (Brik 2019). However, whether the church's fragmentation has any influence on the developments related to the pandemic is open to debate.

Why does church fragmentation matter? We draw from the long-lasting tradition in sociology which understands such fragmentation in the terms of 'religious markets' and 'competition' (Lechner 2007; Stark and Finke 2000). Despite some shortcomings and criticism, this theory is widely accepted in scholarship, including in post-communist societies (Brik 2019, 2022; Pickel and Sammet 2012). According to this theory, churches are organisations that compete by monitoring and adapting to the preferences of laypeople. Furthermore, in the context of church competition, churches are more likely to find a match and cater their services to people with respective preferences. Finally, this theory has also developed analytical

tools to study radicalisation (Abramitzky 2008; Iannaccone 1994; Berman and Laitin 2008). Rigid religious organisations successfully filter out less zealous and committed religious members, which increases inner trust and cooperation. This secures the church's survival in the long run, despite possible drops in numbers in the short run.

All these insights help us to better understand the dynamics of Eastern Christian churches in Ukraine during the pandemic. In the following, we consider how religious leaders constructed their take on the pandemic, then we explore how local priests received the call from their leaders, and we conclude with the responses from the Ukrainian lay believers. These trends, as we have already noted above, allow us to look at general social changes that are reflected in church life, as well as changes at the intra-church level.

Data, Methodology, and Timeline

We systematically collected our media data and official statements from January 2020 till January 2021. They indicate how religious groups responded during significant religious periods, such as Orthodox Christmas and Easter. Historically, Orthodox Christianity has been particularly keen on rituals, especially pertinent to these two celebrations. The qualitative data were collected from March to May 2021 in six regions of Ukraine. As was mentioned, we interviewed eight priests and active believers from OCU, three priests from UOC-MP, and two priests from UGCC. Additionally, we had one interview with an active believer of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine. The interviews were structured along with six major themes: (1) How did the regular rituals change due to the pandemic? (2) What were the relationships between the parishes, local authorities, and police? (3) What is the church's position regarding the scientific views on public health and vaccination? (4) What are the major challenges in terms of financial resources and the church's attendance/attrition rates of believers? (5) What are the threats and opportunities for religious actors and ordinary believers? (6) How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the church structure in general? Finally, we commissioned three surveys from Gradus Research, which conducted them in April 2020 (before Orthodox Easter, $N = 1{,}176$), in December 2020 (a week before the 2021 Orthodox Christmas, $N = 1{,}831$), and in April 2021 (before Orthodox Easter, $N = 1{,}001$). The first wave (April 2020) corresponds to the most salient governmental policies and public debates in Ukraine (Brik and Obrizan 2020). A three-week nationwide quarantine was imposed on 12 March 2020. Thereafter, the Ukrainian government introduced the so-called adaptive quarantine (from July 2020 to the end of August) and weekend quarantine. All regions were divided into zones—'green', 'yellow', 'orange', and 'red'—based on several indicators, such as the number of cases in the previous 14 days per 100,000 people, and bed occupancy in hospitals. While the Easter holidays in 2020 (survey wave 1) were significantly affected by the lockdown, the Christmas holidays (survey waves 2 and 3) were not. In late 2021, the government allowed vaccinated people to use public transport and attend public places if they could present a certificate of vaccination (either printed or digital).

Official Responses to the Pandemic

Two major Orthodox churches (OCU and UOC-MP) actively communicated through mass media, social media, and meetings with political leaders. They both issued similar statements immediately after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The OCU promulgated its message on 12 March and the UOC-MP on 13 March.[8] Similarly, both statements stressed that the pandemic was a real threat and that one had to care about their health. These messages prescribed that during the lockdown, icons should be sanitised; laypeople could bow in front of icons and crosses rather than kissing them; that kissing priests' hands was not necessary; and that moving icons from one place to another was not advisable. Both churches repeated these messages later when they held their Holy Synods.[9] Another similarity was that both the OCU and the UOC-MP approved and then published on their websites special prayers to contain COVID-19. Furthermore, both churches offered to bless paschal food in groceries before Easter, so that people would not have to bring this food to churches for blessing.[10] Notably, both churches acknowledged that faith was essential for individuals and the nation to survive the crisis.

At the same time, there were also striking differences between their responses. While both churches acknowledged that the virus was real and some measures must be taken, only the OCU mandated that the Holy Communion be distributed from plastic cups. Moreover, the OCU's Synod used the language of 'social distancing', mentioned the protocol of having no more than ten persons in a church, and forbade mass gatherings in front of church buildings. Even more, the OCU sent a clear message that religious rituals could be executed individually at homes instead of the churches. The OCU repeatedly stated that it was communicating with both national and local authorities and complying with the national healthcare protocols to keep the churches' doors open as much as possible.

In sharp contrast, the UOC-MP, at its Holy Synod's sessions, did not refer to the pandemic as a unique or central problem. These sessions were focused on other issues, including international affairs (in Jordan and Montenegro), the 400th anniversary of the restoration of the Orthodox hierarchy in Ukraine (in 1620, after the Union of Brest in 1596, which created the Greek Catholic Church), and even the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War. The pandemic was mentioned as only one of many issues that the church was facing. The UOC-MP did not promulgate an official statement on social distancing and staying at home. Instead, it published a 'commentary' by the head of the Synodal department on health issues, who warned that governmental health protocols were not to be ignored. This commentary can be perceived as a personal position rather than the church's official standpoint. The UOC-MP's website often publishes the personal opinions of hierarchs and clergy instead of providing coherent and official statements. Such opinions were often approving of physical gatherings and stressed the importance of rituals: (1) people should attend church in times of crisis (statement by the abbess of the Odesa Monastery Serafima Shevchyk);[11] (2) people cannot be discouraged from visiting churches (statement by Metropolitan Nikodym of Zhytomyr);[12] (3)

the Eucharist is not just another social gathering but a specific spiritual experience that should not be banned by the state (statement by Metropolitan Mitrofan of Luhansk);[13] and (4) only undoubtedly sick people should stay at home, while all others can participate in outdoor gatherings (statements by Metropolitan Antoniy of Boryspil[14] and the primate of the UOC-MP Metropolitan Onufriy).[15] While the OCU cancelled public gatherings and signalled its compliance with the state policies, the UOC-MP's website published several calls for religious processions in large cities[16] and systematically challenged local and national authorities.[17] The UOC-MP not only challenged the state policies, but also competed with the state in providing goods for those in need. The UOC-MP systematically (and more often than other churches) published statements advertising its aid to the homeless, how it supplied hospitals with ventilators and masks, how it offered housing to doctors, purchased tests, and created special hotlines for people who might need help.[18]

The position of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was made clear from the very beginning of the pandemic. This church stressed the importance of health protocols, including social distancing, sanitation, and mask-wearing.[19] The UGCC announced that it would fully comply with the state's regulations.[20] This church was among the first to stress the importance of vaccination.[21] It is noteworthy that the Greek Catholic Church, similarly to other churches we discussed, stressed that it was crucial to keep churches open. As long as social distancing was maintained, the churches were safe and should be opened for religious gatherings, even if for only a limited number of people. [22]

Summing up, all major Eastern Christian churches in Ukraine officially acknowledged the dangers of coronavirus and followed the quarantine measures, while insisting that the churches' doors must remain open. The difference was in commitment, style, and balance between religious and scientistic motivations. The UOC-MP constantly challenged the state and insisted on the necessity of public gatherings. It appealed to religious motivations more than to the scientific ones. The OCU fully complied with and embraced the state policies (expecting in this way to avoid strict quarantine). This church argued that it was essential to combine the religious motivation of the church with the scientific motivation promoted by the state. The Greek Catholics went even further in appropriating scientific argumentation and referring to it as a part of the church's narrative. At the same time, the Greek Catholic Church insisted that social distancing would be enough and politely asked the state to lift the rule of having no more than ten people in a church.

How Did Parishes Respond? Moving from the Official Position to Local Interpretations and Behaviours

The OCU priests took significant initiative in adjusting the rituals to make them safer for people on an official level. This is evidence of the readiness of the ministers for grassroots democracy and initiative. However, these initiatives were not always approved by the church hierarchy. Still, it could differ on the ground depending on the personality of the leading priest. For instance, those serving in a military hospital quickly adopted the norm of giving Holy Communion into recipients' hands

and not by spoon to mouth. They justified such a practice by claiming that this was an old tradition that existed in Orthodox Christianity before the current practices. Indeed, as liturgical studies have demonstrated (Taft 1996), the original Christian practice of distributing communion was into hands and not to mouth through a spoon. Only by the seventh century did this tradition gradually begin to change in some regions towards the East and West of the Eastern Roman Empire, where communion started to be given by spoon. In the ninth century, such practice was evidenced in Byzantium, and in the eleventh century it became common there. The transition from one practice to another did not have strong theological reasons; it was rather a matter of convenience.

Another respondent said that this was a Catholic practice but he did not see any issue in adopting it. Respondents also mentioned that giving the Holy Communion into hands makes the clergy 'closer to people'. 'A person is worthy of being given the sacrament into the hands', said one of the OCU respondents. The question of the Eucharist being distributed using a spoon or directly into hands has become a cross-cutting and certain trigger for some believers and priests, which we see throughout the study and in every conversation. For a certain circle of priests, this was perceived quite logically and did not raise questions as an ancient practice of the church. 'A part of the clergy is horrified to think about returning to the spoon', one of the respondents claimed. For others, it was a certain allusion to Catholic practices, which were considered alien. At the same time, some believers showed considerable conservatism, refusing to receive communion into their hands, because the spoon had become a symbol of stability for them and was considered a mandatory element of communion. Not all priests could explain the difference and why this kind of Eucharist was now safer. This process was also not helped by the detached reaction of the hierarchs, who delegated all the responsibilities to the local priests and did not provide direct recommendations, except 'not to violate the norms of the law'.

The OCU priests, in contrast to other churches, mentioned a lot of changes in their daily habits: new online Bible readings, online donations (through e-banking), daily sanitation, changing the schedule of liturgies to accommodate people in smaller but more frequent groups, praying for doctors and sick people, and so forth. Most importantly, the OCU priests did not feel that they were forced to change their practices by their leadership. Instead, they argued that their leaders acted reasonably and clearly communicated that the virus constituted a severe threat. Although such a supposedly democratic reaction of the OCU hierarchs may have indicated their readiness to accept and nurture a grassroots initiative, this issue is not so clear-cut. So, unlike the UOC-MP, the leadership of the OCU indeed reacted more flexibly and gave priests the opportunity to make their own decisions. In practice, according to the respondents, almost all ministers were confused and, on the contrary, were waiting for at least some instructions. Precise solutions and innovations were proposed by those priests who had a sufficient level of theological education and training, and therefore quickly remembered ancient church practices, explained them to people, and implemented them in everyday liturgies. Others had to find their own solutions, seek advice and support, or give up the

service for a certain time, or at least conduct it behind closed doors, so as not to put the parish at risk. Therefore, if some believers wanted to believe in a more democratic structure of the OCU, this partially met their demand, but it was also dictated by the fact that the mechanisms for responding to external crises had not yet been worked out, and therefore priests were left alone with problems and had to come up with their own solutions. On the one hand, this gave them a chance to show individual responsibility, but on the other hand, it did not support them in any way and exposed them to risk.

Considering the relationship with local authorities, the OCU respondents reported that it was smooth. The liturgies were not interrupted, because they followed the protocols (police often monitored the churches). At the same time, priests acknowledged some significant challenges, such as the online liturgy being an artificial substitute for actual liturgy, and the fact that many parishioners stopped attending services. Furthermore, they stressed that the pandemic was a significant challenge for the church due to uncertainty and dramatic losses among less loyal community members. They also acknowledged that the pandemic exacerbated the trend rather than created it. The decline in church attendance was observed before the pandemic, although at a slower pace. It is noteworthy that the OCU priests reported several instances when their congregation members entered the church but then left when they were not satisfied with the safety protocols (e.g., they did not see everyone wearing masks or the church was too crowded). Another important change to the priests of OCU during pandemic was that they did not feel enough support from their colleagues and official representatives, as if they were almost left alone with the problem. As we have already noted above, many ministers relied on direct and simple instructions from the church leadership, such as in the case of mass gatherings, holding the Eucharist or liturgy, funerals, and other occasions. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, it was completely unclear how to respond to calls if one of the parishioners came to serve the sick; how to visit those who were sick with coronavirus while protecting oneself, protecting one's family, and at the same time fulfilling one's duties as a minister; and how to change the sacraments of weddings, funerals, and baptisms in order to act within the framework of the law and not provoke a surge of disease in the community. Some priests of the OCU shared in an interview that they proposed to the regional leaders to convene an urgent meeting in order to make joint decisions and act uniformly, but this never happened. Therefore, against the background of the general recommendation of church leaders to act within the framework of the law, each parish adopted its own rules and changed them in order not to be exposed to danger. This caused a lot of dissatisfaction and discussions among the believers, who could now choose a priest who still gave communion from a spoon, was willing to conduct a funeral at home or not, allowed more people to be in the church, and so on. The challenge of the pandemic could teach church structures that it was worth discussing joint solutions, giving some joint instructions, and being ready to listen to ordinary ministers on the ground, who often offered creative solutions that not only reduced the risks of infection, but also returned the church to its traditions and brought the believers together among themselves.

The Greek Catholic priests provided similar answers. At the same time, it was in this church that the hierarchs gave clear instructions that were used in churches in different regions, in both cities and villages. This did not eliminate the problem that certain ministers still wanted to follow their own way, but it made it possible to refer to direct church documents and removed the level of tension for the parishioners. However, when the Greek Catholic priests talked about using new digital tools, they were more positive than the OCU priests. As they said, online communication was indeed a challenge, but it had a clear silver lining, since people who had avoided the masses before received new convenient digital tools to participate in the religious lives of their communities. Moreover, local priests said that in 2020 they arranged the blessing of food with door-to-door delivery in food baskets. Their congregations liked this a lot and suggested keeping this convenient practice. Considering liturgical customs, they did not distribute Holy Communion into hands but used sanitised spoons. While most social distancing rules were followed, there was an exception regarding confession. Still, there were some personal cases when not all priests followed recommendations. Yet, they were the most disciplined ones.

The UOC-MP priests reported a mixed picture. On the one hand, similarly to the Greek Catholics, they acknowledged that digital tools facilitated communication and kept the congregation together. For example, they often used WhatsApp, which is one of the most popular messengers in Ukraine. Also, similarly to the OCU, the UOC-MP priests we interviewed appealed to the historical tradition of giving Holy Communion into hands (by explaining that 'this was common in the 1930s' or 'it was common in the time of concentration camps'). Conditions of service in cathedrals or churches in a big city differ from small parishes in villages and small territorial communities. For example, in a big city, the number of parishioners is much larger, but not all of them know each other and there may be more people who just came to see or listen to the priest. Therefore, in the presence of clear rules in the conditions of large groups of people, ministers protected themselves from possible violations and removed unnecessary questions from the church community. One priest explained:

> The church leadership said that you can spend Easter 2020 as you wish—it will be the decisions of the priests personally and their responsibility to the local authorities, which should be taken into account. Then I decided to do a closed service, for up to ten people, and let others come and celebrate the Passover one by one. A police car was around the corner. They made sure that there was no service, they tried to turn off the lights—but they did not interfere. In the year of local elections, I tried not to provoke and to be neutral.

On the other hand, in small towns and villages, the members of the parishes mostly know each other, both in the church and in ordinary life. Here it was much easier to track whether someone was sick or had infected the neighbours, to discuss what was happening in the neighbouring churches and how they themselves would like

to participate in spiritual life under the conditions of the pandemic. This created an additional burden for the local priest, who had to respond more to the social requests of the congregation, as well as to prevent local conflicts or contagion of parishioners due to small groups of people and the rapid spread of information. On the other hand, in sharp contrast to other religious groups, the respondents reported a significant miscommunication with their leadership. The UOC-MP priests claimed that their leaders insisted on keeping the regular way of distributing Holy Communion by spoon, because they feared making any changes. They also claimed that the church's leadership perceived its members as conservatives that would not appreciate the change. The UOC-MP priests complained that they felt discriminated against by local authorities and governmental policies—in contrast to the OCU priests. Even further, one of the respondents reported that they were forced to use state contractors to film and broadcast their liturgies.

Interestingly, one respondent from the Ecumenical Patriarchate faced a unique challenge. Since they represented the supranational entity, they had to obey the rules of Constantinople, which were stricter than the rules of the local Ukrainian churches. In the end, they had to 'compromise' and implement some of the local safety protocols regardless of what their church told them to do. In a way, this international church adjusted to the local standards, showing how Orthodox Christianity can be flexible depending on the local context. Furthermore, these respondents evaluated the actions and inactions of other churches. From their perspective, the UOC-MP was keen on rituals that they carefully nurtured and preserved, making them the pillar of their faith. For them, changing the rituals might trigger changes in how people viewed the church and weaken their faith. This view corresponds to what we heard from the UOC-MP priests.

To summarise, all respondents from all religious groups acknowledged that the pandemic was an existential threat for churches. As a UOC-MP priest added,

> The lesson of the pandemic is to give priests the opportunity to rethink the role of the liturgy, to be able to review tradition and experience in order to apply them effectively. The pandemic teaches the family concept of the church and the church as a community. And all trials should be crowned with our spiritual growth.

This was a general trend that could be observed in almost all parishes, regardless of their geographical location or size. Importantly, the pandemic became a global crisis that affected basic everyday practices at the level of even a rural parish. Due to the loss of a certain number of parishioners, due to the competition between ministers who used different ways to change the sacraments under the conditions of the pandemic, each minister faced the challenge: What do we perceive as the church and its community? What should keep people together besides rituals like the Sunday liturgy? How can we increase the level of spiritual awareness and practices under the conditions of remote contact? How can we bring people back to the church by using the latest technology? Why should the church as a special place be attractive to young people? All these questions were and remain even more

relevant for all priests, regardless of the jurisdiction and their scope of service. Our respondent from the Ecumenical Patriarchate helped to summarise those findings in the following quote:

> The reaction to the challenges of modernity is a chance to find internal dynamism and search for new and old forms. There is a problem of fear of the other—a challenge that the church has lived with until now and a new reality when it was under the lockdown—it is important to ask, and why did this happen? Will a closed space be able to become a space of love not only for neighbours, but also for everyone? It is necessary to look into forms where the main thing is an existential meeting and the search for a new quality of relationships.

Ministers complained about the threat stemming from the diminished church attendance and about making the churches scapegoats for public health failures (such as 'the church-goers as super spreaders', 'religious people as covid dissidents', etc.). More importantly, they envisaged the main challenge in how to find new and deep meaning in the rituals that were being executed online or individually, and not through shared collective religious experiences. While these perceived threats were common for all groups, some churches reported unique challenges. For instance, for the OCU, the challenge was that its people were less attached to this church because many of them considered their religiosity to be a part of their national identity that did not incite them to religious practices. This made them reduce their visits to the church. 'Both the clergy and the laity showed their true selves—who is with the Kyiv church and who is with the Moscow church', an OCU priest said. This is another sign of the rising latent polarisation. Pandemic services, thus, were used to draw another line of division. In contrast, the issue for the UOC-MP stemmed from the opposite situation—because their flocks were more devoted to the traditional rituals, they tended to ignore the anti-pandemic measures. Regardless of church dynamics, the pandemic opened up latent problems in every confession. 'Thanks to the pandemic, we saw what works in our church, what doesn't, and it's time for all of us to think about communication with the parish', a UGCC respondent said after one year of service during the pandemic.

In one interview, a priest reflected:

> Quasi-church positions and polarities have arisen among believers. On the one hand, we comply with all the requirements. On the other hand, we perceive restrictions as heresy. Around us there is migration due to practices in parishes. The attitude towards the pandemic became a factor of belonging to 'one's own'.

In general, the pandemic, like any crisis, and even more so given its global nature, exposed the existing challenges and problems of the church environment. Thus, in addition to the search for one's own and others, and the strengthening of national identity, especially in the case of the parishioners of the OCU, another important

problem was revealed: the insufficient external communication of churches with the congregation and society in general. As one of the respondents from UOC-MP noted,

> The problem is that the priests do not speak! This is not even a liturgical revival, but elementary education. Revival for both priests and believers. There were even such wild practices when the priest did not receive communion at the end of the liturgy.

And here the question arises not only about the formal theological education, which is often lacking or takes place through a brief course. The problem lies deeper and at different levels: the priest's communication with the parishioners; the interpretation of church practices and their meaning, and the true value of spiritual life; the meaning of the church as a community; communication between the priests themselves, who often do not trust each other or compete even within a diocese of the same jurisdiction; and the lack of transparent communication mechanisms between church hierarchs (bishops and heads of churches) with ministers on the ground and at the regional level, when most challenges or public troubles could be avoided if all this was discussed in advance and not left to the personal discretion of the priest. It is important for us to emphasise that this study is important not only from the point of view of describing how practices and the church situation changed during the pandemic, but also what kinds of challenges, problems, or topical issues this crisis has revealed and what are the possibilities for their solution in the Orthodox tradition.

It should be noted that all respondents from all religious groups acknowledged that they monitor and follow the policies of their churches: (1) the Greek Catholic priests were told to keep door-to-door deliveries, as they were more convenient; (2) the UOC-MP priests were told otherwise, because their leadership did not want to initiate any changes, as they were afraid to put their conservative followers under stress; (3) the OCU priests saw people leaving the churches when they did not observe all sanitation norms; (4) the Ecumenical Patriarchate had to balance between the strict rules of their church and safety expectations from their local flock.

Mass Attitudes and Behaviour

While this chapter harvests from the official church responses and sociological interviews in parishes, we also explore several online polls conducted in the large Ukrainian cities during 2020 and 2021. In line with the divisions between the OCU and the UOC-MP, which we observed in their official statements, poll respondents varied in their support of religious activities depending on their affiliation. For instance, the polling data (wave 1) show that the UOC-MP believers were less supportive of online services when compared with the OCU believers (mean answers of 6.2 on a 10-point scale versus 8.7, respectively). Moreover, when answering the question 'which rituals should be banned during the pandemic?', UOC-MP

believers showed lower rates of disapproval of church attendance, shared spoon communion, and religious processions than the OCU believers (60 per cent vs. 88 per cent; 74 per cent vs. 92 per cent vs. 74 per cent; and 61 per cent vs. 76 per cent, respectively). These quantitative data are in line with the official positions of the respective churches and our in-depth interviews of priests.

Furthermore, our data detected that churchgoing, praying at home, and religious identifications increased at the beginning of the pandemic (wave 1) and then dropped during the consequent waves. We observed that frequent church attendance declined from 21 per cent in wave 1 to 17 per cent in wave 3, and frequent praying declined from 50 per cent in wave 1 to 43 per cent in wave 3. We also observed that the shares of atheists increased from 8 per cent in wave 1 to 23 per cent in wave 3. These numbers also correspond to what we learned from the qualitative interviews. While people reacted stressfully during the first wave of the pandemic and attended/prayed more often (which corresponded to the Easter celebrations and the first lockdown in 2020), more people calmed down and became less zealous over time. Our qualitative interviews also registered that more people adjusted to the new reality and that church attendance dropped.

Conclusions

The Ukrainian religious landscape is highly fragmented. There are no regions with a religious monopoly, and the official attitudes of the churches towards politics and social issues have often been different. In this chapter, we have investigated to what extent this context of the church fragmentation has shaped the reaction of religious groups to the pandemic. Drawing from the media and official statements, in-depth interviews, and survey analysis, we have shown that, indeed, this context matters a lot.

The challenges of the pandemic exposed the internal problems of churches and the Orthodox environment, particularly in Ukraine. They found a number of important consequences that concern not only ministers and parishioners, but also the whole society. The pandemic has demonstrated lines of polarisation and conflict that have manifested themselves at various levels: between parishioners of different churches and jurisdictions; a crisis of insufficient communication and coordination, as well as trust between Orthodox priests within the same church; lack of communication, understanding, and clarification regarding the service from the hierarchs to the ministers; as well as the detachment of the church leadership from the realities on the ground. The pandemic affected both existential and everyday aspects, such as the economic standard of living of priests, who were forced to independently find additional sources of income in order to cover at least communal services for the temple, not to mention their own comfort. The new crisis made them think about the main role and mission of the church, its understanding as a community of people, not a building, and also transformed the perception of the sacraments and the use of the latest technologies, which, on the one hand, increased the opportunities for the participation of those parishioners who could not be physically present in the church, and on the other hand, significantly reduced

the motivation to participate directly in the liturgy. At the same time, the new challenges of service gave birth to new creative forms, a partial return to ancient forms of service, such as in communion, as well as various formats of communication (reading the Bible online, individual meetings, collection of donations and charitable assistance, etc.).

On paper, the Greek Catholic Church and all Orthodox churches have acknowledged the threat of the coronavirus, yet they all insisted on keeping their doors open. They all had to pay the price—by changing some traditional rituals (such as the ways of distributing Holy Communion, scheduling liturgies, online services, etc.). While they all acknowledged the importance of such changes on paper, their official reactions varied significantly. The leaders of the UGCC tried to respond to the challenges of the pandemic in a collective and structured manner immediately after it began, distributing instructions for ministers. However, this did not protect them from individual conflicts in places where each priest served as he saw fit and could organise mass events that greatly increased the risk of illness for parishioners (such as the procession of the cross). The variability of practices in the sacraments, especially in the funeral rite, gave rise to a hidden competition between priests, where people chose the minister whose style of behaviour during the pandemic seemed to be closer to them. Also, one of the sacraments, confession, remained offline only due to one of the five conditions of a good confession as repentance for one's sins, which can only be established in direct contact with a priest. Certain questions within the church remained unanswered, but in general their public response and rapid communication work looked much more structured to an outside audience.

The reaction and perception of the pandemic by the UOC-MP even gave birth to a new term: 'COVID-dissidents'. Their initial refusal to recognise the pandemic, their prayers for healing, the mass illness of priests, and hierarchs led not only to public scandals and active attacks in the media, but also to open confrontations with the police and the state. The dilemma sounded like this: on the one hand, there was a threat to life, and on the other, there was the use of the social technology of pressure, since the priesthood was ordered to obey the demands of the state. Pilgrimage activities were severely affected, and there were no mass events. It was not possible to agree on providing charity jointly with other denominations, so the UOC-MP relied on secular partners. Most notably, the UOC-MP constantly challenged the state and insisted on the necessity of public gatherings. The first wave of the pandemic was full of fear; people were urged to stay at home, while priests continued to serve. The attitude towards the liturgy changed—it became closer and more conscious. As our respondents noted, priests should have understood that a large church and a large choir were not needed for the service. However, all of the local priests we interviewed faced similar problems regardless of their affiliation. Their resources and congregations shrank, while loyal community members were not always happy about the quality of religious services. Moreover, they all received new and sometimes unexpected reactions from their communities. According to our respondents from the UOC-MP, everything was democratic in the decision making—each priest decided for himself how to administer the sacraments, but it

was necessary to negotiate with the parishioners. Not everyone accepted the innovation, and the communion lost its value for them.

In the case of the OCU, as a result of the pandemic, activity and participation in the church life of families with children, which is the basis of the working population of the country, significantly decreased. Processes to reduce church attendance continued, as did the marginalisation of those who go to churches—the pandemic accelerated this process. Some parishioners refused to visit the church if they saw that the priest did not comply with safety requirements. Not everyone in such cases looked for another church, and sometimes simply lost access to collective spiritual practices. After the first wave of lockdown, many relaxed and stopped following the previous norms. After that, for the second closure, the clergy had to negotiate with the authorities in order to continue the service. Along with the exodus of old parishioners, the pandemic brought to the church a new, younger generation who were looking for certain existential answers and were ready to join in the case of a charismatic parish leader. Also, the pandemic contributed to the development of renewed spiritual practices, such as general confession, communion given into the hands and not from a spoon, other formats of weddings, funerals, and baptisms, and special prayers. Internal church challenges turned out to be insufficient communication between hierarchs and priests, as well as a lack of trust and communication between the religious leaders themselves in the horizontal dimension. According to UOC-MP respondents, the behaviour of local and state authorities was destructive in their attempts to ban religious services or close churches to visitors. Although the main reactions depended on the personal factor and relations with local representatives of the police and authorities, nevertheless, the general behaviour of church leaders at the beginning of the pandemic did not promote trust. Thus, priests could serve under the close supervision of law enforcement agencies, under constant surveillance and inspection, as well as under the threat of a significant financial fine or public accusation.

In the case of the representation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine, we were able to talk to only one parishioner of St. Andrew's Church, which in Kyiv was officially transferred to this jurisdiction. This church's centre in Istanbul showed enough flexibility and allowed services to continue in the format which was considered necessary—although in general, after the official announcement of the pandemic by the WHO, Patriarch Bartholomew issued an order to close churches until the situation improved.

One of our respondents emphasised:

> The lesson of the pandemic is to give priests the opportunity to rethink the role of the liturgy, to be able to review tradition and experience in order to apply them effectively. The pandemic teaches the family concept of the church and the church as a community. And all trials should be crowned with our spiritual growth.

The UOC-MP had to adjust to very conservative members who did not want changes. The OCU had to satisfy more liberal members who expected masks

and sanitation. And the Greek Catholics had to keep up with technologically savvy and demanding congregations. In all cases, many adjustments happened. Our surveys show that pre-existing fragmentation was exacerbated. Respondents who identified with the UOC-MP and the OCU differed in how they perceived religious rituals—in line with the official standpoint of their respective churches. The challenges of the pandemic have once again revealed an identity discrepancy in the Orthodox environment of Ukraine, where the national can exceed the religious. That is, belonging to the Orthodox Church as a reflection of the national identity of a Ukrainian turns out to be the primary motivation for religious affiliation. This leads to the fact that, as soon as the conditions for regular service changed, part of the parishioners stopped participating in spiritual gatherings, because they considered belonging to the church more important than practical faith and religious practices. This particularly applies to both public and hidden forms of confrontation between the UOC-MP and the OCU. In the former case, there are parishes with an indisputably strong spiritual community, while in the latter case, the church reflects the more mass aspirations of Orthodox Ukrainians for independence and political choice from the point of view of citizenship. Thus, the pandemic became another reason to divide the church environment into 'progressive' and 'conservative' representatives of the church and to continue campaigning against the opponent. The previous lines of polarisation only intensified, including due to the national question, as well as relying on different explanations of the events happening all around.

Another common challenge faced by all churches is the lack of discussion and understanding of ancient practices, which are not only known, but also actively applied under various social challenges. The question of the Eucharist, whether it should be distributed through spoons or into hands, became the most critical, not only because of hygiene standards, but also because of the possibility of a more democratic style of service. Yes, more conservative circles of priests were categorically against such a return to the ancient tradition, because they felt it made the parishioners 'too close' to the sacrament and ostensibly diminished its sanctity. This reflects not only the peculiarities of theological education, but also the unpreparedness of a certain category of ministers for more democratic processes in the Orthodox environment and the involvement of parishioners in the service or their perception on a different level. Therefore, the discussion and application of ancient church practices are not only lost opportunities for resolving challenges, but also indicative of questions regarding the participation of parishioners, democratisation, and communication within the religious structure.

In most cases, at the institutional level, we observed a transfer of the responsibility of the church leadership to the personal responsibility and awareness of the priest. Therefore, each priest had to find out on his own what could be changed, what the conditions for service from the local self-government and the police could be, and how seriously they should be taken, and how to ensure a minimal level of security and conduct explanatory work among parishioners. All of these dilemmas and challenges were mostly overcome by the ministers on their own instead of being able to discuss them with the church leadership and understand how exactly

to organise the spiritual life of the community further. It was also accompanied by special attention from the power structures and the police specifically to religious organisations, even against the background of possible other mass gatherings or institutions that continued to operate. This not only created additional problems for the priests themselves, but also gave rise to a series of media reports with a generalised negative attitude towards any religious institution during the pandemic.

The crisis gave rise to creative responses, examples of which are given above. However, the conditions for their successful application should be not only the personal readiness and education of the religious leader, but also the readiness of the parishioners to accept something new, and the church hierarchy in the form of sufficient flexibility to allow the initiative to be manifested and rooted from below. Thus, efforts to propose new forms often ended not only with an outflow or criticism from the parishioners, but also with their direct influence and demand to carry out the ministry exactly as they saw fit. Instead, the priest himself remained alone with the colossal responsibility for the health and safety of the congregation, as well as civic responsibility and the search for optimal solutions for various situations.

Finally, the pandemic has shed light on certain problems that are present both at the level of society and in the churches themselves. It has highlighted the differences between different religious organisations and created a space for rethinking the role and embodiment of spiritual life within churches. The new crisis showed polarisation in the church life of Ukraine, especially between the UOC-MP and the OCU, creating an opportunity for yet another condemnation of the other side in the conflict. The pandemic has actualised the need for effective communication both among ministers and with parishioners who want interpretations and live participation in spiritual life instead of formalities. The period of the coronavirus, starting in March 2020, has created a space for new opportunities, plunging religious leaders into thinking about the mission and role of the church in society in general, as well as its appeal.

Notes

1 Public video by Pope Francis and six Cardinals and Archbishops from the United States and Latin America can be accessed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5rwTnJF0U.
2 www.rferl.org/a/moldova-s-orthodox-church-lashes-out-at-anti-christ-plot-to-develop-virus-vaccine/30624250.html.
3 See some reactions at www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31409624.html, www.facebook.com/Orthodox.in.Ukraine/posts/3766046973471416/, and www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Oplb2wOLg.
4 www.radiosvoboda.org/a/velykden-koronavirus-krainy-pravoslavni/30561847.html.
5 www.radiosvoboda.org/a/koronavirus-i-cerkva/30493768.html.
6 Релігійна самоідентифікація населення і ставлення до основних церков України: червень 2021. http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1052&page=1.
7 https://dess.gov.ua/statistics-2020/.
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2 Orthodox Churches and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania and Bulgaria

Lucian N. Leustean

Introduction

In November 2021, *The Guardian* published an article with an unsettling title: 'Morgues fill up in Romania and Bulgaria amid low Covid vaccine uptake'.[1] The article pointed out that the two countries had the European Union's (EU) 'highest daily death rates from Covid-19, after superstition, misinformation and entrenched mistrust in governments and institutions combined to leave them the least vaccinated countries in the bloc'. The extent of the death rate in Romania was presented by Cătălin Florin Cîrstoiu, a doctor and manager of the Bucharest University Emergency Hospital, who commented: 'A village is vanishing every day'.[2] Bulgaria faced a similar situation. In *The Guardian*'s analysis, what brought Romania and Bulgaria together was not only the fact that they were two predominantly Eastern Orthodox countries, but also that they had the lowest vaccination rates in the European Union: 34.5 per cent of Romania's population received two jabs, while in Bulgaria, the figure was even lower at 23.04 per cent of the population. The figures in these two Eastern Orthodox countries contrasted with those of Western Catholic Spain, Malta, and Portugal, in which over 80 per cent of the population was vaccinated.

How have Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria, as institutional communities, perceived the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways have Orthodox churches in these countries responded to national state mobilisation in observing strict health measures and national vaccination programmes? To what extent have the vaccination rates in Romania and Bulgaria been influenced by the discourse of political leaders, Orthodox hierarchy, lower clergy, and lay intellectuals? This chapter investigates the interplay between religious and state authorities from January 2020, when the World Health Organization announced that a novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan City, Hubei, China, until February 2022, at the end of the fourth COVID-19 wave, when European countries began to lift pandemic restrictions. The chapter examines the social mobilisation of religious actors and state bodies, legislation frameworks, and public statements, drawing on ethnographic data collected on a research trip to Romania in September 2021. The analysis is divided into three sections: an overview of religious responses in Romania and Bulgaria; an examination of case studies, with an emphasis on the key religious and political actors; and a comparative section concluding the investigation, identifying common patterns of religious mobilisation. The section on Romania includes the wider

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narrative of religious and health mobilisation in Europe and around the world. The section on Bulgaria focuses on key events in the country without repeating the same key dates on pandemic waves mentioned in the previous section.

Romania: The Ambivalence of the Orthodox Church

The 2011 census noted a population of 20,121,641 people, divided according to the following religious backgrounds: Eastern Orthodoxy (81.04 per cent), the Catholic Church (4.33 per cent), the Greek-Catholic Church (3.3 per cent), Calvinist (2.99 per cent), and Pentecostal denominations (1.80 per cent). The Muslim population numbered around 64,000, while the Jewish community 3,519 in 2011. A relatively small number of people declared themselves atheists (21,000), while around 19,000 people stated that they did not follow any religion. Romania stands out in the Eastern Orthodox world as the country with one of the highest percentages of population trust in the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC), the largest religious confession in the country.

After joining the European Union in 2007, many Romanians migrated to Western Europe, with figures ranging from two to three million in Italy and Spain and large communities in Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. A comparison with the religious situation at the end of the Cold War shows that the Orthodox Church has constantly witnessed an increase in the number of its congregations, while the number of practising faithful has been declining. In 2014, the church counted 14,513 priests and deacons servicing 15,218 places of worship, and 637 monasteries and sketes with over 8,000 monks and nuns—a contrast to around 8,000 priests in 1989. In 2008, the Orthodox Church began a programme of cooperation with the government to work in joint social projects, including medical and spiritual assistance. Over the last two decades, clergymen were allowed to enter politics at local and national levels, and since 2008, church hierarchy, including lower-ranking clergy, has been exempted from verification of their communist past and previous collaboration with the security services, the *Securitate*. The engagement of the church in political disputes has benefited nationalistic parties, such as the Greater Romania Party and the New Generation—Christian Democrat Party, which have made constant references to Orthodox values. However, with the exception of the leader of the far-right Greater Romania Party, which reached the runoff phase of the presidential elections in 2000, both parties have gradually lost support among the electorate: the Greater Romania Party scored 1.47 per cent in 2012, while the New Generation—Christian Democrat Party—scored 2.2 per cent in 2004.[3]

Orthodoxy and the 2020 Electoral Year: 'No Matter How Many Hospitals We Have, if We Do Not Have the Resurrected Jesus Christ, We Cannot Escape from this Great World Crisis'

The pandemic started in an electoral year. In November 2019, the National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*) appointed its prime minister, Ludovic Orban, to lead a minority government, and secured the re-election of President Klaus

Iohannis, a pro-EU and reformist politician. The liberals aimed to replace the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*) as the largest in the Parliament in the national elections planned for June 2020. The start of the pandemic in winter 2020 delayed the electoral process until autumn. Local elections were held on 27 November 2020 and legislative elections on 6 December 2020. The turnout was the lowest since 1989, with only 32 per cent of the population voting. Despite holding power, the liberals came in second. The distribution of popular votes among the main parties were as follows: the Social Democratic Party came first (29.32 per cent of the vote), followed by the National Liberal Party (25.58 per cent) and the Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*) (USR PLUS) (15.86 per cent), while the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*) reached 5.89 per cent.

The elections saw the emergence of a new right-wing political party which was set up only five months before the start of the pandemic: the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR), which gained 9.17 per cent of the vote (541,935 people), enabling it to reach 14 seats in the Senate and 33 in the Chamber of Deputies. The AUR was registered as a political party in September 2019, on an initial platform of promoting the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. The meteoric rise of the new party was due to a combination of factors, including the absence of the right-wing Greater Romania Party from the Parliament since 2012, the strict health restrictions imposed by the government in tackling the pandemic, and the religious card employed by the party's political leadership.

After underperforming in the legislative elections, Prime Minister Orban resigned. On 23 December 2020, Florin Cîțu from the National Liberal Party took over as the prime minister in a coalition which involved the Save Romania Union and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania. In September 2021, after the Save Romania Union decided to leave the government and following internal clashes in the Liberal Party, in November 2021, Cîțu was replaced by Nicolae Ciucă, a retired general and former Minister of Defence.

The ups and downs of the political scene and the rise of right-wing politics have been intertwined with the response of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the pandemic at local and national levels. As was evident throughout 2020 and 2021, the ambiguous position of the church leadership with regard to the most appropriate ways of responding to the pandemic, the challenge of political decision, the lack of national mobilisation to involve Orthodox parishes, and the pressure from monastic communities towards what was perceived as state interference in religious life were key in understanding the low numbers of vaccinated people.

As an EU member, Romania followed closely the international monitoring of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 21 January 2020, the Romanian government introduced restrictions on people arriving from contaminated regions. At first, the RomOC's response was similar to that in neighbouring Orthodox countries, namely a national debate on the use of liturgical tools in administering the sacraments. The most significant controversy was the use of the spoon in receiving the sacrament of the Holy Communion, seen in theological terms as the transfigured

bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In the Orthodox liturgy, the faithful receive the bread and wine with a single spoon from a chalice, with the priest offering them to each individual. This practice is different from the Catholic ceremonial, where the priest hands the unleavened bread to worshippers without the use of a spoon or a chalice. Health authorities regarded the use of the same spoon in administering the Holy Communion as a prime factor in the transmission of COVID-19. The church debated the best practice for offering the sacrament while remaining faithful to the theological understanding of transubstantiation. If the body and blood of Christ were of a divine nature, it was argued, they could not carry a deadly virus and infect the faithful. Faced with adopting a stance which would mediate between medical and theological views, on 28 February 2020, the church hierarchy confirmed that the faithful 'may exceptionally ask the priest to use their own spoon' in the Holy Communion.[4] The change of practice faced criticism from those in monastic circles, who feared that it would alter the Orthodox doctrine. In the subsequent months, the Holy Communion debate continued and gradually led to resistance towards what was seen as interference from secular powers.

In response to the pandemic, the Romanian government issued the Military Ordinance no. 1 of 17 March 2020 and the Military Ordinance no. 2 of 21 March 2020, which restricted the movement of people and sent the whole country into lockdown.[5] On 22 March, the Holy Synod of the RomOC issued further instructions clarifying the church's position. Orthodox services continued to be performed, but without the physical presence of the faithful; they were transmitted via online networks and, at the national level, by the church's channels, Trinitas TV and Radio Trinitas. The faithful were encouraged to arrange a religious space for prayers inside private homes and to refrain from travelling to their nearby churches. The priests were allowed to travel to administer Holy Communion or Holy Confession only after following travel regulations instituted by the local authorities. All faithful were encouraged not to leave their homes except in an emergency. The church was able to perform only three sacraments in person inside church buildings with the presence of the faithful, namely baptisms, weddings, and funerals, restricted to only eight people. The Holy Synod's statement ended with a clear message supporting medical procedures and indicating that:

> …the exceptional measures taken by the authorities are aimed at protecting our own health and the health of those around us. Life and health are gifts from God, but we have a duty to protect and cultivate them with permanent responsibility.[6]

In addition to observing strict state measures, the church provided its own weapons to fight against the disease, namely public processions with relics of saints. On 5 April, for the third time in the last three centuries, and for the first time since 1947, the relics of Saint Parascheva from Iași, protector of Moldova, left the metropolitan cathedral and went on public procession to the cities of Roman, Piatra Neamţ, and Tîrgu Neamţ, and to three monasteries in the region: Bodești,

Văratec, and Agapia. In all of the cities and villages to which the relics travelled, bells rang and people welcomed the procession from their balconies.[7] On the same day, a procession took place in Bucharest when the relics of Saint Dimitrie, based in the patriarchal cathedral, toured the key sites in the capital with prayers to end the pandemic.[8]

The inclusion of monasteries in the region of Moldova not only added symbolic weight to the procession but also aimed to alleviate tension among the faithful. An increasing number of monastic clergies started to link the pandemic with apocalyptic times and expressed right-wing conspiracy theories. The sudden medical rush for a COVID vaccine was regarded as the use of the spear which confirmed Christ's death on the cross, while the closure of churches was nothing less than the decision of a police state and the 'Antichrist's world government'. Right-wing conspiracy theories started to circulate among the population, with clergy stating that survival of the pandemic was similar to the communist period, with some monks claiming that a new wave of religious persecution was imminent, which in turn would become even harsher.[9]

The exceptional travel restrictions meant that churches were unable to celebrate the Orthodox Easter on Sunday, 19 April. This led to discontent among the clergy. An example was Father Mihail Milea, chair of the 'Saint Sava' Foundation in charge of social programmes in Buzău, who wrote a letter to President Iohannis asking for his direct involvement in influencing the health authorities. Father Milea pointed out that it was possible to celebrate Easter in Israel, Bulgaria, and Georgia. He ended the letter by stating what many clergy felt, namely: 'No matter how many hospitals we have, if we do not have the resurrected Jesus Christ, we cannot escape from this great world crisis'.[10] Informal channels of communication protesting against religious restrictions spread through Facebook. Father Marcel Malanca, Dean of Negreşti Oaş in north-western Romania, challenged the measures imposed by physician Raed Arafat, head of the Department for Emergency Situations, by claiming that his department had no authority to shut churches.[11] The 2020 Easter was celebrated without the faithful in a largely symbolic gesture, which demonstrated the powerful influence of the church throughout Romanian society; with the help of local volunteers, each local parish organised impromptu ceremonies in which people were given the Holy Easter Light at home.[12] The widespread mobilisation demonstrated not only the solidarity of the population facing the pandemic but also that the church retained a prime role in people's lives. The dramatism surrounding the Easter celebration reached a climax at the end of April, when the church announced that Archbishop Pimen of Suceava and Rădăuți was infected with the virus. The 90-year-old prelate was transported by helicopter to Bucharest, where he died one month later.[13]

On 15 May, after the first wave of the pandemic and the lifting of partial travel restrictions, in consultation with the government, the RomOC issued new guidance on how to celebrate religious services. The faithful were able to attend services inside or outside a church; however, they had to maintain a 2-metre distance and follow strict hygienic measures. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals were now able to accommodate up to 16 people. The Holy Synod decreed that the use of a single

spoon in administering the Holy Communion was not a standard requirement and that discussions were underway with other Orthodox churches.[14]

These decisions were welcomed by the clergy. In a highly unusual gesture, which reflected dissatisfaction with the state authorities, Archbishop Teodosie of Constanţa decided that, in his diocese, the church would celebrate a second Easter to be held one week later, on the night of 26–27 May. The decision, which did not follow church norms, was presented by the Romanian Patriarchate as the desire of the local hierarch rather than a coordinated policy.[15] In the subsequent months, Archbishop Teodosie became one of the key supporters of a national anti-vaccination programme.

After enabling in-person religious services, particularly in an electoral year, in June 2020, the date when initial national elections were due to be held, Prime Minister Orban was careful to dissociate himself from the image of a political leader shutting churches. In an interview, he stated that the new measures should not be perceived as new by pointing out:

> I made the decision to allow services to be held inside the churches as well. Here I would like to make a point. We did not close churches. Churches were opened during this period. The only thing that was not allowed was the officiating of the services. For example, various events were allowed for baptisms, marriages, with a limited number of people at the family level. Also, the churches were not closed, so those who published articles in the media regarding the reopening of the churches did not tell the truth correctly.[16]

The international race to produce the first vaccines were not completely overlooked by religious discourse. In June 2020, China approved the CanSino vaccine for military usage, and in August 2020, Russia approved its own Sputnik V vaccine for emergency use; however, their fast authorisation process was received with caution in the EU and the United States. A major shift took place at the end of the year: on 2 December 2020, the Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine, developed in Germany, received temporary regulatory approval in the United Kingdom, which began the first large-scale vaccination programme. In the subsequent weeks, most EU countries followed suit and approved the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, and on 30 December 2020, the United Kingdom approved a second vaccine, the Oxford–AstraZeneca COVID-19. The relatively fast process of developing and approving vaccines was regarded with high scepticism across Eastern Europe, and Romania was no exception, affecting not only the Orthodox but also other religious communities. In December 2020, a Romanian pastor based in the United Kingdom encouraged the Baptist community in his country to dispel the idea that the vaccine was a malefic project and perceive it instead as a blessing sign from God.[17]

The change of government and the unexpected rise of the right-wing party in the December 2020 legislative elections led to an increase in the use of religious symbolism in political speeches. The turn towards the church demonstrated a shift in public opinion towards religion-state relations. A survey conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research Larics between 30 November and 7 December 2020 revealed two key findings. First, the RomOC became the public institution

with the highest percentage of population trust (very high: 41.4 per cent; high: 29.8 per cent), followed by the army in second place (very high: 17.8 per cent; high: 44 per cent). The Parliament (very high: 1.9 per cent; high: 7.6 per cent;) and the government (very high: 2.9 per cent; high: 10.8 per cent) lacked significant public support. That the church achieved first place was surprising, as just one year before the pandemic started, the army held first place in public trust (68.1 per cent), while the church ranked second (55.1 per cent).[18] The second finding of the survey was that the majority of the population perceived, in relation to 'the attitude of state authorities towards churches during the pandemic', that 'the state has restricted the religious freedom of religious confessions' (47.3 per cent) and only 15.9 per cent of the population considered that 'the state has collaborated well with churches and communicated very well its decisions'.[19]

Church activism and mobilisation towards challenging state authorities over the pandemic was evident in a report published by the RomOC summarising its work throughout the 2020 pandemic year. The church continued to maintain contact with other Orthodox churches and sent a delegation to the funeral of Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, who died after contracting COVID-19 in November. Between March and December 2020, the church reassessed its social work by focusing on purchasing medical equipment for six hospitals in Bucharest and running 492 social programmes across the country. In total, the report stated that the church spent over 38 million euros in its charitable activities.[20]

Orthodoxy and the 2021 Vaccination Campaign: 'The Holy Communion Is the Most Authentic Vaccine'

The ambivalence of the RomOC towards the vaccination programmes was evident in its communication with the faithful. Officially, the church remained committed to health measures instituted by the state authorities. Each parish was instructed to promote a booklet titled *Vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Free. Voluntary. Secure* (*Vaccinarea împotriva COVID-19 în România. Gratuită. Voluntară. Sigură*); however, the hierarchy did not send any pastoral letters to the faithful in support of the vaccination process. The booklet was presented by the church as the most important measure in communicating directly with the faithful, while local clergy were able to exert their authority as they saw fit regarding the most appropriate means of publicising it, such as speaking to the people about it, distributing it to them, or placing it in the church where people could see it.[21]

In February 2021, the Holy Synod made reference to the decision taken by the Patriarchate of Antioch that 'vaccination was a personal decision' and claimed that it followed a similar approach to those in all other Orthodox churches.[22] In April, Prime Minister Cîțu became impatient with the lack of religious mobilisation towards informing people about the benefits of the vaccine, and demanded that the clergy should speak and engage directly with the rural population. When asked why the church was not doing more to raise awareness of the national vaccination programme, Vasile Bănescu, the spokesmen of the Patriarchate, indicated that the church was already publicising the booklet and that he did not wish to make a

secret that he, personally, was vaccinated, although he reiterated that people should regard his choice as a personal decision.[23]

The encouragement of far-right conspiracies became evident around Easter. In his pastoral letter, Bishop Sebastian of Slatina and Romanaţi lamented that the previous year, when the church was forced to celebrate without the faithful, was the 'saddest Easter after the murder of Our Lord Christ'.[24] He doubted the efficacy of the vaccination programme and claimed that the invention of new vaccines in just under a year was an example of 'resetting the world'. He pointed out that, just a few weeks earlier, the European Parliament had issued a resolution which, in his opinion, forbade the use of the word 'mother'. In his own words:

> Doesn't it seem astonishing that in March of this year, on the eve of the so-called third wave of the pandemic, when the whole world was waiting for effective measures to fight the Corona virus, the European Parliament was very concerned about, 'Father', 'masculine', 'feminine', etc.? Are these Europe's priorities? What is the connection between the pandemic and this ideology—how sinister, how aggressive?![25]

His complaint was against the European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021, which declared 'the European Union as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone', without, as the bishop wrote, recommending the specific words to be banned. The declaration instead denounced all forms of violence or discrimination against persons on the basis of their sex or sexual orientation.[26] The Parliament's declaration in relation to the 'EU Strategy on children's rights', which was issued on the same day, used the word 'mother' only once, when it pointed out that '56,700 mothers could die within six months due to disruption to basic interventions such as routine health service coverage'.[27] The use of the word 'mother' did not appear on any other statements made by the Parliament. The bishop's pastoral letter was an example of the way in which the pandemic encouraged the spread of disinformation by the church, which tapped into the far-right conspiracy theories.

A similar approach to denouncing health measures which was linked to far-right ideology came from Archbishop Teodosie of Constanța. At the same time as the government instituted social distancing and banned public events, he encouraged pilgrimages to continue in his diocese. When asked by a reporter if he felt that he would have people's lives on his conscience, he replied: 'If it is time to leave this life, people go to God anyway'. He asserted again his scepticism that the vaccine was beneficial and claimed that, in his view, 'The Holy Communion is the most authentic vaccine'. He added:

> The vaccine is not mandatory and especially it is a vaccine that is made in a hurry. That's why there are surprises every day, because people have to be prepared; there are people with certain diseases who, due to the vaccine, give up, some die, some are paralyzed, and we have to be careful. We are not doctors to recommend the vaccine. It would be an overstatement of our knowledge and responsibilities.[28]

Teodosie's unusual stance in contrast to that of the official church discourse from the Patriarchate made headlines in the mass media. His words not only reflected the authority of one of the most influential hierarchs of the church, but also gave public voice to monastic clergy. The church thus became divided between two sections: one which supported Teodosie's view and found allegiance particularly in monastic circles and rural communities, and one which followed the official discourse of the church and the state. When challenged by reporters regarding the best response, Vasile Bănescu, spokesman of the Patriarchate, rebuked Teodosie and indicated that the vaccine should not be compared with the Holy Communion. The clash between these two visions in the church, one supporting and one condemning the vaccination programme, remained dominant throughout the year and explained the reluctance of the church hierarchy to engage publicly in the vaccination programme.

In February, Teodosie thought that his stance would prevail and challenged the Patriarch's place in the Holy Synod. He sent an official request to the Patriarchate, in which he demanded that his archbishopric should be raised to the rank of metropolitanate. His request capitalised on the dissatisfaction of a number of hierarchs towards the Patriarch's proposal that Holy Communion could be administered to the faithful using their own spoons.[29] In the end, the Patriarch's position prevailed: the principle of 'symphonia', or collaboration between the church and state authorities, lay at the core of the church–state relations, and Teodosie's statements did nothing but negatively affect the public image of the church. On 19 April, the Holy Synod issued a statement which refused Teodosie's request to raise his diocese to metropolitanate and encouraged him instead to follow the health measures imposed by the government.

The clash between these two visions in the church continued. In June 2021, Abbot Zenovie from Nechit Monastery in Neamț county gave a sermon which was widely circulated in the mass media and highly criticised by both the Patriarchate and health officials. In an apocalyptic message, he claimed that the vaccine was

> anything but a vaccine. All those who have been vaccinated should expect the following diseases: terrible skin diseases, kidney failure, strokes, heart disease, neurological diseases, paralysis. People who have been vaccinated, in combination with the new unknown—the epidemic—will not be able to walk, they will be zombies, just like we see drug addicts. It will be the worst epidemic on earth.
>
> People who are happy today to get their vaccine will be very unhappy tomorrow, because they will not even have time to repent of what they have done against God. If the mind does not function at its normal capacity, you are attacking God. After vaccination, after a short time and in combination with the new disease, people's skin will fill with scales, like fish …
>
> Humans will be filled with scales and blood cancers, which will be transmitted to the entire human body. They will be filled with wounds, from which fluid will flow; this disease will be frightening. The Holy Fathers prophesy to us. My children, people will lose their freedom of thought, they will be inactive. The work of the wicked will endure. People will die after vaccination.[30]

Similar sermons were uttered in other monasteries. Teodosie Paraschiv, an influential clergyman from the iconic Durău Monastery, gave several sermons in which he claimed that a world government was imposed by aliens and that the world population will be controlled through vaccine chips and magnets implemented during the vaccination programme. He encouraged the faithful to oppose the vaccine for themselves and others: 'You are getting vaccinated, you have signed your death sentence. Don't poison your children!'[31]

The Patriarchate's official position continued to be consistent with that of the health officials. Bănescu asked the faithful to follow the local authorities rather than conspiracy theories or 'apocalyptic mixing of vaccination with faith and theology'.[32] In July 2021, Archbishop Nifon of Târgoviște had a similar message, claiming that 'the Christian Church is against ignorance, against superstitions of all kinds'.[33] After the Russian Orthodox Church declared that those who opposed the vaccination programmes were committing a sin,[34] and after the Orthodox Church of Greece became publicly involved in supporting the faithful to vaccinate, reaching a vaccination rate of over 50 per cent,[35] public pressure became more evident on the Patriarch himself to declare his support for the vaccination programme. On 22 July, when Patriarch Daniel turned 70 and was decorated by President Iohannis in a public ceremony, Bănescu, the spokesman for the Patriarchate, pointed out that the church has many times presented its official position over the last few months. Bănescu stated that 'the Patriarch is a person like everyone else … an individual with a personal medical profile … who consults with his doctors' and that 'vaccination is a right, not an obligation'.[36]

The uncertainty over the Patriarch's stance towards the vaccine lasted until November 2021, when Romania had one of the highest mortality rates in Europe. At the end of a meeting in the Parliament, the Patriarch was approached in the corridors by journalists and was asked why he was not vaccinated. His brief response—'Of course, I am vaccinated, that's it'—was impromptu and veiled in secrecy rather than a coordinated reaction of encouraging the faithful. He referred to the church's and state authorities' official position that medical records were confidential and that each person should make a decision after discussion with their personal doctor.[37]

The vague measures and the lack of a coordinated national response by the church were capitalised on by anti-vaccination clergy. Archbishop Teodosie continued his opposition by stating:

> How can we be above medical science? For this reason, we keep parishioners with the vaccine of faith and of the liturgy. This is our vaccine. We do not get involved in vaccination propaganda, which is so diverse and controversial. At the national level there is no discussion on how much damage had by those who were vaccinated.[38]

A mass media investigation in northern Moldova, in Vorniceni, a village of around four thousand people, found that only 4 per cent of the population was vaccinated. When asked why they were not vaccinated, people claimed that they had 'divine

help', they did not want to be drugged, and, as one respondent stated, 'I am not afraid because I believe in God and Jesus Christ. Where there is fear, there is death'.[39] In the same region, in Botoșani county, the police were alerted that clergy were ripping the masks off those attending the liturgy, while those who were vaccinated were not allowed to attend the service.[40]

The anti-vaccine position was quickly capitalised on by the far-right party. On 27 October, Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă, a Romanian MP, produced a Facebook video in which she denounced the health measures, stating: 'You went to the vaccination centres like lambs to the slaughter. … We, the lawyers and doctors who have been banned, have shown you the truth'. In 24 hours, the video was watched by over one million people and was shared over 46,000 times. George 'Gigi' Becali, the owner of a football team in Bucharest and a controversial politician who regularly made nationalist and religious references, declared in an interview: 'Why should I get vaccinated? I've never been vaccinated in my life. Even if I get treatment for [COVID-19], why should I get vaccinated? To make a genetic change or what?' One month after it was posted on Facebook, the video attracted over two million views.[41] In November 2021, a clergyman giving a sermon at Sihăstria monastery, one of the most influential monastic centres in the country, followed the same message, stating:

> We are constrained, we are chased and manipulated in every way to be vaccinated. … There have been diseases throughout history. This, I might say, in comparison with other epidemics, with other diseases, is almost nothing. The survival rate for this disease is over 99 per cent.[42]

Anti-vaccination statements in religious circles coupled with the rise of the far-right movement even led to attempts to influence the faithful towards international politics. On 8 February 2022, Archbishop Teodosie made another controversial statement which seemed to support the far-right discourse and declared that Russian President Vladimir Putin was demonised unfairly in Western Europe as 'a criminal' and that his charitable activities in Jerusalem and Mount Athos were too easily forgotten.[43] Vasile Bănescu responded that the official position of the Patriarchate was that people should avoid the connection of '(ultra) nationalism with patriotism … [and] religious fidelity'.[44] A few days later, on 15 February, in what seemed to be a counterbalance of Teodosie's statement on charity, the Holy Synod publicised its official report on church charitable activities in the previous year. The report highlighted that, despite the pandemic, the church supported 1,114 social projects reaching over 140,000 people. In total, the report stated that the overall costs for its charitable work was over 44 million euros.[45]

Bulgaria: 'There Have Never Been Epidemics in the Church'

In contrast to Romania's total population, the 2021 census in Bulgaria showed a total population of 6,838,937.[46] The Orthodox faithful represented the largest numbers with 59.40 per cent, followed by Sunnis (7.41 per cent), Protestants (0.88 per

cent), the Catholics (0.66 per cent), and Shias (0.32 per cent), while 5.67 per cent declared to have no religious affiliation and 3.7 per cent have no religion. During communist rule, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) was officially recognised as the Patriarchate, even as the country became one of the most secular predominantly Orthodox countries. In 2014, the BOC counted 1,280 priests, 120 monks, 140 nuns, over 3,000 churches and cathedrals, 170 monasteries, and around 3,000 parishes.

After the fall of communism, Bulgaria faced one of the most unusual divisions between the secular and the religious. Article 13 (3) of the 1991 Constitution proclaimed Eastern Orthodox Christianity as 'the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria'. In 1998, the Constitutional Court stated that

> […] religious institutions, in particular the church, are separate and independent from the state, and the state is secular; the traditional nature of the Eastern Orthodox religion expresses its cultural-historical role and importance for the Bulgarian state, as well as its current significance for state life, reflected mostly in the system of public holidays (all Sundays, New Year, Easter, Christmas).[47]

As in Romania, in the first two years of the pandemic, Bulgaria witnessed political uncertainty. Boyko Borisov, the second longest serving prime minister, who ruled the country intermittently since 2009, was in his third mandate in 2020. His pro-EU conservative populist party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za evropeĭsko razvitie na Bŭlgariya*, GERB), ruled together with two far-right parties, the IMRO—Bulgarian National Movement (*Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie*, VMRO) —and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (*Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bŭlgariya*, NFSB). Bulgaria faced a major political crisis when the office of President Rumen Radev, a critic of Prime Minister Borisov, was raided by representatives of the specialised prosecutor's office on 9 July 2020, an act which led to widespread demonstrations lasting nearly a year, until 16 April 2021.[48] In May 2021, Borisov resigned, and two snap elections followed in July and November. Between 12 May and 13 December 2021, Bulgaria was ruled by Stefan Yanev, as the caretaker prime minister. After the November 2021 elections, Kiril Petkov became the prime minister, leader of the pro-EU party We Continue the Change (*Prodalzhavame promyanata*, PP), a political party set up only a few months earlier in September 2021. The unexpected rise of We Continue the Change, which ruled in a party coalition together with the populist There Is Such a People (*Ima takav narod*, ITN), Democratic Bulgaria (*Demokratichna Balgariya*, DB), and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (*Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya*, BSP), not only demonstrated dissatisfaction with the political elite associated with Borisov's rule, but also encouraged the rise of new political units which presented themselves as alternatives to the measures instituted by the political establishment. For example, the July snap election was won by an anti-elite, populist party, There Is Such a People, attracting over 24 per cent of the vote.

The BOC stood out among south-eastern European countries as the only church which continued to hold the Easter service in the first year of the pandemic. By contrast, in Greece, services were held only with cantors and clergy; in Romania and Serbia, the church accepted the ban; and in Ukraine and Russia, some churches were closed, particularly in the densely populated areas. The only country which followed a similar approach to that in Bulgaria was Georgia, where the Georgian Orthodox Church refused to follow government advice.

The BOC's stance and the holding of the Easter service was coupled with the government's religious card in support of its policies. Uncertainty over the best way of responding to the pandemic was evident in the first few months of 2020.[49] Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech claimed that only those who had a weak faith were contaminated: 'In no way has the contagion been transmitted and spread in churches where sacraments are performed! There have never been epidemics in the Church'.[50] On 10 March 2020, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter to the faithful in which he encouraged attendance, indicating that churches were open mainly because '[t]he Holy Mysteries cannot be carriers of infection or any disease, but are a medicine for the healing of the soul and health'.[51] The Patriarch recommended that churches should 'use disinfectants and maintain excellent hygiene', while those who were ill should not come to the service.[52] The service in Saint Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia was broadcast live, with those in attendance maintaining social distancing of at least one metre and a half.[53] To demonstrate support for health measures, on 22 March, Patriarch Neophyte celebrated a Sunday liturgy against the pandemic which was broadcast on Bulgarian National Television.[54] The following day he sent an address to the faithful, endorsing strict adherence to the measures imposed by the state authorities and the imposition of the state of emergency, presenting his support for the work of 'our medics, government and military'.[55]

The church's ambivalent stance was echoed by political leaders. Yordan Kirilov Tsonev, Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Group 'Movement for Rights and Freedoms', with studies in economics and a doctorate in Orthodox theology from Sofia University, stated that 'no virus or infection can be transmitted during the services … I will take the Eucharist from the shared spoon today because I genuinely believe that it brings us salvation'.[56] On 30 March, Patriarch Neophyte met Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev, Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, head of the national operational headquarters against COVID-19, and Emil Velinov, Director of the Religious Denominations Directorate at the Council of Ministers, to discuss the most appropriate measures to be held during the Easter celebrations. The clergy who had any COVID-19 symptoms were required to inform their superiors. Baptisms and weddings were allowed to take place only with a small number of people, and funerals only with members of the immediate family. At the end of the meeting, the Holy Synod issued a statement which praised 'the government, doctors, nurses and workers, for all other public servants—police, military, transport workers, shopkeepers, all who are at risk in order to preserve daily life as far as possible'.[57]

The church's message was close to the far-right discourse. Volen Siderov, a Sofia city councillor and chairman of the nationalist party Attack, encouraged

people to disobey the state of emergency. After Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and Ventsislav Mutafchiyski appealed to the population to follow restrictions and stay at home, Siderov sent a press release with the headline: 'Go out en masse at Easter and prove that God is above Mutafchiyski!'[58] The message did not lead to a change in the behaviour of the population, as most people continued to stay at home; however, several intellectuals pointed out that the unusual stance of the church in combating the crisis did little to alleviate the pandemic. That the church held an influential role in the debate was evident when Mutafchiyski was photographed kissing an icon while at the same time he appealed to the population to stay at home. Mutafchiyski held a meeting with Patriarch Neophyte and, as part of the protocol, he was offered a present— an icon—which he kissed. His public gesture was an example of being an Orthodox believer rather disobeying hygiene measures; however, the church hierarchy presented the public display of religiosity as an act of close church–state relations. The paradox in the attitude of health officials and church leaders was summarised in an article by Professor Ivaylo Dichev from Kliment Okhridski University of Sofia:

> Do you see priests comforting those suffering in hospitals? Do you hear about charities? … No, they prefer to sing in golden robes. And to repeat boldly that the biggest compromise of the church was not to give willows for Palm Sunday. … Does incense help against a virus?[59]

In response to criticism of performing services, the church hierarchy claimed to be following 'God's providence'. Metropolitan Anthony for Central and Western Europe stated that if church buildings had been shut, it would have been perceived as the church 'abandon[ing] the faithful in this difficult time … God's providence is beyond any logic'.[60] The discourse of the Orthodox hierarchy contrasted with those from other religious communities, such as the Catholic and the Protestant, which decided to broadcast all their services online.[61]

The strict measures imposed by the government were effective in the first wave of the pandemic. In early June, as in many East European countries, the government relaxed its restrictions. Political clashes between the ruling coalition and the opposition became evident when Borissov's GERB party and the Socialist Party began to hold large-scale electoral gatherings which attracted a fine of 3,000 leva (around 1,500 euros) for not following social distancing. A few weeks later, COVID-19 cases started to spike, reaching 3,984 people and 207 deaths. Borissov himself was fined 300 leva for not wearing a protective mask during a religious service at Rila Monastery.[62] The monastery was not only one of the most important religious sites in the country, but also a pilgrimage centre for the faithful, and was thus perceived as a key place in Bulgarian national consciousness for religious and state authorities.[63]

The church hierarchy's support of Borissov, at a time of mass protests engulfing the country, continued. On 15 August 2020, Metropolitan Nikolai of Plovdiv, in a sermon at the end of the liturgy celebrating the 'Assumption of the Mother of God', criticised the increasing number of political protestors[64] against the government

and particularly in what seemed to be religious resistance around prayers organised by a defrocked monk, Archimandrite Dionysius.[65] Metropolitan Nikolai endorsed Borissov's rule as beneficial to close church–state relations by pointing out that '[i]n the last 10 years, for the first time in many years, we have had a state leadership that has expressed a desire to help the Church'. He reminded the faithful that Article 13 of the Constitution reserved a key role for the BOC and that only adherence to 'God's laws is the medicine that the sick Bulgarian society needs' at the time of the pandemic.[66] As evident in the previous months, the sermon was an example of choosing religious exceptionalism in the face of the pandemic rather than observing strict health measures, indicating that it was only a matter of time until high clergy were affected by the pandemic. On 18 August, the church announced that Metropolitan Ambrose of Dorostol passed away after being admitted to hospital with coronavirus symptoms.[67]

As mass protests and violence against political authorities started to spread across the country, a number of lower clergies distanced themselves from the church's official position. Hieromonk Hristofor Sabev, one of the first dissidents of the Union of Democratic Forces which aimed to overthrow the communist regime in 1989, condemned the violence and doubted the public risks associated with the pandemic. In an interview, he pointed out that, after two months of public protests at which thousands of people regularly gathered in the capital, there was not a visible sharp increase in infections. When asked if he thought that the pandemic was 'a coronavirus conspiracy', he replied that '[t]he pandemic is something like a rehearsal for [a] global conspiracy' and 'an attempt to see how much people obey'. In his view, the world was changing not due to the pandemic but mainly due to migration and emigration affecting the structure of society. He expressed dissatisfaction with the government and more widely with the fact that top hierarchs were tainted by connections with the pre-1989 communist regime and the lack of a lustration process inside the church.[68]

The church's stance of continuing to perform services led to hierarchs and clergy not disclosing publicly when they became ill. An exception to the lack of public trust was in November 2020, when Metropolitan Kyprian of Stara Zagora expressed during a radio broadcast his gratitude to doctors after he recovered from the virus. The broadcast mentioned that one priest from Vidin, two priests from Sofia, and three priests from Nevrokop diocese had died the previous week.[69]

With its public image affected by close relations with the political authorities and a lack of transparency regarding the number of ill clergy, the church hierarchy attempted to present a more inclusive attitude towards those affected by the pandemic. On 10 December 2020, after a meeting with Bishop Polycarp of Belogradchik, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov gave a public address on national television in which he pointed out the latest measures. He started by reminding the faithful that '[a] very great day is approaching—Christmas—and in this pandemic, in this financial and economic crisis, people's trust in God is extremely important'. He pointed out that a state subsidy of 2.5 million levas was assigned to the church for the restoration of worship places.[70] Patriarch Neophyte proposed that, from

20 to 26 December during the Christmas period, the clergy would go to hospitals and sprinkle the patients with holy water.

Close church–state support in engaging the population was also evident when the first vaccines were approved in the European Union. On 27 December 2020, the vaccination programme was officially launched in Sofia, with the first vaccines being received by one state and one religious official—namely Kostadin Angelov, Minister of Health, and the 75-year-old Bishop Tikhon of Tiberias, vicar of Patriarch Neophyte.[71] On 29 December, Borissov held a meeting with Bishop Evlogiy of Adrianople, abbot of the Rila Monastery, in which he expressed his gratitude for the church's support; however, no public statement in support of the vaccination programme was issued by the church. The Holy Synod of the BOC only issued a short statement confirming that Bishop Tikhon's vaccination was only a personal decision based on his previous medical training before he joined the church hierarchy, rather than a coordinated religious policy. In attempting to secure a firmer commitment from the church hierarchy, Borissov announced that 1.62 million leva was allocated for a municipal project to purify water at Rila monastery.[72]

No other statements were made by the church in relation to the vaccination programme. Bulgarian theologians defended the view that the church should not become publicly involved in the national vaccination programme for the fear of being accused of becoming 'an instrument of state policy'.[73] In February 2021, aiming to communicate directly with the population, a Public Vaccination Council was set up which brought together doctors and public intellectuals working with the Ministry of Health. The council presented itself as a non-political platform and lamented the fact that many doctors across the country regarded the vaccine with scepticism. The first meeting of the council was attended by representatives of all major religious communities in Bulgaria, with one notable exception: the BOC. The council indicated that the Orthodox Church of Greece had issued a statement in support of the vaccination programme, and that it hoped that the BOC would follow suit. The church hierarchy remained largely silent. The only exception was a short statement on Metropolitan Nahum of Ruse's Facebook account, in which he claimed that there could be no connection between vaccines, sinfulness, and apostasy.[74] After the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece issued a statement, on 13 January, which declared that 'vaccination does not mean falling away from the right faith and life in the Church' and 'the production of COVID-19 vaccines does not require the use of embryonic cell cultures',[75] Metropolitan Nahum published a similar statement aimed at his diocese. On 23 February, he encouraged the faithful to consult with their doctors and get vaccinated, reminding them that the vaccination process was personal. He criticised those who refused to follow advice from the health authorities and who concealed symptoms which endangered other people.[76]

In the months that followed, church–state relations did not lead to any major changes in support of the vaccination programme. Prime Minister Borissov's four-year term ended on 12 May, amid mass national protests, while Patriarch Neophyte's health deteriorated and he was hospitalised twice, in April and in June.

The Holy Synod issued official statements with vague updates on his illness, advising that he was not suffering from COVID-19.[77]

Political uncertainty was directly linked to the ways in which people regarded the vaccination programme. In November 2021, in Vidin, a city in northern Bulgaria with around 63,000 people, only 12 per cent were vaccinated. Over the course of two years, over 27,000 people died of COVID-19 in Bulgaria, constituting one of the highest mortality rates in the European Union. The new political parties which emerged after the 2020–2021 protests questioned the use of restrictive measures, with more than 70 per cent of the population against the vaccine.[78] When the Ministry of Health was finally able to sign a document with the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria, which officially engaged religious communities in its vaccination campaign, in December 2021, the Orthodox Church was again absent. Instead, the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church, the United Evangelical churches, and the Chief Mufti's Office agreed to disseminate information among the faithful regarding the benefits of the vaccination programme.[79]

The state authorities organised mass vaccinations centres, which attracted significant numbers; however, the overall resistance and criticism of the government was coupled by shortages of available stock, while, from a political perspective, protestors continued to openly oppose the vaccine, with some even burning their masks in public. At the end of Borissov's term, the national vaccination programme had some degree of population support; however, political infighting and scepticism towards the vaccine remained dominant. In December 2021, Bishop Tikhon, who received the first vaccine in the country, had to defend himself by stating:

> I have no doubt that I did the right thing. We didn't know anything about the virus then. It was normal to get it after the vaccine was given. … One cannot speak of a lack of trust in God, since the science we have is a gift from God. It is ridiculous to think that one who is vaccinated does not have enough faith. … The church still doesn't talk about vaccines.[80]

The election of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in December 2021 represented a change in state policy towards the church. For the first time in two decades, Petkov did not invite Patriarch Neophyte to attend the oath and inauguration ceremony of his premiership held in the National Assembly. Petkov was dissatisfied with the close relations between the previous administration and the church hierarchy, and the lack of church support towards the vaccination campaign. Tense relations continued until the end of the fourth wave and the lifting of international travel restrictions.[81]

Conclusion

Romania and Bulgaria are exceptional cases of vaccination uptakes and death rates in the European Union. Data from John Hopkins University, which monitored COVID-19 cases around the world, show a contrasting picture to that of other EU member states. In 2022, while both countries were somewhat average

in the category 'Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people', much lower than Germany and similar to the United Kingdom and Italy (see Figure 2.1), Bulgaria and Romania ranked first in 'Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people' (see Figure 2.2) and lower than other EU countries in regard to 'Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol' (see Figure 2.3). The link between the lack of vaccination and high mortality rate is evident in all of these graphs.

Orthodox churches are imbedded in the social fabric of Romania and Bulgaria. At the institutional level, Orthodox churches have retained close relations with state authorities. The pandemic showed that institutional links have limits and that conformity to health measures is more a function of religiosity rather than a response to top-down directives from religious and political leaders. In Romania and Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church is considered by local populations to be one of the most trusted institutions. However, the main difference between both countries is in terms of public attendance at religious services. Bulgaria, despite over 70 per cent of the population identifying as Orthodox, is one of the most secular states in Eastern Europe—between 7 per cent[82] and 9 per cent[83] of the population are regular churchgoers—while in Romania, 24 per cent of the population attend services on a weekly basis.[84]

The BOC's decision to celebrate Easter in 2020, when no other religious communities in the country did so, was encouraged by state authorities due to the low number of faithful attending services regularly. The decision was symbolic and was aimed at gaining political capital at a time when far-right parties shared power

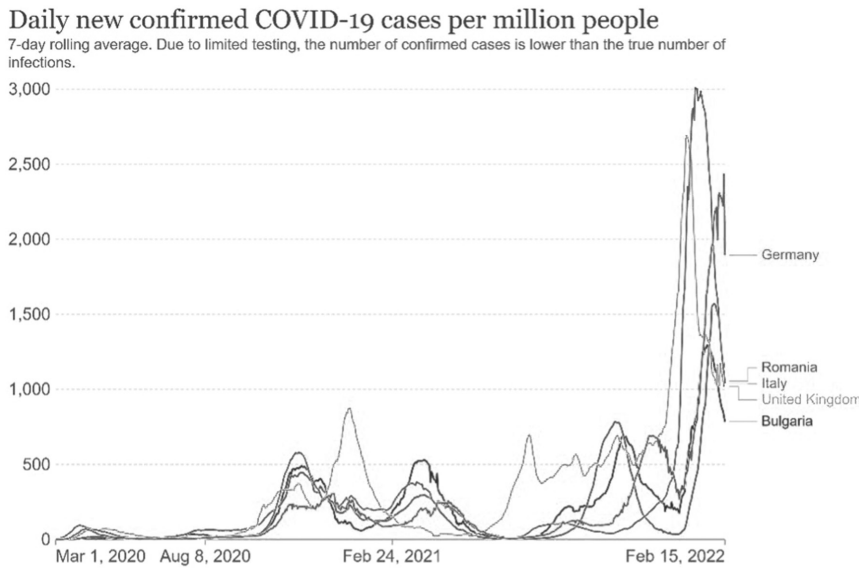

Figure 2.1 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people.

Source: Our World in Data.

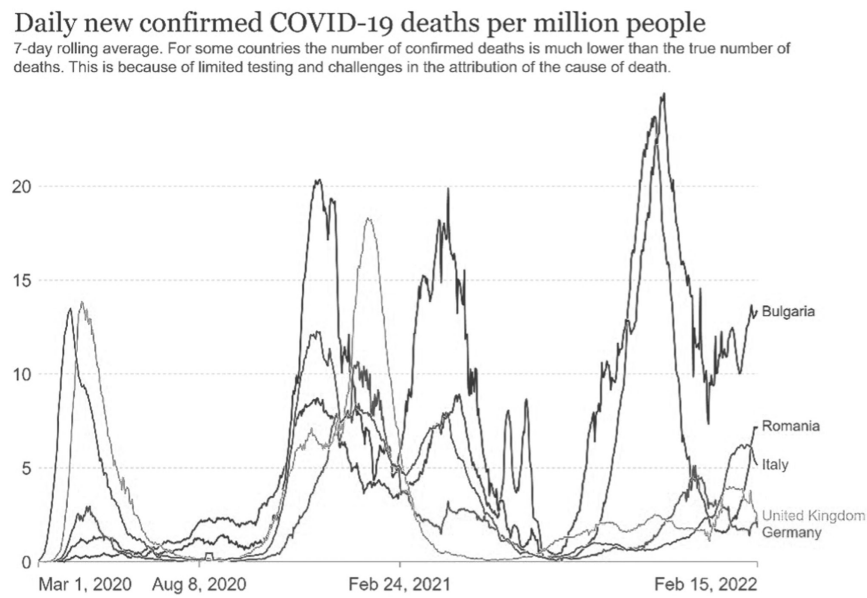

Figure 2.2 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people.

Source: Our World in Data.

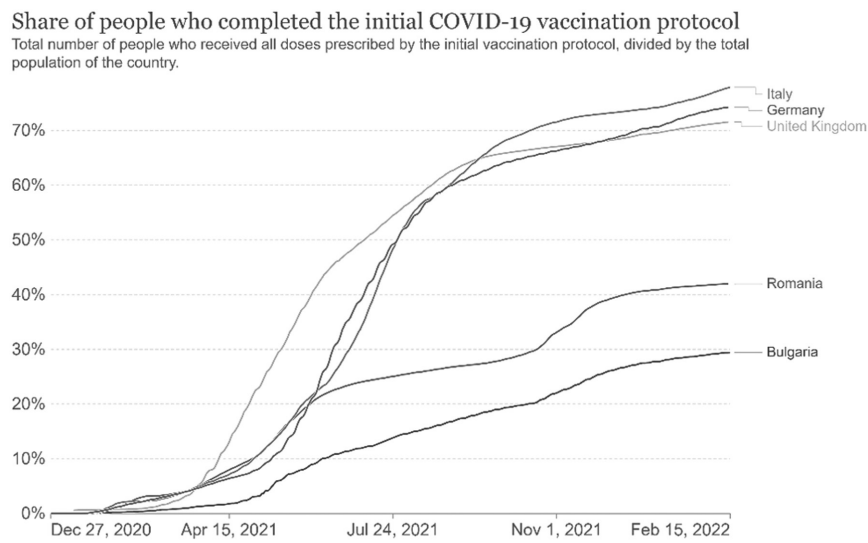

Figure 2.3 Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol.

Source: Our World in Data.

in the governing coalition with Borissov's GERB party. By contrast, Romania, ruled by the National Liberal Party, closed all places of worship, in line with other EU member states. However, in the subsequent months, the challenges from the church and the use of religious symbolism by far-right leaders were factors which supported the meteoric rise of AUR, the fourth largest party in the Parliament.

In September 2021, during my research trip to eight monasteries in Romania (five monasteries run by monks—Neamț, Sihăstria, Secu, Bistrița, and Pângărați—and three convents by nuns—Văratic, Agapia, and Pasărea), I found an official notification posted at each entrance encouraging the faithful to observe social distancing and health measures. However, in all of the monasteries, none of the clergy, monks, or nuns wore protective masks, and social distancing was not observed. At Agapia monastery, the nuns attended the service in the main church rather than in open air alongside the faithful. At Bistrița monastery, anti-vaccine leaflets were placed at the entrance to the church under a detailed text with an overview of the church's history. It is unclear if the leaflets were placed by monks or by visitors; however, they only emphasised the lack of trust in the vaccination programme and health measures. In Romania, at the official level, the church authorities followed governmental instructions, but in practice, informal channels of communication were stronger and more influential. In Bulgaria, a similar practice took place. While the church enjoyed close cooperation with the Borissov government in the first year of the pandemic, it refused to issue a strong statement of support for the national vaccination programme.

In both countries, the church challenged the implementation of health measures from the start. In Romania, the clergy claimed that no matter how many hospitals and how much investment in medical science the state was implementing, any measures had little effect without religiosity. In Bulgaria, the clergy stated that 'there was no pandemic in the church' and that its authority transcended any disease. Those who fell ill were seen as suffering spiritual loss rather than physical illness.

Perhaps most surprising, as a general trend, the church discourse which challenged health measures and doubted the efficacy of the vaccine led to an increase in conspiracy theories and indirectly to the rise of far-right movements. In Romania, a bishop claimed that the pandemic was nothing but the start of resetting the world. In his view, the European Union was detrimental to the church and the faithful due to the alleged banning by the European Parliament of the word 'mother'. A number of monks from monasteries in the region of Moldova even claimed that the pandemic showed the existence of a world government and that the vaccine was a sign of the anti-Christ. Apocalyptic warnings were mentioned in sermons, while a number of lower clergies ripped protective masks off the faithful and banned those who were vaccinated from attending services. In Bulgaria, church and public figures saw the pandemic as a political test of the population. Facebook messages and informal channels of communication which challenged health and state authorities were influential and reached a large segment of the population swiftly.

The lack of transparency in the communication from the Holy Synods of both churches led to the perception that church hierarchs were not supporting the

vaccination programme. Patriarch Daniel of the RomOC confirmed that he was vaccinated only in an impromptu manner, when surrounded by journalists in the corridors of the Romanian Parliament. His words dismissed the act as something that was not supposed to be discussed in public. The church's official position was that the population should decide to be vaccinated only after consultation with personal doctors. In practice, the medical system was regarded as highly corrupt and most people did not consult their doctors. In Bulgaria, when Bishop Tikhon became the second vaccinated person in the country in a televised transmission, his act was presented as his personal choice rather than as a church endorsement of vaccination. Patriarch Neophyte and other members of the hierarchy did not disclose if they were vaccinated. With the exception of Metropolitan Nahum of Ruse, who issued a statement in support of vaccination, with a text which was inspired from a decision of the Orthodox Church of Greece, no other hierarchs became publicly engaged in the vaccination campaign. In Bulgaria, the church even refrained from sending representatives to the Public Vaccination Council, which was set up as a forum to encourage people to be vaccinated. All other major religious confessions in the country attended the council.

When in late autumn and winter 2021 both countries battled the fourth and most lethal wave of COVID-19 in the European Union, the churches remained largely silent. Since the start of the pandemic, the churches provided theological narratives on how to deal with the crisis, ranging from prayers for the difficult times to public processions of relics and blessing the ill with holy water. In both countries, even when top hierarchs died after contracting the coronavirus, the church authorities did not change their discourse and emphasised instead everyone's free will regarding vaccination.

The pandemic also revealed the extent of collaboration between church hierarchies and state authorities. In Romania, the decision to cancel the 2020 Easter celebrations were viewed by some clergy as a non-Orthodox act. President Iohannis, an ethnic German Lutheran, was criticised for not understanding the Orthodox faith. A priest even sent a letter of complaint to the president pointing out that in Bulgaria and Georgia Easter was celebrated publicly. Archbishop Teodosie went further, and when restrictions were lifted, he celebrated a second Easter in Constanța diocese on a date of his choice. He remained an anti-vaccine promoter, and his speeches were followed by far-right politicians. Two years after the start of the pandemic, there was only one step between his anti-vaccine discourse and his claim that Russian President Putin should be perceived in a better light in Europe due to his charitable work in Jerusalem and Mount Athos. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Teodosie retracted his words; however, his comments showed that the churches paid attention to what was happening in other countries rather than following unilateral decisions issued by their own national capitals. At times of national elections, church leaders have repeatedly encouraged the faithful to vote for candidates who supported the church. In Bulgaria, close contacts between the top hierarchs and Borissov's government were perceived with suspicion by the general population. Borissov's conflict with President Radev and the 2020–2021 national protests led to distrust in the vaccine. The mass protests in major cities

endorsed the anti-vaccine movement and the rise of new political parties. When Kiril Petkov became prime minister in December 2021, he attempted to move away from close church–state relations. He criticised the church for not becoming involved in the vaccination campaign and did not issue an invitation to Patriarch Neophyte to attend his inauguration ceremony.

The Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria were an integral part of the social and political response of the pandemic crisis. No health measures could be implemented by the state authorities without the direct involvement of religious leaders, not only because they reached rural populations, but also due to the legacy of church–state relations in defining the identity and religiosity of the faithful. Churches presented themselves as human security providers that transcended medical measures and provided spiritual support, which was more important than national mobilisation on health matters. Despite operating under different church–state models, the response of the Orthodox churches in both countries was the same: cooperation with state authorities in line with the Byzantine principle of 'symphonia' in providing support to the faithful.

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3 Conspiracies, Anxieties, and Ritual Arrhythmia

Exploring Orthodox Discourses and Practices in Greece and Cyprus during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Vasilios N. Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes the coronavirus disease that first appeared in 2019 (COVID-19), to be a global pandemic. Certainly, pandemics (e.g., plague/'Black Death', smallpox) are not a novel phenomenon, having occurred in the past with various political, religious, and social repercussions. Looking at pandemics through a historical lens is useful,[1] for it reveals that Orthodox churches, with some exceptions, were not necessarily against any kind of protective measures (including vaccination), but on the contrary supported such measures officially through encyclicals or by assisting state policies. Although there is a traditional and dominant Christian discourse about diseases as allowed by God for disciplinary or punitive reasons, the Orthodox church hierarchy and the faithful did not necessarily turn against medicine and its use in combatting diseases and pandemics at large. After all, several well-known saints in the Orthodox church calendar were (or are reported to have been) medical practitioners (e.g., Luke the Evangelist, Cosmas and Damianos), a fact further demonstrating that the church did not oppose the medical profession as such. More importantly, there is also evidence that the church was even ready to temporarily 'deviate' from its traditional ritual practice in order to protect its flock in periods of pandemics. The above data are important in examining Orthodox Christianity in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, since many Orthodox Christians, mainly at the grassroots level, maintained a different stance on the matter by questioning medical authorities, showing hesitancy, or even refusing hygienic measures, medical treatment, vaccination, or hospitalisation, and exhibiting what some might call 'irrational behaviour' by solely and exclusively trusting God and supernatural powers in order to overcome related infections or the pandemic as a whole.

Our intention in this chapter is to examine the impact and the diverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic within the realm of 'Greek Orthodoxy' at various levels by focusing especially on the Orthodox churches of Greece and Cyprus (with some occasional references to the policies of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople). What we attempt to highlight are common patterns of Orthodox responses and reactions towards the recent pandemic. Although the size and the

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respective socio-political contexts of the two countries are not identical, and the role of the Orthodox church of Cyprus is more significant and visible in politics, society, and culture than that of the Orthodox church of Greece, there are constant contacts between these churches and the respective Orthodox cultures in general, not least because of the common language, history, and interests.[2]

Our procedure in tackling this issue is as follows: we take into consideration the main problems and contested issues chronologically, as they were unfolding in relation to one another during the long pandemic. In fact, the repercussions of the pandemic were polymorphous. Whereas a much-debated issue in 2020 concerned the obligatory use of facemasks as a means of protecting oneself and others from transmitting the virus, one of the main discourses in 2021 revolved around the necessity and the legitimacy of obligatory vaccination and the ethical and other issues connected to it.

First, we focus on the attitudes, responses, and reactions of the involved churches on the basis of their respective official discourses related to the various facets and phases of the pandemic. Given the dependence of both churches on the respective states, we often observed that, by and large, both of them came to terms with government measures, albeit at times expressing their dissatisfaction with them. In any event, the appearance of individual disobedient bishops and clerics, who preferred a rather frontal collision with both church and state, was not uncommon. The phenomenon of bishops, clerics, and monks expressing ambiguous and hesitant views on the pandemic or mildly disagreeing with official church stances was also not out of the ordinary. We shall also reflect on various changes effected by the pandemic (e.g., the question of reforming rituals) as well as on the potential post-pandemic changes, which may endure and become part of Orthodox tradition and practice in the future.

Second, our research also covers the area of 'lived religion' by examining the religious practices of active believers and their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits and practices due to the pandemic and towards official church policies. Our observations here are based on interviews conducted via Zoom during the summer of 2021 and during two months of fieldwork carried out between September and November 2021 in three Greek cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, and Larissa. Our interlocutors were four men and six women from these three cities, whom we met both virtually and in person. Their ages ranged from 39 to 85, and they were all of middle-class background. In order to protect their identity, we use pseudonyms and avoid pointing out the exact location and names of their parish churches. Using Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' and in particular his concept of 'arrhythmia',[3] we examine the impact of the pandemic on materialities and the emergence of new forms of ritual behaviour. We argue that 'pandemic temporality'[4] is characterised by what we term 'ritual arrhythmia' that resulted not only in disruption, tension, scepticism, and conflict, but also in ritual transformation and innovation, and the blurring of boundaries between official and unofficial, clergy and laity, secular and sacred, public and private, as well as the physical and the virtual. By combining, therefore, these two different strands of research, namely an analysis of Orthodox discourses and

events juxtaposed with ethnographic data on religious practices, we attempt to provide a more holistic picture of what 'pandemic Orthodoxy' looks like in our specific contexts.

Conspiracy Theories and Their Orthodox Versions

A recurrent issue that permeated almost all the debates surrounding the pandemic from the very beginning was its constant contextualisation within a broader conspiracy canvas, to which an 'Orthodox twist' was always given. This pertained to both Greece[5] and Cyprus,[6] including their Orthodox milieus, respectively. Generally speaking, conspiracy theories exist far beyond the religious domain and comprise any conceivable elements from all possible areas, including both the extreme right and left political spectrums, as well as anarchist and anti-systemic milieus. In our context, conspiracy mentality certainly became a sweeping, global phenomenon, immensely facilitated by the modern electronic media and the constant construction and dissemination of fake or fabricated news. As was to be expected, all this fuelled heated reactions and polarisations of all kinds. Thus, it is not accidental that the WHO used the term 'infodemic' to describe this unprecedented cataclysm of misinformation. Yet, it is not amiss to argue that Orthodox cultures in general have a particular penchant towards religiously coloured conspiracy scenarios. These precede by far the recent pandemic, as they have abundantly flourished in past centuries as well—for instance, apocalyptic scenarios and prophetic discourses about the Antichrist and the coming end of the world. This is mainly due to the 'enemy' and 'fortress syndrome' that has historically developed among Orthodox Christians following tensions with Western Christianity and the Western world as a whole. The pervasive and multifaceted Orthodox anti-Westernism, which lingers on until today, clearly attests to this. In recent years, there has also been a significant upsurge of interest among Greek and Cypriot Orthodox circles in prophecies, oracles, and legends, of all kinds related to the future of Orthodoxy and Hellenism as well as their lurking enemies, as these prophetic discourses usually serve conservative socio-ethical values and nationalistic aspirations.[7] These phenomena are mostly prominent among those in Orthodox rigorist/fundamentalist circles, who have become more vocal in the last decades due to growing secularisation and globalisation. Yet, they are also able to influence the official church hierarchy to a growing extent.

Given this background, it occasions no surprise that Greece very quickly became a prime location of conspiracy scenarios. In a survey of 16 European countries (plus Israel) examining the role of social media in the dissemination of conspiracy theories, Greece was found to belong to the top group—together with ex-communist East European countries.[8] Similar findings were reported for Cyprus.[9] With regard to Orthodoxy specifically, the whole pandemic in its individual aspects was often portrayed, though not coherently, as part of an internationalist plan aimed at creating a global government and a global religion, connected to the restriction of national sovereignty, personal freedom, and Orthodox identity. WHO was also implicated in this plan. Various foreign intellectuals, such as the Israeli historian

and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, who spoke about the future radical changes for humankind through the advancement of digital technology and biotechnology, were adduced as further proofs of this forthcoming 'new world order'. Such conspiracies also included a fake dialogue between Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management Nikos Chardalias about a 'secret plan', financed by the well-known businessman George Soros, concerning microchips to be injected into all Greeks through vaccination, which would mean, among other things, the end of Orthodoxy. In such conspiracy scenarios, anybody and anything could be potentially criminalised: the Rockefeller Foundation, WHO, 5G technology in telecommunications, and the global electronic media. This also concerned Sotiris Tsiodras, professor of medicine and infectious diseases at the University of Athens Medical School and an internationally respected scholar. He was the chief scientific advisor to the Greek government on COVID-19, and became widely known in the country due to his televised briefings on the progress of the pandemic. Although a religious person who attended church regularly, he was often accused of being a surreptitious tool of the above internationalist order aimed at capturing Orthodoxy 'from the inside'.

In Cyprus, a bishop who made headlines with such conspiracy scenarios was Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, whose influence could also be observed among many believers in Greece as well. For him, the pandemic was part of such a 'new world order' aimed at controlling especially Orthodox Christians. He claimed that the virus had been artificially created decades earlier and was scheduled to be released in 2020. The vaccines, attributed to businessman and software developer Bill Gates, were also portrayed as part of this plan aimed at eliminating large numbers of the world population, curtailing human freedom, and creating a new elite-ruled, submissive human race. These and similar views were also echoed by metropolitans in Greece, such as Nektarios of Corfu.

This enhanced conspiracy constellation becomes even clearer if we ponder the fact that other unrelated events during the same period have been unduly suspected and criminalised by numerous Greek citizens. This concerns the population and housing census of 2021, officially conducted by the Greek Statistical Service every ten years. In the midst of the pandemic, though, and especially the growing opposition to vaccination, the whole issue became very complicated, as many individuals and families did not allow census workers to enter their homes and collect information. The latter could be used—according to conspiracy scenarios—against them in the future (e.g., to identify the unvaccinated persons). Similar fears, but to a lesser degree, also appeared in Cyprus, where a population and housing census was conducted in 2021 too. Here we are not simply referring to Orthodox believers reacting against the census, but to a broad group of citizens with low degrees of trust in the state and in both national (e.g., the judicial system, the police) and international institutions, especially with regard to the collection of private data and their potential harmful use. Orthodox reactions were also motivated by the alleged 'double standards' applied by the state and the perceived unjust treatment of the Orthodox, despite being the overwhelming majority in both countries. This is because Gay Pride parades and gatherings of foreign immigrants were not strictly prohibited

by state authorities, whereas more severe and allegedly unjustified measures were mainly imposed on Orthodox believers.

The Outbreak of the Pandemic as Fake News

An early reaction to the extremely sudden and unforeseen pandemic, which caught everybody off guard, in the first months after its eruption (March–April 2020) in Greece was its full negation. Due to the lack of secure epidemiological data and reliable information on the nature of the pandemic and its consequences, there was general perplexity among the public as to the new virus and the viability of protection measures. In this context, the whole issue was presented by many as 'fake news' with ulterior hidden aims, such as disorienting the people by making them susceptible to central control, manipulation, and submissiveness. The early strict measures taken by the government regarding Orthodox worship affected especially Holy Week and Easter services, a development that was deemed by numerous believers as a camouflaged attempt to alter the Orthodox character of the country. In addition, the fact that the official church finally complied with the state measures was often interpreted as a betrayal of its prophetic mission in society and its authentic identity.

A first reaction, therefore, was to underestimate the danger of the new virus and even to completely negate its existence. The parish priest of St Nicholas (Pefkakia, Exarcheia) in central Athens, for example, reacted against the closed doors of church buildings as having been caused by a 'mere flu', which was overdramatised by the media for spurious reasons and with ulterior motives. He thus criticised sharply both state and church for attempting such scandalous measures, especially during Holy Week and Easter, and prohibiting believers from taking part in the related services. This would result, he predicted, in God's punishment. In his view, watching policemen driving believers away from closed church buildings instead of chasing and arresting criminals was simply outrageous. The fundamentalist priest-monk Ignatios from the Monastery of Agia Paraskevi (Eordaia) also considered the whole pandemic to be a plot for the global establishment of the dictatorship of the Antichrist through WHO. He also claimed that the whole discourse about the new virus was a lie and that many doctors were in fact bribed to publicly attribute numerous deaths to the coronavirus and create general anxiety and turmoil. Interestingly enough, the same evaluation of the new virus as being a mere flu was also supported by non-religious actors, such the Greek ex-deputy Rachel Makri, who was known both for her unconventional positions and Orthodox convictions. Similar positions were also expressed in Cyprus, such as by Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou. However, as the pandemic soon entered a more critical phase, other issues came to prominence and attracted greater attention.

Lockdown and Restriction Measures as Anti-Orthodox Plots

In Greece, significant opposition was directed against the state decision about mandatory confinement and restriction rules nationwide (e.g., shutdowns, lockdowns,

exit strategies, isolation, social distancing, limited social meetings). The government decided to implement a very strict lockdown from the very beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, which has been regarded as instrumental in effectively curbing it. This also gave rise internationally to a discourse about a 'Greek success', presenting the related strategy as a model to be imitated.[10]

As was to be expected, the lockdown was also applied to church buildings and services, a measure that created turmoil within the church hierarchy and among numerous believers. This is because such imposed restrictions were not assumed to impinge solely upon religious freedom and basic human rights—they were also regarded as exhibiting a clear anti-Orthodox spirit, given that church services experienced dramatic changes during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter.[11] These services took place behind closed doors solely with the presence of a few clergy and personnel without any members of the public. Instead, it was suggested that people could celebrate Easter at home, either by following the services digitally or by performing rituals symbolically (e.g., holding candles during the Easter service on the balconies and in the yards of their homes). It is characteristic that the Holy Synod showed reluctance at the beginning in complying with state measures and sought ambiguous exemptions from these rules—for example, keeping church buildings accessible for a few hours during Holy Week and relying upon the individual discretion of believers to go or to stay away from church services. This happened not only because of internal disagreements within the church hierarchy, but also because of the fear of reactions on the part of believers. In fact, it was the prime minister, in consultation with the minister of education and religious affairs, who publicly announced that the strict lockdown measures would also apply to the Orthodox church (and to all other religions in the country), thus putting an end to the matter. This decision also applied to monasteries, including Holy Mount Athos.

As a result, the church was criticised several times by secular actors for failing to respond quickly and drastically to the multiple dangers posed by the pandemic and for putting public health in jeopardy at the beginning. Afterwards, however, the church appeared to be fully on board with the government's measures, thanked all those who helped alleviate the crisis, and promised to assist the state in curbing the pandemic. It also urged everyone to strictly observe the instructions of the health authorities and experts and not to be led astray by those who suggested disobedience. The latter, it argued, was not justified even in the name of the Christian faith. Despite restrictions, the multiple charitable works of the church could be continued. Praying at home under lockdown measures was regarded not only as an understandable temporary restriction, but also as an ancient tradition which had been practised under exceptional circumstances since early Christian times. Finally, the church defended itself against those who, due to ignorance, misinformation, or misunderstanding, resorted to the popular and easy way of slander and insults against the church and its stance. More specifically, Archbishop Hieronymos II emphasised that the church had temporarily suspended or adapted various rituals and practices according the principle of *oikonomia* several times in the past (e.g., in 1854 on the islands of Syros and Tinos due to an epidemic). If deemed necessary, it could also

do the same during the coronavirus pandemic, even with very popular rituals, such as the transfer of the 'Holy Light' from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to various dioceses in Greece for the Easter service. Generally, the measures to celebrate 'behind closed doors' were also supported by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in its dioceses around the globe, which was generally in favour of all protective measures against the pandemic.[12] The spiritual handling of the pandemic and the revival of the ancient concept of 'domestic church' with maturity, mindfulness, faith, and prayer were also promoted by the church discourse.

Such sudden and radical changes in Orthodox ritual life (including funerals, which were allowed to include solely a narrow circle of the deceased person's relatives) triggered local protests. The curfew and the concomitant strict measures were regarded as unnecessary, given that many considered the new virus to be a mere flu. True, there had been similar lockdowns in the past, and there was actually a law in 1828 by the highly esteemed first governor of modern Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias (1776–1831), stopping all religious activities and prohibiting the ringing of church bells during a pandemic.[13] Even so, the consequences of the pandemic on ritual life, which was seriously disrupted to the extent of causing a 'ritual arrhythmia' among believers, were hard to bear. This also included popular pilgrimage places that are regularly visited by thousands of pilgrims.[14] The possibility for a short-stay individual prayer and the lighting of a candle in a church building (one person per ten square meters) under sanitary protection were permitted outside normal services, but it was hardly sufficient to appease the majority of believers. Thus, there were protests outside closed church buildings guarded by the police, while many believers either attempted to enter them by force or barricaded themselves inside the buildings. Priests who disobeyed and opened the churches to perform 'secret liturgies' faced arrest by the police and disciplinary measures by the church hierarchy. There was a lot of improvisation and ingenuity in bypassing laws and restrictions. Such actions were perceived as a cause of pride and as establishing a link with the early Christians celebrating services secretly in catacombs due to persecutions in the Roman Empire.

It is worth mentioning that several bishops also expressed their disagreement in various ways with the church hierarchy's readiness to succumb to state pressure about a very strict lockdown, and especially with the closure of church buildings. Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki expressed himself more diplomatically and suggested the selective closure of some church buildings, but not the strict application of rules everywhere and with no exceptions. Even the spokesman of the Holy Synod, the learned Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and Hagios Vlasios, disagreed with the state's decision. He also argued that the church has a 2,000-year-old tradition and cannot be treated by the state in a manner worse than a supermarket or a hairdresser's salon. In a letter sent to the prime minister, the retired Metropolitan Ambrosios of Kalavryta and Aigialeia, who was well known because of his militant and uncompromising positions, stressed that he had no right to close the church buildings and that he thereby became an enemy of the church and Christ, drawing upon him the wrath of God. The church as a holy place and the abode of God could not transmit the virus, he argued. On the

contrary, it was therapy for the soul and body of every Christian, if one considered the therapeutic miracles that were taking place constantly in church buildings and pilgrimage places. Beyond this, Metropolitan Nektarios of Corfu suggested that believers ignore what he considered absurd and insensitive state restrictions and come to church to partake in Holy Communion. People, he argued, were allowed under lockdown to take their dogs out for a walk or to go out for physical exercise, but not to go to church to pray or for receiving Holy Communion. In addition, Metropolitan Makarios of Sidirokastron sent a letter to deputy ministers Stelios Petsas and Nikos Chardalias, as well as to professor Tsiordas, urging them to ask for forgiveness for having closed church buildings, given that viable alternatives surely existed. He emphasised that nobody, not even the highest authority, had the right to deny Holy Communion to believers, who fasted all through Lent in order to receive it. In his diocese, he wrote, these measures were amounting to a war against the Orthodox faith and tradition.

Reactions came also from outside the church domain. The previously mentioned ex-deputy Makri rejected the lockdown of church buildings as being part of an anti-Christian plan to destroy Orthodoxy. The left politician Alekos Alavanos suggested that at least the popular *Epitaphios* procession on Good Friday should not have been prohibited, due to its long tradition. A small procession could have been allowed, while believers could chant and pray from their homes or balconies, a step that would strengthen their morale during the lockdown. Similar reactions, although not necessarily out of Orthodox convictions, came from all possible sides, ranging from the far-right party 'Golden Dawn' to prominent personalities in various domains in the country. There were also initiatives of various Orthodox associations collecting signatures in order to open church buildings on Easter and criticising the selective state policy concerning lockdowns. Some believers even appealed to the Council of State in order to 'freeze' the state measures banning religious services as unconstitutional, but this highest judicial body rejected these appeals for reasons of public health protection. The anti-lockdown arguments varied: some stressed the fact that church buildings were not even closed during the centuries-long Ottoman rule, while others pointed to the situation in other predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, in which such strict lockdowns were not implemented.

Nevertheless, the majority of Greek bishops maintained a more pragmatic agenda and were ready to provide reasonable explanations for these state measures. Metropolitan Ignatios of Volos and Dimitrias found it far-fetched to argue that the measures, which he fully endorsed, amounted to a persecution of Christianity and the church. In fact, he expected reasonable stances from both the church and the state, in order to avoid 'forms of crypto-Christianity' or an exploitation of the whole situation by various people causing tensions and problems. Given that the pandemic situation ameliorated in the summer of 2020, church buildings became again accessible, albeit under loose hygienic conditions. Nevertheless, from late autumn 2020, the overall pandemic situation deteriorated again, due to repeated neglect of protective measures in church buildings. Even Archbishop Hieronymos II was infected and spent several days in intensive care in November 2020. Yet, the

new restrictions imposed were not as strict as at the beginning. This situation lasted throughout the winter of 2020-2021 until the spring of 2022, with various disruptions and restructurings of ritual life (e.g., the legislative prohibition of religious processions), which affected the major feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. The latter was even celebrated at 9 p.m. (instead of the traditional midnight), so that churchgoers might return home earlier and avoid large gatherings and overcrowding. However, given the importance of every detail in the Orthodox ritual tradition, such measures were deemed by many believers to be serious deviations from the sacred tradition, a disturbance that fuelled once more all kinds of reactions against imposed measures.

In this period, the state diplomatically sought the dialogue with more 'progressive' church hierarchs and tried to isolate the hardliners, yet the latter were quite vocal in their reactions and had wider influence, given that even many moderate bishops expressed dissatisfaction with the state policies. Thus, opposition to state measures grew stronger, not only because these measures were regarded as ineffective in battling and potentially ending the pandemic, but also because they were implicated in various conspiracy scenarios. The discourse was now about an imposed 'new form of dictatorship' aimed at curtailing human will and freedom. More importantly, these measures were controversially discussed at the higher echelons of the church, so that the church leadership started expressing openly its dissatisfaction with them as being disproportionally harsh and unnecessary. Although in the end the church in its majority opted for a compromise, there were bishops who took a more radical stance, performing church services without protections or defying state and church decisions (e.g., Metropolitan Serapheim of Kythera and Antikythera, Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania, and Metropolitan Nektarios of Corfu). Such cases of disobedience led to police investigations and hearings before the Holy Synod, although ultimately without repercussions for the disobedient bishops.

The situation in the church of Cyprus evolved similarly in many respects, given that its Holy Synod supported the state-imposed strict lockdown in March 2020, which resulted in the disruption of churchgoing. The church legitimised this decision by reference to the urgent need to combat the spread of the virus through drastic measures, albeit appealing simultaneously to divine power in curbing the pandemic. As painful as such a decision might have been for many believers, it was still deemed an absolutely necessary one. Most importantly, according to the church, it did not impinge at all upon the Orthodox faith and tradition. Attending church services digitally through modern electronic media was presented as a quite acceptable alternative under these circumstances. However, there were various reactions, the most prominent being that of the aforementioned Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, who often and openly defied the rules and held religious services with large attendance. Even if the police intervened to stop such assemblies, he assumed full responsibility and insisted on their legitimacy by arguing that divine law is above any human law. In his view, what mattered in this transient life was not simply following earthly concerns, but paying attention to things that would guarantee eternal life after death.

In another interesting case, 152 doctors and nursing personnel signed a petition to the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nikos Anastasiadis, asking him to reopen church buildings under specific protective conditions. It was argued that they were put in an unjust position as potential spreaders of the virus, when—epidemiologically speaking—the same applied (even to a greater degree) to all businesses supplying food, which did not face such harsh restriction measures. This initiative annoyed Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus, who took the side of the government and advised medical experts and practitioners to do their own jobs and not interfere in the affairs of the church. This was not the time, he argued, for populist reactions, and the church always attempted to serve the people of God responsibly. Protesters should have first contacted the Archbishop to hear his intentions before sending such a petition directly to the president.[15] This incident characteristically shows that, in many instances, lay Orthodox appeared to be more annoyed by the state decisions, whereas the church leadership was prone to come to an agreement with the state and support its restrictive policies.

Digitalisation/Virtualisation as an Alienating Mode of Existence

Another issue that was discussed in this broader context concerned the tremendous consequences of anti-pandemic measures in society at large, especially due to radical changes in the traditional patterns of life and work. These included, for example, the disruption of the work-school-private life balance, home offices, overexposure to digital media, as well as the lack of physical contact and in-person communication. This extensively pervasive yet unavoidable digitalisation of the entire spectrum of human life during the pandemic, albeit preceding it in various forms, enhanced anxieties about unknown and unprecedented negative consequences in the future. Truth be told, many Orthodox actors had already been worried for decades about the growing significance of new electronic media, even if they often benefitted from using them. As a result, they were highly disturbed by this novel, abrupt, and more massive onslaught of digitalisation. These fears were also extended to the potential of a virtual church life and its multiple repercussions for 'embodied religion', which is a key feature of Orthodox Christianity. The potential digital transformation of Orthodox worship was thus a cause for concern. Another one was the replacement of the God-created human person by an impersonal electronic human identity, which could lead to the degradation of the living church community and transform physical participation into a mere numerical electronic collective without true interpersonal relations. The fact that the church had earlier accepted such digital innovations to a considerable extent was interpreted as a sign of its growing self-secularisation, which was much more intensified during the pandemic.[16]

Taking into consideration that the start of the pandemic affected Holy Week services in general and the Easter service in particular, things became very quickly quite complicated. This is because the Easter tradition in Orthodoxy feeds on the sense of community and interpersonal relations, which had always taken place in the past in a physical form. The existence of a related virtual community could

not, of course, match the experiential advantages and the emotional significance of celebrating Easter in person in a church building with all the ritual richness and festivities. It is well known from statistical surveys that even atheists or religiously indifferent people go to church on Easter, a fact demonstrating the broader social and cultural significance of this ritual for the public. This ritual is also connected to previous life experiences, especially during childhood, of many involved persons, and conveys a strong sense of belonging. The same pertains to rituals that have an equally strong and communal appeal, such as baptisms and weddings. All these were significantly reduced during the pandemic, causing an overall disruption of habitual ritual life, a 'ritual arrhythmia', to which we shall return below.

From the church's perspective, the enforced digitalisation of ecclesiastical life, especially through the online transmission of religious services, was regarded as a temporary measure in times of need, which did not really affect true ecclesial identity. It could be allowed according to the principle of ecclesiastical *oikonomia*, yet should not result in a permanent situation, because that would signify the secularisation of the church. It was acknowledged that these changes affected the living church community, which authentically and ideally exists and operates mainly through physical presence and interpersonal exchange. But it was deemed an unavoidable measure in the harsh times of lockdown that could offer useful and practical alternatives. After all, the use of new electronic media in general was not perceived as an evil development, but as an inescapable technological step, from which the church could eventually draw considerable profit for its own purposes. In fact, online worship was already an aspect of church media, as liturgies and other services were broadcast live on various channels. Other forms of Orthodox communal life (sermons, study groups, consultations, curricula, etc.) were also available virtually in the past as well.

Concerning the digitalisation of Orthodox worship and its relation to the church sacraments, it is well known that these issues are sometimes theologically controversial, and this concerns especially the Eucharist. Yet, for the church, there was no need to discuss more seriously such questions, simply because there was no thought of organising a digital Holy Communion in restriction times. This particular ritual had to remain completely traditional, hence there was no conflict here. While the theological discussion of all aspects of digitalisation of church life may not have been developed thoroughly so far, there is a sense that most aspects can be treated in a satisfactory and constructive way. However, a lot depends on the historical experiences of the involved churches. In Orthodox ex-communist countries in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, where church buildings had been closed or destroyed and religious services had been seriously interrupted under communism, things were somehow different. The enforced new closure of church buildings due to the pandemic created various negative associations with the past and consequently more critical stances towards the attempted digitalisation of church services. However, this was not the case with Greece and Cyprus, which had not experienced communism as such in their history.

In our context, most reactions related mainly to the overall context of the pandemic and had largely to do with the forcible character of the imposed protection

measures, the curtailment of personal freedom of choice, and the massive reduction of public life. These measures were often implicated in conspiracy scenarios about forthcoming radical changes in the wake of the ongoing globalisation process, especially by Orthodox fundamentalists, as already highlighted. Reactions to globalisation are found among many groups and cultures worldwide, far beyond the domain of religion. New digital possibilities, from electronic collection of personal data to the control of digital identities, have created numerous insecurities, uncertainties, and fears about a massive restriction of personal freedom and a pending 'global dictatorship'. The coronavirus pandemic triggered pre-existing fears and doomsday scenarios and culminated in them. This is no doubt an issue that will seriously concern Orthodox cultures in years to come. This is because continuous new developments in natural and human sciences lead to a more sophisticated and reflective understanding of how human identities are articulated and invite a discussion of what it means to be a human person. All this presents severe challenges to Orthodox anthropology, which is conventionally based on the relational, communitarian, and transcendent character of human personhood.

Protection Measures and Their Ambiguous Acceptance

The hygienic and other protection measures mandated by the Greek and the Cypriot states, when church buildings started reopening in May 2020 after the first lockdown under restrictions, also caused varied Orthodox reactions. These measures included the obligatory use of facemasks; antiseptics for hand disinfection; controlled waiting of worshippers at the entrance; safety distances and maximum occupancy limits in every church building; good natural ventilation of church buildings; refraining for shaking hands; frequent and meticulous cleaning of icons, other religious objects, and surfaces; the distribution of the consecrated bread with rubber gloves; and many other related prescriptions. Anyone showing symptoms of a cold was admonished to stay at home. In general, the church officially supported these new rules, and there is evidence that many believers seemed to accept them too.[17] However, the sensitive issue of Holy Communion and the traditional way of its distribution, to which we shall return later on, were not touched upon by the state in the framework of these obligatory protective measures, a development that generally pleased the church leadership.

In fact, sanitary and other protection measures were applied throughout the pandemic period, although perhaps not as strictly as at the beginning. Especially in late 2020 and in 2021, when there was growing dissatisfaction among many believers regarding state restrictions on church services, the application of such measures was lax and negligent. Parish priests professing dissident views allowed parishioners to bypass them or did not apply them at all. Certainly, this was not the most debated issue during the pandemic, yet opposition to such measures usually emerged within the following discourse: the church building is a holy place as the abode of God, the heavenly powers, and the saints; hence, no physical harm

can ever happen there to a true believer. In principle, kissing icons, representations of the cross, and the priest's hand could never hurt a believer or transmit the virus. Following this logic of transcendence, under the protection of God, sanitary measures in a church building were often deemed trivial and perhaps unnecessary during the pandemic.

Such ideas gave rise to ambiguous evaluations of 'human protection' measures as distinct from 'divine protection' due to the grace of God, which was thought to be by far superior. The aforementioned Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, originally a physicist with noteworthy postgraduate degrees in science (from Harvard and MIT), emphasised the need to follow the prescribed hygienic measures, yet argued that they should not be overestimated in their efficacy, because there also exists the protection provided by God and the Virgin Mary, which should not be neglected. The new 'flu virus' was causing global turmoil and had to be treated pragmatically by scientific means. However, he asserted, aside from diseases, pandemics, viruses, and germs, there exists also the 'virus' of unbelief, atheism, and the rejection of God, which he characterised as the endemic problem of our era. In his view, the coronavirus pandemic was the consequence of the human morbid eudemonism and immanentism, and thus could become a trigger to rediscover the presence of God in human life; and God is actually the best medicine for every infection and disease.[18]

There were, however, other theological elaborations on the significance of ritual practice in Orthodoxy that supported its preeminent 'spiritual character'. External and visible demonstrations of faith and piety were not considered so important to God. Far more crucial was the inner and genuine faith of every believer, which does not depend on ostentatious acts of worship. One could thus fulfil his/her Christian duties of love towards neighbours by responsibly protecting oneself and others from the coronavirus, following the hygienic rules. This would be more significant than a pretentious ritual life. Even so, coronavirus protection measures did not remain uncontested. Hence, some fundamentalist Orthodox criticised the rather extensive application of such measures by Archbishop Elpidophoros of America (under the Patriarchate of Constantinople) with regard to the distribution of Holy Communion, a development that they deemed untraditional following the above logic of 'divine protection'.

Be that as it may, the pandemic crisis entered a phase of deterioration due to various deadlier mutations of the virus (especially the Delta variant) from early autumn 2020 until spring 2021. Given that protection measures had been largely neglected along the way, there was a rising number of infections in church buildings with dramatic results. Such a case took place in Thessaloniki in the context of the celebrations of the feast of its patron saint Demetrios (26 October 2020), which was massively attended without any protection measures. This consequently led to the massive spread of the virus among bishops, clerics, and monks, some of whom later died (e.g., Metropolitan Ioannis of Langadas). Aside from this, there was an (often implicit) ambiguous reception of protection measures by specific Orthodox circles, which became openly evident in 2021 through the growing and vehement opposition to (obligatory) vaccination.

Facemasks as a Curtailment of the Human Person

In connection to the above point, the obligatory use of masks covering parts of the human face created a lot of discussions and debates from many interrelated points of view. The whole issue became quite complicated due to the long duration of the pandemic, in which protective facemasks became an established, everyday practise and a reality with which everyone had to cope, either wearing them obligatorily or refusing. The issue was extensively discussed on a medical level in terms of the real protection provided by such masks, given that there were medical experts who considered masks (cloth, surgical, and even the N95) to be ultimately non-effective and thus unnecessary in protecting from the spread of the virus.

However, the whole issue had additional religious dimensions, which became of concern to the Orthodox people involved, not least within a conspiracy theory framework. The main pro-mask argument of the church referred to its potential for protecting oneself and the others from the virus. This action was thought to be based on Christian responsibility and the love of one's own neighbour. Yet, opinions did vary on this matter considerably. Facemasks and their obligatory imposition were generally interpreted by many Orthodox as a means to curtail the very characteristics of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. They were thought to hide and constrain human emotions, sentiments, individuality, and freedom. The latter elements are considered indispensable in the context of multisensory Orthodox worship. For example, the absolutely necessary visual interaction between icons and believers in a church building could be seriously disturbed and constrained through the intermediary medium of a facemask. Such masks were viewed as a non-natural, artificial disruption of the divine-human communion and communication, which is extremely central to Orthodox worship. There were many other interruptions of Orthodox ritual life due to facemasks, such as the impossibility of kissing icons and the hand of a priest.

This concerns a specific 'sensorial arrhythmia' that was widely felt during the pandemic. As we have already observed, many such practices were changed or adapted during the pandemic. Instead of kissing icons, believers were admonished, for example, to simply bow their head in front of an icon without touching it. However, the problem was particularly visible in the context of Holy Communion, which could not be received when wearing a facemask. This and other similar interruptions of the Orthodox sensorial experience during a church service were perceived by many believers as an abrupt and externally imposed alienation from their traditional ritual practise, with which they had been very well accustomed without problems. In addition, wearers of masks were perceived as not having a 'strong faith', thus compensating for their ineptitude to fully trust God during the pandemic through the use of facemasks. Wearing such masks especially in the holy place of a church building, which by definition stays under God's full protection, was regarded as documenting a false and distorted view of Christian faith.

Given all these objections, it was not unusual to observe a variety of reactions to mask-wearing by Orthodox clerics, monks, and lay people, pre-eminently within a church building, but at times elsewhere too. During the Divine Liturgy, there were incidents of priests interrupting the service to ask individual believers or the body

of the faithful to take off their facemasks. At times, people were instructed to do so before even entering the church building. There were cases of monasteries placing signs at their entrances prohibiting people wearing masks from entering the monastery premises. Those afraid of the virus had to stay at home or sit outside instead of entering the church building with a facemask. It was argued that there should be no fear in God's presence. Ironically, such views were openly expressed by Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania, who in early January 2022 died from coronavirus. Among the fundamentalist Orthodox, such reactions were even stronger, as the case of the aforementioned priest-monk Ignatios in Eordaia shows. He once ordered a 74-year-old woman to take off her mask, comparing facemasks to carnival festivities that have no place in a church building. In his view, the church is the body of Christ, and Christ wants the faces of his people to be clean and free of obstructions, so that they can look at him directly and without any constraints. This story reached the Facebook community, which was critical of the priest's actions.

However, there have been repercussions for disobedient priests going against the state and the church's orders. In February 2021, Metropolitan Paisios of Leros, Kalymnos, and Astypalaia put the priest of Saint Athanasios Church in Kalymnos on mandatory leave for two months because he allowed believers to enter the church without facemasks and made exhortations via the Internet defying the anti-pandemic measures. Even before that the mayor of Kalymnos had held the local diocese responsible for the rising number of infections because of the systematic disregard for protection measures. Another priest in Thessaloniki involved in similar practices was investigated in October 2021 by the police for the offence of incitement to disobedience. The situation in Cyprus was similar, not only with Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, who denied all such measures from the very beginning, but also with some other hierarchs (e.g., Metropolitan Athanasios of Lemesos), who expressed ambiguous opinions on certain aspects, including facemasks and the appropriateness of their use.

Once more, we should keep in mind that the entire facemask opposition movement was much broader and included protesters of all sorts, who made their demands clear through public demonstrations and other actions, putting forth various arguments—not only that masks curtailed human freedom and were an imposed muzzle, but also that they were unhealthy due to the destruction of the human immune system. All this took place within the usual conspiracy framework about the 'new world order' aimed at eliminating the majority of people and creating a new and genetically perfect human race of a few elect persons. Interestingly enough, such positions were often reproduced by idiosyncratic politicians in the Greek Parliament, such as by Kyriakos Velopoulos, president of a small right-wing populist party. As the moderate Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis once remarked:

> The mask-denial movement is a complex social phenomenon with strong anti-systemic characteristics … It is not a Greek particularity, and in no way should we underestimate or ignore it. In two months, however, we shall find it in front of us when it transforms itself into an anti-vax movement. We need national unity in order to deal with it.[19]

In fact, his above utterance was more than prophetic.

The Sensitive Issue of Holy Communion

The sacrament of Orthodox Holy Communion was a central issue from the beginning of the pandemic because of the way the Holy Gifts (the bread and wine of the Eucharist changed through the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ) are traditionally distributed to the believers, using a common chalice and a shared spoon. As expected, this practice had caused suspicions or fears in the past about the potential for transmission of viruses (such as AIDS) due to the unavoidable mixing of human saliva. Yet, in practical terms, this was never an issue, and no measures were ever planned or taken by the state, as the medical world did not provide any evidence that there was an epidemiological problem involved. After all, it was considered an internal and non-negotiable matter for the church, since no higher mortality cases were ever reported for priests, who partake more often than anybody else in Holy Communion and always consume its remains after the end of the Divine Liturgy.

What is more, Holy Communion was a ritual that was always considered proof of the 'supernatural' and 'miraculous' nature of Orthodox worship, given that this centuries-old practice had never led to the eruption of a pandemic or the spread of contagious diseases in the past. Seen in this way, it was a 'miracle' that was performed every time a Divine Liturgy took place. After all, it was a matter of faith, and whoever had true faith in God should never be afraid of any lurking danger. It is a common Christian belief that God can simply change the natural cause and order of things in this earthly world. Nobody has appeared to have been infected by any contagious disease through this ritual practice that has been taking place for centuries regularly and without interruption. Hence, according to the church, Holy Communion is a 'miracle' that cannot be subjected to the logic of mundane science (medicine) and state policies. Aside from this, the entire sacrament of the Eucharist has been a contentious one historically, not least from an inward theological point of view regarding its interpretation and significance for church life in general. Differences between Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Protestants have lasted for centuries, especially because of the Protestant-flavoured modernisation of the Eucharist on the basis of its symbolic, abstract understanding and the concomitant aversion towards embodied, material religion.

As was to be expected, this issue took prominence during the pandemic. When some medical experts and practitioners expressed doubts about public health security due to this ritual, the church was keen to categorically discard all questioning and doubts. In the period of the early strict lockdown, when churches remained closed, the sacrament was unavoidably suspended and was available only to a small number of believers. But afterwards, it was regularly performed in the traditional way without any deviation. There was never a complete disruption of this practice, and its suspension was never part of the sanitary/protective measures imposed by the state. Cases of government officials and politicians partaking (at times ostentatiously) in Holy Communion during the pandemic attests to the fact that this sacrament was not regarded as a major problem.

Having accepted the list of protective, anti-pandemic state measures, the Greek church made officially clear from the outset that the way this ritual was traditionally performed was not going to change. Holy Communion was portrayed as no threat at all for the spread of diseases, but rather as a source of eternal life. For the church, the whole matter was *a priori* non-negotiable. The church believed that, in the Eucharist, with the intervention of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become truly the body and blood of Christ. Some clergymen pointed additionally to the alcohol content in the wine as an antimicrobial. Whether this is sufficient to kill the COVID-19 virus is of course disputed.

The same stance was kept initially by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but in June 2020 it came to finally adopt a more lenient and adaptable policy, especially because of its numerous dioceses spread around the globe, which had to obey local state decisions. The Patriarchate made clear that the church respected medical science and urged all believers to conform to the health directives of WHO and the relevant recommendations and local legislation of respective states. It reiterated that it would always remain the guardian of the traditions handed down by the Holy Church Fathers. At the same time, it also clearly acknowledged that the manner of distributing Holy Communion could be adapted according to local state prescriptions due to the pandemic.[20] This gave leeway to follow the various policies and strategies in each different country.

For example, in Germany the Greek Orthodox Metropolis (under Constantinople) during the early lockdown had to completely suspend this ritual for believers due to the general federal prohibitions to stop the spread of the virus.[21] Thus, only priests could partake in Holy Communion, and no alternative ways of distributing it were introduced. On the other hand, in New Hampshire (USA), the use of multiple (plastic) spoons and private vessels was prescribed by the authorities, thus prohibiting Holy Communion from a common cup and handle. Some Orthodox parish churches did not follow this rule, and this was connected to a rising number of infections in one parish church, which was subsequently closed through the intervention of the Public Attorney in September 2020. In another case, Metropolitan Alexandros of Nigeria kept the traditional ritual intact, but chose the method of pouring the Holy Gifts with a spoon directly into the mouths of the communicants without touching them. Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, instead, approved the use of separate disposable spoons for Holy Communion; yet out of the eight dioceses under his jurisdiction only one widely accepted this change. These examples demonstrate the great variety in approaches to this sensitive issue.

In Greece, although Holy Communion was left practically untouched, there were plenty of controversial discussions about its character and the potential dangers epidemiologically. Theologians and other scholars pointed to the historically documented variety in ways of partaking in Holy Communion. It was also pointed out that a well-known Orthodox canonist, Nikodimos Hagioreitis (1749–1809), had allowed provisional adaptations in its distribution during periods of pandemics.[22] In exceptional times, the faithful were temporarily allowed to bring their own spoons in order to be protected against infection. Historically speaking, in the early church, Holy Communion was practised differently, in all probability with bare

hands, while the 'spoon' (the cochlea) was generally introduced from at least the eleventh or twelfth century onwards.[23] Hence, it was argued that the whole issue was not a canonical or dogmatic one, but simply a ritual custom, which could be of course changed or accordingly adapted in case of need.

Yet, things were not as straightforward as they appeared to be. Interestingly enough, some medical experts from the Athens University Medical School (the epidemiologists Eleni Giamarellou and Athina Linou) publicly claimed that the Holy Communion does not pose a public health threat, because it is a mystery and a miracle performed by God. Similar opinions were formulated by other medical experts, even with the support of medical arguments.[24] Such judgements were deemed to be at odds with the medical profession as such, a fact that caused outrage among their more secular colleagues. Thus, Greek geneticist Manolis Dermitzakis from the University of Geneva disagreed and asked for a state intervention to change the way Holy Communion was distributed to the faithful. The Federation of Hospital Doctors' Associations of Greece, the Greek National Public Health Agency, and the Panhellenic Medical Association also expressed their strong concern and disagreement with the 'unscientific' public statements of some medical experts regarding the impossibility of COVID-19 transmission through Holy Communion. In turn, this caused heightened reactions from the church and especially from the aforementioned militant Metropolitan Ambrosios of Kalavryta and Aigialeia, who brought theological and historical arguments in favour of the traditional practice.

Be that as it may, the Greek Professor of Public Health at the London School of Economics and advisor to the Greek government on the pandemic, Elias Mosialos, took the following position: being secular himself and critical towards religion, he initially suggested changing the manner of distributing Holy Communion until a safe and effective vaccine could be found. But later on, he argued that there were no reliable epidemiological data about the potential transmission of diseases through Holy Communion. In fact, there has been only one serious study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which did not provide any data that this specific ritual runs the risk of transmitting infectious diseases.[25] Mosialos argued that, if it is scientifically proven that communion from a common cup is contagious, then there could be a modification of this entire ritual. There are some further medical studies pointing to the theoretical yet still unproven and undocumented risk of contamination of healthy people through a common communion cup.[26] Germ exposure might be possible using such a cup, but no outbreaks of diseases were reported linked to this practice.

The blurring of the boundaries between religion and science was quite often evident in such debates; the sheer ambiguity surrounding this ritual kept dividing and even polarising the two opposite camps. Critics of the ritual in Greece included comedians (Radio Arvyla), public intellectuals (Stelios Ramfos), well-known writers (Petros Tatsopoulos), and the left ex-minister and doctor Pavlos Polakis. The left opposition party 'Syriza' also raised the topic, probably out of political motives, asking the prime minister about Holy Communion as a potential danger for public health; but the whole issue was not discussed any longer on this political level. On the other hand, prominent media persons (e.g., actors, singers) and many

others openly disclosed their Orthodox convictions and their constant partaking in Holy Communion without any fear or second thoughts. In any event, as previously noted, the state did not dare to intervene on this sensitive issue and kept its distance, so that up until now there has been no interruption, prohibition, or change in this important Orthodox ritual, which has been continuously performed unchanged.

What is worth mentioning is that the Greek church did not consider various alternative changes or adaptations of the ritual, even if temporarily, although introducing single-use/disposable spoons was allowed under certain circumstances in some other Orthodox churches on a local basis without generalising the novelty or rendering it permanent. This attachment to tradition was often interpreted in 'national terms', that is, as an indication that Greek Orthodoxy, the oldest one historically, is the guarantor of Orthodox authenticity and genuineness and the historical bastion of Orthodox truth. However, some clerics and theologians criticised the emphasis put on the miraculous character of this sacrament, namely in the sense that one expects thereby a 'miracle' from God every time Holy Communion takes place. This is tantamount to putting God under constant temptation to perform miracles, which is not the real meaning of the sacrament. Hence, its 'modernisation' as a contactless process (e.g., without the spoon coming into contact with the mouth of the communicant) has also been suggested, putting emphasis on the 'essential' and not the 'contingent' elements (e.g., the way of transmission) of the sacrament.

Similar issues were raised, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Cypriot Orthodox context, given that during the first strict lockdown an abstinence from religious services and Holy Communion was suggested by the Holy Synod to the faithful. This measure was justified by reference to the seriousness of the epidemiological crisis and as a way of contributing to the common public good. Thus, this harsh measure was not considered to impinge upon the conscience of the faithful. However, as stated earlier, the petition of 152 doctors and nursing personnel to the Cypriot President to allow the reopening of church buildings under protective measures touched explicitly upon the issue of Holy Communion. There it was argued that, for Orthodox Christians, it is not just about a religious ritualistic duty, but about the very foundation of their faith, as well as their inalienable right and a 'gift of eternal life'. It was also claimed that no viruses or germs could be transmitted by or through it, and that no scientific article, study, or research proved the opposite. The fact that there exist no such data, particularly for priests, who have been partaking in Holy Communion for centuries, was taken as proof that the latter is not and cannot be a source of infections. Infectious diseases of various sizes and conditions have always existed and will always exist in the world. However, at no time in the 2,000-year history of Orthodoxy in Cyprus has there ever been a question of interrupting the possibility for the faithful to come to church and receive Holy Communion. Various sanitary and protective measures were suggested as a way of guaranteeing the safety of the faithful while in the church building, but Holy Communion had still to be distributed in the traditional Orthodox manner. The whole argumentation here reveals once more the blurring of the boundaries between religious faith and science, a constant characteristic of the whole debate during the pandemic.

(Compulsory) Vaccination as a Threat and New Totalitarianism

The last controversial point that monopolised most reactions throughout 2021 and partly until the spring of 2022 involved vaccination, a development that since the start of its application in December 2020 has decisively shaped the later course of the pandemic and the stances towards it. Needless to say, the multifaceted anti-vaccine movement has a global dimension, and its purveyors are far beyond the religious domain, including members of the medical profession. The same pertains to Greece and Cyprus, where anti-vaccine protestors came from quite diverse areas.

Yet, a significant part of them were Orthodox actors of varied provenance, who were quite loud in supporting or disseminating their views through electronic media and regularly organised protests. In Greece, there has been a huge amount of misinformation and rumours about the various vaccines in use, especially those using the mRNA technique. For example, this sort of vaccination was connected to the philosophico-scientific movement of 'transhumanism' that supports the enhancement of human capacities and the improvement of the human condition through the use of modern technologies (e.g., a new and genetically perfect human race). Generally, transhumanism has been discussed critically from an Orthodox point of view,[27] but in our context reactions against it followed the line of conspiracy theories that predicted hard times for the Orthodox in the 'new world order'. There was a large array of anti-vaccine opinions; for example, that only Holy Communion is better protection from the virus than vaccination; that medicine against the virus had already been discovered, but was purposely kept secret so that vaccination would prevail among the largest majority of humans; or anti-scientific arguments claiming that humans should trust solely in God and not modern science. Finally, many Orthodox explained that they were not against vaccination as such, but that they simply reacted against the imposition of obligatory vaccination by the state, which was regarded as a new form of totalitarianism restricting human freedom. They also claimed that the new vaccines did not fulfil all the necessary criteria to be allowed for use and that there were other ways to effectively protect oneself from the virus.

All of the above created quite a few tensions within the church and led to serious debates, given that a considerable number of clerics, including bishops, monks, and lay people, were not persuaded by the necessity of vaccination. However, the official church hierarchy issued an encyclical[28] that was distributed widely throughout the country and which tried to offer extensive persuasive answers to all queries and doubts about vaccines. Even so, it does not seem to have had a huge impact upon the faithful. Metropolitan Hieronymos of Larissa and Tyrnavos even ordered (October 2021) a mobile vaccination centre to be present on Sundays outside the city's cathedral as a way of persuading believers to be vaccinated—this despite various reactions from a group of anti-vaccine supporters. In his opinion, the church does not deny technology, but uses it pertinently for the sake of people.[29] Similar initiatives were undertaken by other dioceses as a way to promote vaccination and neutralise the resistance and suspicions of many Orthodox.

There have also been various surveys to chart the entire field of anti-vaccine reactions—their initiators and their followers. These have revealed that the percentage of unvaccinated persons was particularly high in church milieus, monasteries, ecclesiastical academies, and university schools of theology, a fact showing that Orthodox persuasions and motivations did play a significant role in this domain. Considerable differences between East and West were also observed in this context, which are not unrelated to the influence of Orthodox Christianity in the East.[30] In spite of official church support for medical and state measures (especially vaccination) against the pandemic, various Orthodox milieus, both within the hierarchy and in local contexts, became a matrix of questions and reactions against these measures throughout 2021. In October 2021, this prompted Archbishop Hieronymos II, who had been vaccinated on 12 May 2021, to officially and publicly castigate those clerics of all ranks who openly or secretly disagreed with and opposed the decisions of the church hierarchy on the pandemic. He even asked them to leave the church and find another profession elsewhere or isolate themselves in monasteries.[31] Most importantly, he was not only referring to Orthodox hardliners of all sorts, but also to members of the church hierarchy, who kept following their own individual dictates on the matter and were influencing churchgoers, believers, and other people in their respective dioceses—often in collaboration with a wide spectrum of non-religious protesters against vaccination and anti-pandemic measures.

The result of all these tensions and conflicts was dramatic in many instances. Numerous unvaccinated priests, both older and younger, caught the virus, were hospitalised (sometimes with members of their families), and finally died. Ironically, most of them had been quite vocal earlier, preaching against vaccines and medical protective measures while urging their flocks to trust only God and the Orthodox faith as the sole way to overcome the crisis—a recurrent phenomenon throughout the pandemic. There were also cases of infected clerics, who refused medical help and hospitalisation and died of coronavirus complications. A most prominent case was the previously mentioned Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania. He refused to be vaccinated and was brought to hospital involuntarily by others when his condition seriously deteriorated, yet to no avail. His unvaccinated sister died as well. Others, such as Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythera and Antikythera, repeatedly spread conspiracy theories about the vaccines as being a product of abortions. There were also cases when 'spiritual fathers' (from different Orthodox milieus, including Old Calendarists) advised their spiritual children to avoid vaccinating themselves, which sometimes led to tragic results with the loss of entire families. As stated above, monasteries have been key places for spreading the virus, and the same holds true for students in ecclesiastical schools—in both cases, with low rates of vaccination. In other instances, if an unvaccinated cleric caught the virus and was finally healed after hospitalisation, he attributed his rescue mostly to God while underestimating the role of scientific medicine. A prominent case was the abbot Ephraim of the Vatopedi Monastery (Holy Mount Athos), who was seriously ill with coronavirus, had additional underlying conditions, and was hospitalised for 51 days in an intensive care unit, followed by a longer rehabilitation period.

Despite all this, the majority of the Greek clergy were in favour of vaccination. The same positive attitude characterised the bishops of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In Greece, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Dodoni and Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Messinia even supported the obligatory vaccination for all Orthodox clerics, given that they were all being paid by the Greek state. There were vaccination centres even on Holy Mount Athos due to the initiatives of monks who came from the medical profession and undertook to enlighten other monks; they were also at the female convent at Ormylia (Chalkidiki), which operates its own health centre with nuns who come from the medical profession. Some bishops, such as Metropolitan Dionysios of Zakynthos, threatened the unvaccinated priests in their dioceses with canonical repercussions. In his view, spiritual fathers were not allowed to have a say in medical matters, let alone to cause social dramas and become moral instigators in the deaths of innocent and unsuspecting believers. Hence, 14 priests in the diocese of Metropolitan Dionysios, who refused to be vaccinated, were placed on mandatory leave, a decision that was rejected by anti-vaccine supporters, who spoke of a 'satanic' act on the part of the metropolitan.

The whole matter became even more complicated from the late fall of 2021 and during the winter of 2021–2022, as cases of infected people were once more on the rise. As effective vaccines from different biopharmaceutical companies became available, along with boosters, basic protection from the coronavirus was considered possible through vaccination. Albeit highly controversial, the Greek state decided to make vaccination obligatory for some categories of citizens and to put enhanced restrictions on the unvaccinated. In the end, two groups of people were formed: the 'privileged' vaccinated ones, who had access everywhere, and the 'unprivileged' unvaccinated, whose public life was significantly constrained, as they had to undergo constant tests to prove that they were not infected with coronavirus. Not least, this also had an impact on access to church buildings as public places. However, when the state decided in November 2021 to implement a prohibition against unvaccinated people entering a church building, the Holy Synod declared its inability to enforce this measure and transposed the responsibility back to the state, despite its basic endorsement of other protective measures.

In Cyprus, the previously mentioned Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou continued his opposition to the measures taken against the coronavirus by focusing on the issue of vaccination in his conspiracy framework. He repeatedly expressed his vociferous opposition to vaccination, which, in his opinion, would transform people into a genetically modified product of the 'new world order', despite the fact that the Holy Synod encouraged the faithful to receive it. However, being unvaccinated himself, he tested positive for coronavirus in August 2021 and showed mild symptoms. He simply received medical treatment in isolation, emphasising again that he did not intend to be vaccinated. He also issued a statement in support of a doctor arrested by the police in connection with a large anti-vaccination protest.

There have been rumours about other Cypriot bishops opposing vaccination, such as Athanasios of Lemesos, yet not so radically as Metropolitan Neophytos. However, it does seem that Athanasios was against obligatory vaccination. He also tested positive for coronavirus, but managed to overcome it with various

repercussions, although he left open the possibility he could be vaccinated in the future. In general, the phenomenon of priests being hospitalised or dying because of the virus was not unusual in Cyprus, as in Greece. Given that Metropolitan Neophytos was extremely vocal and popular, his reactionary influence went far beyond the Cypriot borders and reached Greece as well. Thus, it was no surprise that the church of Greece officially called on its Cypriot counterpart to ask the outspoken Neophytos to tone down his conspiracy-driven, anti-vaccine rhetoric and criticism in sermons and public statements, which were interfering with the affairs of another church and creating serious problems there.[32] Neophytos became 'quieter' following a meeting held between President Nikos Anastasiadis and the Holy Synod of the Cypriot church in September 2021. This was probably because the Holy Synod agreed that bishops would not voice public dissent whenever they disagreed with a decision of the majority.

Even in early 2022, despite Archbishop Chrysostomos II's tough stance on vaccination, almost half of Cyprus's priests had yet to receive a vaccine. As a result, he decided to send 12 unvaccinated priests on mandatory leave, warning those and others of tougher potential measures (e.g., long suspension of duties and even defrocking) if they continued to defy church rules. The Archbishop mentioned that 27 out of 123 priests in his jurisdiction remained unvaccinated, whereas 15 were exempted for medical reasons. Despite vaccination remaining optional, the Archbishop issued strong guidelines for priests and theologians to get vaccinated. After all, he had backed the government's campaign to vaccinate the population from the very start, being one of the first people to be vaccinated in December 2020.

Uncertainty, Scepticism, and Ritual Arrhythmia: Pandemic Implications for Lived Orthodoxy

The pandemic consequences reached their apex in Greece, as already indicated, in March 2020 during Great Lent, one of the most intensified periods of fasting and prayer in the Orthodox liturgical calendar, leading to Holy Week and to Easter Sunday. The government's imposition of the first lockdown in mid-March (16 March–5 May 2020) saw the suspension of all church services for about two months. Churchgoers were deprived of the possibility of being present in the third and fourth services of Salutations—the well-attended hymns sung to the Virgin Mary during the five Fridays of Great Lent—as well as the important liturgies, rituals, and celebrations of Holy Week and Easter.

While most of our Greek interlocutors opposed this measure that was foisted on their parish churches, they could 'see the logic' behind it, as some of them often told us. According to George, a 47-year-old icon painter living in Athens:

> The church is a sanitised space by the grace of God, yet I can understand that for non-believers, who unfortunately are the majority, it was perceived as the breeding ground of microbes and viruses. It would have been scandalous for them to see large gatherings, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and many did blame us, the churchgoers and the priests, for spreading the virus.

Indeed, the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in Greece, in February 2020, opened a window of opportunity for accusations against the Orthodox faith, the church leaders, and their followers on social media—particularly on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Coming from a variety of societal groups, there were manifestations of extreme forms of anticlericalism, atheistic views, ideologies, and political contentions, demanding a greater separation of church and state and the complete closure of the churches.[33] Many Greeks, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, were against Orthodox hardliners as well as people who were exhibiting extreme forms of piety and were not flexible enough to adapt their religious observances to the situation and prioritise health matters. Together with their ecclesiastical hierarchs, as many of our interlocutors revealed in our discussions, they were often labelled 'murderers', 'criminals', and 'spreaders of death'. Such hostile language, coupled with the language of warfare used by the government and the mass media to describe the virus and the efforts to contain it, contributed to the dissemination of fear that coloured everyone's decisions concerning their religious behaviour during the pandemic. More importantly here, it also resulted in an increased disunity of the general population, the faithful, and the church hierarchy, dividing them into 'enemies' vs 'heroes', 'egotistical' vs 'caring', 'immoral' vs 'moral', 'responsible' vs 'irresponsible', and 'bad' vs 'good' Christians.

It is in this context of dichotomising attitudes and comparisons that the government's protective measures against COVID-19 and the official church's responses were judged. In particular, some measures that were not directly connected with the containment of the virus were perceived as 'unnecessary' and 'alarming' by many of our interlocutors. Such measures enhanced their anxiety and scepticism and persuaded some of them that they were devised as part of a greater scheme of things that would ultimately bring about the persecution and elimination of the church and Greek Orthodoxy.

One such practice was the enforced silence of the church bells during the first lockdown, with the exception of Good Friday and the following Saturday midnight for the celebration of Easter. Despina, a 54-year-old bank clerk from Larissa and regular churchgoer, described intense feelings of anxiety and anger about both the silence experienced during lockdown and the 'silencing' of the church bells:

> I felt very nervous by all the silence that surrounded us during the lockdown. It was like waiting for something to happen but without knowing what. I was used to hearing the bells of my parish church, as I live close by. They reminded me of major festivities, of sad occurrences, of the passing of the time when they rang for vespers or for the Sunday liturgy. When they stopped, I felt strange. As an Orthodox believer, I felt unheard. Like being on mute. But most of all, I felt angry because it was like they were silencing God. I remember when I was young in the Sunday school, they taught us that the church bells symbolised God's mouth calling us to his home. This was not a protective measure against the virus. It was a totally unnecessary one. We all understood that we could not go to church, but at least the church bells ringing would have reminded us that we could watch the liturgy on our television or computer screens.

These criticisms voiced by our interlocutors reflect their need to reclaim the rhythm of ritual life, resisting the silence that might result in the complete annihilation of their Orthodox identity. The significance of that rhythm and the manner in which it permeated the religious lives of our interlocutors can perhaps only be fully acknowledged once it was disrupted, giving rise to what Lefebvre described as 'arrhythmia': rhythms that are discordant and pathological.[34] Lefebvre considers society to be made up of different clusters of routinised and repetitive behaviour patterns that can be analysed as 'rhythms', through which he highlights the interconnections between time and space and how these are dynamically produced categories in the life worlds of people. Drawing on Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' and applying the concept of rhythm to religious practices and rituals, which already have a rhythmic character, our research has revealed that, in the duration of pandemic temporality, Greek Orthodox religious practices and rituals were characterised by what we will term as 'ritual arrhythmia', namely a breakdown of the usual time-space structures of religious experience and its effects on the lives of Greek Orthodox believers. Pandemic temporality involved new timings, suspensions, and postponements, as well as prolonged or shortened durations that caused both temporal and spatial ab-'normalities' and established a restructuring of an ever changing 'normality', both in church rituals and the everyday religious practices and experiences of the laity. Arrhythmia is symptomatic of a pathology that creates uncertainty and has unsettling and disturbing psychological and social consequences. We argue that, on the one hand, ritual arrhythmia during the pandemic produced a crisis of the collective Orthodox identity exemplified in fears, violent reactions, and discord within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and between the clergy, the laity, and the state. On the other hand, it also allowed for agency and strategies of adaptation and innovation in Orthodox rituals, beliefs, and practices. As we will see, the end result of ritual arrhythmia, which lasted for most of the pandemic, was not so much a coherent scheme of action, but rather a multitude of religious responses and practices, on the part of both the official church and the laity.

The ritual arrhythmia caused by the government's health regulations was almost never welcomed by our interlocutors, but, as previously indicated, was treated as either 'necessary' and understandable or, as Despina pointed out for the silencing of the bells, as 'unnecessary' and devoid of logic. This is also the way that Maria, a 64-year-old retired teacher from Thessaloniki, described the earlier celebration of Easter liturgy in 2021, due to the government-imposed curfew:

> Because of the curfew, we had to celebrate Christ's Resurrection at nine o'clock in the evening instead of twelve o'clock. I remember thinking, is this a logical decision? Is the virus becoming more infectious at midnight than it is at 9 p.m.? This decision is based on a complete ignorance of Orthodox rituals. True Orthodox know that no two divine liturgies can be performed on the same day. The priest in our church did not go fully against the state's decision, but he decided to split the Easter service in two. We attended the Holy Saturday Resurrection Service on Saturday evening and the Divine Liturgy on the morning of Easter Sunday, so we could all receive Holy Communion.

> Other priests, however, who defied the state's decision and started the Easter service at 11 p.m. according to tradition, like Father Antonios, the priest of the Church of Saint Athanasios here in Thessaloniki, were put on mandatory leave from the local metropolitan, Anthimos.

Maria also revealed that, during the Holy Week of 2020, the priest of her parish church defied the government-imposed ban on congregational gatherings and liturgies by secretly allowing people to come in the church on Good Friday in order to venerate the *Epitaphios*: 'I got a call from a friend that the church doors would be unlocked for a few hours on Good Friday. I was so happy that I could go and kiss the *Epitaphios*. On my way there I felt like I was going to *kryfó scholió*'. *Kryfó scholió* is often featured in Greek national imagery as a 'secret, underground school' where Orthodox priests or monks taught the Greek language and Orthodox doctrine to pupils under Ottoman rule, contributing thus to the preservation of the Greek religious and ethnic identity. During the lockdown when priests defied the official law by secretly performing certain rituals or opening the church building for their parishioners, they assumed for most zealous churchgoers a quasi-ethnomartyr status. This feeling of preserving faith in secrecy was also voiced by two of our other interlocutors when visiting churches or monasteries that surreptitiously celebrated the important religious services not 'at the normal time', as they put it, but much earlier, before dawn, so that they would avoid the repercussions of being caught and having to face disciplinary measures and fines. They often referred to their experience as analogous not only to that of the Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule, but also as similar to that 'of the early Christians in catacombs'. The ritual arrhythmia of pandemic temporality, marked here by the asynchronous celebrations of liturgical services, contributed, therefore, to a sense of ritual continuity and religious belonging bringing about a synchronicity with imagined experiences of the past.

The above experiences, however, were not those of the majority of our interlocutors. Most of them opined against the closure of churches and the prohibitions on their religious practices. They argued that the church should be treated as a provider of 'essential services' and not be relegated to the sphere of non-essential services, like the hair salons that were allowed to open even before the churches. However, in spite of finding this measure against the virus 'sad', 'painful', and even 'unnecessary', they did not actively resist it. Instead, they described 'a different reality' of having to live-stream or watch liturgical services, especially those of Holy Week and Easter, on their computer or television screens. They all commented on the vast empty space of the church buildings—some noting different architectural features that they had never noticed before due to the crowds that filled them—which now were sadly reduced to the presence of maybe a religious leader, one or two priests, the cantors, the helper, and the media team. Some were lucky enough to live-stream the liturgical services of their own parish churches, which created a greater affective experience for them. During the first lockdown, four of our interlocutors remembered experiencing 'a religious awakening' as a result of the absence of their taken-for-granted in-person religious participation. It

was manifested in the need for more intense prayer, as well as in re-enacting some of the church rituals and creating in their home 'a domestic church' (κατ' οἶκον ἐκκλησία).

Niki, a 57-year-old Athenian shop owner, proudly showed us photographs of her dining table, which for the whole period that the churches remained closed was turned into a 'Holy Altar'. The table was covered with a white lace cloth, and Niki had transferred some of the icons from the family's icon stand to the table, placing at the centre of it the icon of Christ. The icons were adorned with garlands of white and red carnations. In front of them an oil lamp was burning, while to its left and right, there were two big candlesticks with lit church candles. On the table, there was also an incense burner and a book of prayers. Niki recounted how during Holy Week the whole family sat in front of the table and live-streamed the liturgical services. In her own words:

> Just watching the liturgy on a computer screen, somehow, was not enough. We missed the smell of incense, the light of the candles, the touching and kissing of the icons, the whole atmosphere of the church. I thought that creating a Holy Altar and making a little sacred space for our family's gathering for worship, lighting the candles, burning some incense and kneeling in front of the icons will bring us in these hard times a little closer to God.

In the pandemic, 'the liveness' of the church, both as a space filled with sacred objects that produce specific embodied experiences of the divine and as a space for the congregation of the faithful, was ruptured. Live-streaming the liturgical services was not enough to transport 'the liveness' of the church into the private sphere. To compensate for this loss, Niki supplemented the disembodied and technologically mediated presence in the liturgical services with embodied haptic, visual, and olfactory practices in order to emulate the sensory experience of in-person worship. At the same time, Niki's inventive creation of an altar, the central and most sacred feature in the church located behind the iconostasis, in the sanctuary from which women are excluded, is significant. It points to the symbolic relocation of the church into the domestic sphere, to a reversal of the hierarchical positions existing in the church, and also manifests more private and informal religious experiences and practices, centred on individual and familial needs and concerns. The reinvigoration of the institution of the 'domestic church' was, as we have seen, encouraged by several church hierarchs, who transferred the responsibility for the enactment of certain religious rituals to individual believers and particularly to women, who have always been the virtuosi of 'domestic religion' and everyday Orthodox religious practices.

The sensuous character of Orthodoxy and the importance of Orthodoxy's materiality in shaping the religious experience of the laity[35] became also clearly visible in the creation in both Greece and Cyprus of homemade *Epitaphioi* for the commemoration of Christ's Passion and death on Good Friday of 2020. According to our interlocutors, in the absence of the usual parish churches' processions of *Epitaphioi* through town, small family processions of homemade *Epitaphioi* were

taking place on the private balconies or in people's yards. Photographs of such laboriously decorated *Epitaphioi* were displayed in mass media, exhibiting not only the piety of their owners, but also their inventiveness and individual talent. In particular, a family in Larissa created its own *Epitaphios* using a cardboard box and decorated it with 5,000 pearls.[36] Later on, they donated it to their parish church, expanding, as Papantoniou and Vionis rightly observed, its ritual life and 'sacralising' it even further,[37] thus making the distinction between the 'numinous' and the 'secular' less clear.[38] The physical absence from the church buildings caused the disruption of the ritual rhythm of the congregational 'body'. The resulting ritual arrhythmia facilitated the creation of new temporalities and spatialities by blurring the boundaries between secular and sacred, public and private, physical and virtual, as well as clergy and laity. In this way, new opportunities were generated for the maintenance of Greek Orthodox identity, but also—as the case of Maria has revealed—for contestation and refusal to adopt new ways of 'being Orthodox'.

Although the official church recognised its complete reliance on technology during the pandemic for its continuing existence, it had always maintained a minimal presence in the digital world, which it now saw as a necessity rather than as a choice. The same attitude held true for all our interlocutors, even those who were not avid churchgoers. They all missed going to church and had feelings of 'homesickness', albeit each one of them for diverse reasons that emphasised different aspects of their religious and spiritual lives. Yet, three of our interlocutors also commented on how emotional they became when they realised that by using the 'comments' section underneath the liturgy's live-stream they could interact with other Greek Orthodox Christians all over the globe. Furthermore, they used this section for much needed prayers for their dead ones and the health of the members of their close family and friends, thus being in charge of a religious service previously reserved only for priests.[39]

Furthermore, social distancing not only transferred the building of community into the digital domain, but also resulted in the collapse of the inside/outside boundary and the extension of physical space for the communal worship of the sacred. In 2020, the celebration of the Holy Saturday Resurrection Service, which culminated in the singing of 'Christos Anesti' (Christ is Risen), was watched via social media or heard on the radio by Greek Orthodox Christians all over the world. In many Greek and Cypriot cities, however, Orthodox faithful, urged by their religious leaders, gathered at midnight with lit candles on their balconies, gardens, and yards and sang the 'Christos Anesti' together with their neighbours. Alkis, a 53-year-old doctor from Larissa, narrated his own experience of that night as follows:

> The 'Holy Light' that year came not from Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem, but from our domestic oil lamp. Me and my family lit our candles and went to our balcony to sing 'Christ is Risen', and exchanged wishes with our neighbours. That was a very moving scene that will remain with me forever. I felt the true meaning of Easter and a kind of connection with the people around me that I never felt before. In the end, maybe it was good that the churches were closed, because we took everything for granted and in the process we forgot the real meaning of our rituals.

In the pandemic, therefore, balconies, gardens, and yards as in-between, liminal spaces unofficially became 'spaces of religion' where individual bodies could keep safe and 'alive', while at the same time allowing the 'liveness' of communal worship from a safe distance. The same role was assumed by the yards of churches when they finally opened in May 2020. Instead of being the locus of the informal gatherings of the faithful after the liturgical services, they became formal places of worship just like the inner space of the church. Perhaps the only protective measure against the virus that was maintained by all of our interlocutors' parish churches was that of social distancing. That was ensured to a great extent by the use of the outside space around the church. All of our interlocutors reported that the number of chairs provided for the faithful inside the church was halved according to the required distance imposed by the state measures. Outside the church, social distancing was secured by placing individual stools at a distance of two meters from one another. Some parish churches even marked the surrounding space with circles painted in yellow for the standing faithful, making sure that order and the right distance were maintained. The liturgy was either watched on a projector placed outside the church building or heard from the speakers. The number of faithful, who could congregate inside the church building, was determined, as we have already seen, by its size.

The reopening of churches took place under the condition that the collective 'body' of the congregation should be protected not only by God, as several zealous believers maintained, but also by following the sanitary measures imposed by both the state and the official church. These generally included the use of facemasks within the church, the cleaning of the icons with antiseptic, the distribution of the 'antidoron' (consecrated bread) either by the priest who was wearing plastic gloves or in canisters individually wrapped for the faithful to take, and an array of other measures that guaranteed either a 'contactless' worship[40] or the sanitisation of anything that was touched. However, these measures were not followed in all of the parish churches. In the end, it turned out to be the priest's decision as to how many of these measures would be applied and in what way. Two of our interlocutors remarked that, apart from social distancing, no other sanitary measures were applied in their parish churches. In Maria's words:

> In our church, very few of the faithful were wearing a facemask and most of us were taking the antidoron from the priest's hand after kissing it. We also all touched and kissed the icons. The only measure that was observed in our church was keeping the distance from one another by sitting in pews marked by a small icon of a saint that was put there for protection. Our priest, however, urged each one of us alone to decide if we wanted to use a facemask or to kiss the icons or his hand, and never to judge the others whatever they decided to do, but to try above all to keep the unity of the congregation.

In the summer of 2020, immediately after the first lockdown, many controls were imposed on the parish churches by the health authorities and the police to make sure that sanitary measures, in particular the use of facemasks and social distancing,

were observed. Fines were often imposed for breaking the rules, but in the case of Maria's parish church, such controls were never followed.

When we asked our interlocutors if they received Holy Communion during the pandemic and what they thought about the use of a common spoon, all but two stated that they did and that they had absolute faith that Holy Communion would protect and heal them rather than expose them to the virus. Some of our interlocutors justified their decision by also referring to a few aforementioned immunologists claiming that there was no danger of contracting or transmitting the virus through the mystery of Holy Communion. Fotini, a 39-year-old civil servant from Athens, however, answered laughingly: 'I have not received Holy Communion during the pandemic and I do not intend to do so for a long time. I am religious, but not suicidal'. Finally, Penelope, a 45-year-old archaeologist from Thessaloniki, stated:

> I am not so sure if by receiving Holy Communion one can contract the virus. The truth is that I am afraid to receive it from the same spoon as others or to use the same red cloth given by the priest to wipe my lips. Maybe my faith is not so strong. In the summer of 2021, we held a private liturgy, so that only me and my close family can take Holy Communion, thus minimising any existing risk.

The great majority of our interlocutors believed that religious behaviour during the pandemic was very much dependent on the 'degree of one's faith'. Most considered themselves as religious, but they were unsure if their faith was 'strong enough' to fully entrust their protection to the hands of God. The same narrative pertaining to Holy Communion was also used by our interlocutors to explain their attitudes towards vaccination. Only one remained unvaccinated, while the rest were fully vaccinated, despite being sceptical as to whether it was the right thing to do, not only for their bodily but also for their spiritual health. A few of them reported that even their priests were unwilling to give any advice on the matter. As George stated, his confessor's advice was that, 'for the vaccination you should consult the doctors, for your faith the priests'. Yet, many of the faithful and of the clergy believed that vaccination was 'an anti-Christian measure'. Maria was the only one of our interlocutors who was openly anti-vaccine. She believed:

> Vaccines contain cells from aborted human embryos, and I heard that with the seventh vaccine against COVID-19 one will have the mark of the Antichrist. So, what we need is a vaccine against evil and not a vaccine against the virus.

Maria explained her attitude against vaccines also in terms of preserving her bodily health, since vaccines, especially the genetic ones, were new, and no one yet knew their side effects. Thus, for her the vaccine not only endangered her physical health, but more importantly her eternal salvation. Maria demonstrated many times against the government's vaccination policy that made the vaccine mandatory for certain groups of civil servants and especially for health professionals. Such

demonstrations blended, as we have already stated, different political, social, and religious groups. Maria joined these demonstrations with some of her friends from her parish church. She was keen to point out that both she and her friends were different from the 'religious fundamentalists', who usually joined such demonstrations, and that it was better to think of her more as a 'traditionalist' who wanted 'to keep the traditions of Orthodoxy intact and transmit them to the next generation'. She further explained that both she and her friends believed that 'the state is a fascist regime controlled by those who want to rule the world. They spread only fear; this is what we are now experiencing, the pandemic of fear'.

As already explained, conspiracy theories against vaccines abounded among Greek Orthodox believers and many times were unofficially supported by quite a few members of the clergy. Alkis even commented on the regional differences concerning the rate of vaccinations between the two biggest cities in Greece: Athens, the capital, and Thessaloniki, the second biggest city in Greece, lying in the north. According to him:

> They reveal the differences in the degrees of faith. Northern Greece is the lighthouse of Orthodoxy. Holy Mount Athos is there, and people have close relations with priests or some monasteries that are against vaccinations. Thessaloniki, for example, has many priests that unofficially are taking a stance against vaccinations.

Indeed, Alkis was 'right' about this regional difference concerning the vaccination rate.[41] More importantly, however, his statement reveals the position that Holy Mount Athos held in the Greek religious imagination and its influence on Orthodox believers in determining religious attitudes during the pandemic. While the official church supported the government's vaccination programme, in Greece many monasteries—not only the Athonite ones—and cloisters had low rates of vaccination and were unofficially supporting anti-vaccine attitudes and beliefs based on conspiracy theories. Given that Greek monastics often act as role models for the rest of the believers, the influence of the monastic culture on 'lived religion' cannot be ignored.

One should note, finally, that what we provided here is only a sketch of the life of Orthodox believers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Urgent investigation is needed on the transformation and adaptation of Orthodox rites of passage, particularly of funeral rites, as well as more nuanced research on gendered religious experiences and on mass media during the period under study.

Concluding Remarks

The stance of the Greek and Cypriot churches during the pandemic has been both praised[42] and criticised,[43] using different criteria and perspectives. In our view, the COVID-19 pandemic again made clear the deep cleavage between a reactionary, radical, conspiracy-driven and fundamentalist-oriented Orthodoxy and another one, which is more moderate, pragmatic, reasonable, and even liberal to a

considerable degree. These trends and the concomitant polarisations between them can be observed both at the grassroots level and within the church hierarchy, a development with far-reaching consequences for the entire Orthodox body, which could not 'speak in a single voice' and did not generate a unanimous response vis-à-vis the challenges of the pandemic. This becomes quite evident if we compare the Greek and the Cypriot Orthodox contexts with other Orthodox ones in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, given that all of them produced very different evaluations of and responses towards the pandemic. In both the Greek and the Cypriot cases, this 'Orthodox polyphony' was further accentuated by the constant blurring of the boundaries between the scientific medical and the religious discourses, and became particularly evident in the diverse evaluations of the role of Holy Communion in potentially transmitting the virus. In connection with this, there were several contradictory stances towards scientific medicine on the part of many Orthodox actors. These included, on the one hand, a staunch opposition towards vaccination, and, on the other, the implementation of a scientific treatment of infections, particularly when 'Orthodox sacral antidotes' and 'strong faith' did not appear to work. In general, it was a pick-and-mix approach endorsing either all, few, or none of the protective measures against the pandemic.

The same ambiguity can also be observed at another level, namely in the relations between fidelity to tradition and in both changes and adaptations in perspectives and practices. This is a crucial issue due to Orthodox Christianity's strong attachment to tradition, which in many cases in the past has evolved into traditionalism. Yet, an interesting question remains as to whether the pandemic acted as a catalyst for changes within Orthodoxy. The answer reveals once more the previously mentioned 'Orthodox polyphony', considering the example of the various options of distributing Holy Communion adopted by local Orthodox churches and communities. However, both the Greek and the Cypriot churches kept an uncompromising position on this matter and refused to consider alternative solutions of temporary validity. Orthodox theologians reflected systematically on all these aspects,[44] and some even spoke of a 'missed chance' for the church to introduce important changes without jeopardising the 'essence' of the Orthodox faith.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to approach this apparent 'inflexibility' in a more nuanced way, given that, at the level of 'lived religion', the COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes in the ways that Orthodoxy was enacted, performed, and embodied. Here it became clear, on the one hand, that the pandemic disturbed the 'normal rhythm' of religious life and produced a pathology of uncertainty, anxiety, and scepticism. But on the other hand, we could also observe how this 'ritual arrhythmia' brought about new forms of 'sacral individualism',[45] since it promoted individual rather than communitarian worship for the sake of keeping the congregational 'body' healthy. Yet, at the same time, it also created new forms of 'sacral communitarianism' by generating new 'spaces of religion', both in the digital and in the physical domain and in the interplay of both, where community worship could take place. In some cases, it also bred disunity and contestation since it went against the traditional way of doing things. Finally, during the pandemic the locus of religious worship completely shifted to the domestic church, formally

acknowledging the religious expertise of women, and this somewhat upset old hierarchies. Which of these changes will endure in the post-pandemic era remains to be seen. What the above examples make clear is not only the enduring Orthodox polyformity, but also the constant oscillation between tradition-boundedness and change that characterises the Orthodox churches of Greece and Cyprus, a phenomenon that the recent pandemic has brought abundantly to the surface.

Notes

1 Kostis 1995.
2 Leustean 2014, 161–209.
3 Lefebvre 2004.
4 Mukherjee 2022.
5 Theofilopoulos 2021.
6 Kouros, Papa, Ioannou and Kapnisis 2022.
7 Kessareas 2023.
8 Theocharis et al. 2021.
9 Constantinou, Kagialis and Karekla 2021.
10 Moris and Schizas 2020; Kousi, Mitsi and Simos 2021.
11 Androutsopoulos 2021.
12 Grigoriadis 2021.
13 Filistor 2020.
14 Papazoglou et al. 2021.
15 Kalatzis 2020.
16 Elsner 2020.
17 Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021.
18 Nicholas 2020.
19 Lakasas 2020.
20 Bartholomew 2020.
21 Trantas 2022.
22 Andriopoulos 2020.
23 Taft 1996.
24 Anyfantakis 2020.
25 Manangan, Sehulster, Chiarello, Simonds and Jarvis 1998.
26 Spantideas, Drosou, Barsoum and Bougea 2020.
27 Gallaher 2019.
28 Holy Synod 2021.
29 Danikas 2021.
30 Papasarantopoulos 2021.
31 Hieronymos 2021.
32 Orthodox Times 2021.
33 For a discussion of such groups in social media, see Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021.
34 Lefebvre 2004, 16.
35 Cf. Carroll, Lackenby and Gorbanenko 2022.
36 See www.onlarissa.gr/2020/04/17/sygkinitiki-protovoylia-oikogeneias-sti-larisa-eft-iaxe-ton-diko-tis-epitafio-kai-ton-dorise-se-ekklisia-tis-polis-foto-vinteo/ (All websites cited were last accessed in November 2022).
37 Papantoniou and Vionis 2021, 98–99.
38 Ibid., 85.
39 In the offline realm, the members of the congregation will give the names of the living and the dead ones whom they want to commemorate to be read by the priest during the liturgy or other church services.

40 Winiger 2020, 245.
41 For instance, on the 12 April 2022, 73 per cent were fully vaccinated in Athens, while in Thessaloniki only 62 per cent were fully vaccinated. See https://covid19.gov.gr/covid-map-en/.
42 Chrysostomos 2020; Panagiotidis 2020; Hierotheos 2021; Hiera Mitropolis Dimitriados 2022.
43 Sakellariou 2020; Kordas 2021.
44 Asproulis and Wood 2020; Kosmidis 2020; Vassiliadis and Demacopoulos 2020; Orthodox Academy of Crete 2021; Kaminis 2021; Theologiki Scholi 2022.
45 Mitrofanova 2020, 62.

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4 As If the State Mattered

Georgian Orthodox Church under COVID Crisis

Tornike Metreveli

Introduction

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) plays a significant role in the nation's political and religious landscape. The church's dominant position in socio-political life is codified through legislation and the Constitutional Agreement with the Georgian state, which makes it immune to political pressures.[1] Moreover, the GOC is the majority church, meaning that the overwhelming majority of Georgians adhere to the Orthodox Christian faith.[2] The pandemic crisis emerged as a unique test for the Georgian state's secular identity, which proved to be volatile against the assertive politics of the GOC. The GOC faced a power struggle with the state, while the rampant spread of COVID-19 posed an existential challenge to both society and the church.

This chapter explores how Orthodox Church responded to the pandemic and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the church-state, church-parishioner, and parishioner-state relations. The study looks at the tension between the state regulations on social distancing measures and various religious practices. To gain a comprehensive understanding, the chapter employs a multi-method approach, including interviews with priests and parishioners, analysis of church statements and decrees, and online ethnography of church activities in seven regions in Georgia. The time frame for analysis is between 26 February 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 virus was detected in Georgia, and 15 June 2022, when Georgia lifted all COVID-19-related restrictions and obligations (e.g., vaccination certificates or negative PCR test results on arrival to Georgia).

The first part of the chapter provides a broader contextual overview by outlining the legal basis of church-state relations, examining the key factors shaping the church's role in secular polity. The second part delves into an in-depth analysis of the church's responses to the pandemic crisis and explores how COVID-19 pandemic affected religious practices, the nature of religious gatherings, and the character of sacred rituals at the grassroots level.

The chapter finds that the church engaged in what Tymofii Brik and I conceptualise as 'performative security'.[3] Performative security refers to the manner in which Orthodox Church created the illusion of security by mimicking security measures through the repetition of certain narratives and rituals (e.g., special prayers against COVID-19). Despite their ineffectiveness from a public health standpoint, these

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actions were enough to convey a sense of institutional awareness, leaving the state to contend with the medical consequences. By employing performative security, the church announced significant restrictions of religious rituals on paper; they issued messages stating that social distancing was important, and that sanitising was crucial for churches. However, rather than committing to this idea entirely by closing churches, they insisted on maintaining limited access along with practices that were highly contested in terms of public health threats.

The Divine Status: A Look at the Legal Powers of the Georgian Orthodox Church

To understand the role of the GOC during the COVID-19 crisis, one has to consider the legal framework which puts GOC in a superior legal position. The interaction between religion and the state in Georgia is regulated by the Constitution of Georgia and various subsidiary legal instruments. Article 11 of the Constitution of Georgia enshrines the right to equality and prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, origin, ethnicity, language, and religion. The same article recognises the right of Georgian citizens to preserve and develop their culture, as well as to use their native language both in private and in public, free from discrimination. Article 16 on the freedom of belief, religion, and conscience acknowledges the freedom of each individual to hold their own beliefs, practise their religion, and express their conscience without coercion. The article also prohibits persecution based on religious affiliation, belief, or conscience. Article 23, which pertains to the freedom of political parties, prohibits any party that advocates for war or violence, or incites national, ethnic, regional, religious, or social conflict.

The Constitution also addresses the GOC and defines the relationship between the Georgian state and the church in Article 9. This article establishes the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia (aka GOC) as an integral part of the Georgian state.[4] The Georgian Constitution outlines the freedom of belief and religion in Article 9, Paragraph 1, which declares that 'the State recognizes the full freedom of belief and religion and also acknowledges the distinctive role of the Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the State'. This constitutional provision reflects a departure from a standard normative text by enshrining the unique status of the church in Georgian history through the Constitution. Article 9, Paragraph 2 of the Constitution further clarifies the relationship between the church and the state, determining the nature of their interaction:

> The relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be in full compliance with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms. (Article 9)

The Constitutional Agreement between the Georgian state and the GOC has been acknowledged as a normative act in accordance with the Law of Georgia

on Normative Acts. As per Article 7, Paragraph 4 of this law, the Constitutional Agreement takes precedence over any other normative act, unless it contradicts the Constitution of Georgia and the Constitutional Law of Georgia. This legal framework has been instrumental in shaping the religious landscape of Georgia since the adoption of the Constitutional Agreement in 2002. The agreement's constitutional status has given it priority over other domestic legislation, and the fact that it was signed by the Georgian state and the president has imbued it with the characteristics of an international agreement.[5]

The Venice Commission, an advisory body on Constitutional Law of the Council of Europe, has expressed concern that the agreement's provisions could lead to the dominance of religious issues over secular ones, and that the church came close to having a constitutional status equivalent to government branches. The agreement grants the GOC tax exemptions, exempts its clerics from military service, and confers a special legal status upon the Patriarch of Georgia Ilia Shoilashvili (Constitutional Agreement, Article 1, Paragraph 5). Patriarch Ilia has been in power since 1979, and enjoys high levels of public trust, with a steady 92 per cent trust level among the Georgian people. However, in recent years, there has been a decline in trust in the church organisation, with a significant drop from 70 per cent in 2008 to 40 per cent in 2020, according to Caucasus Barometer data. Surveys have shown that 71 per cent of Georgians consider it 'fairly important' or 'very important' to be a parishioner of the GOC in order to be 'truly Georgian'. However, the GOC's church services are only attended weekly by 14 per cent of the total population of Orthodox parishioners, with 28 per cent attending only on special religious holidays, 17 per cent attending at least once a month, 31 per cent attending less often, and 10 per cent never attending.[6]

Trust converts into institutional access. For example, Orthodox priests have been granted the exclusive right to enter the penitentiary system and maintain an Orthodox Christian corner inside of prisons (Article 30, Paragraph 1 (K)). The agreement also ensures the church's right to appoint personnel responsible for religious studies in public schools and the adoption of the program.[7] Moreover, the GOC was granted a unique status as a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) under the Constitutional Agreement, Article 1, Paragraph 1 (K). In contrast, other religious organisations were not afforded the legal option of registering with this status. It was not until 2005 that the representatives of non-Orthodox religious communities in Georgia were granted the ability to attain legal status, but only as LEPL. This status was deemed unsatisfactory by the majority of religious organisations operating in Georgia, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Evangelical-Baptist and Evangelical-Lutheran Church, and the Muslim and Jewish communities. These groups were unwilling to register as non-profit (non-governmental) organisations as this would have effectively denied them formal recognition as religious entities in Georgia.[8]

In 2011, the Georgian government, under the leadership of President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), introduced an amendment to the Civil Code of Georgia that provided other religious organisations with the right to registration.[9] This

change in legislation granted these organisations the legal status of either a LEPL or non-profit entity and established their legal standing as equal to that of the GOC. However, the introduction of this amendment was met with opposition from the GOC, who organised a massive rally in response. In addition to the legal status, the GOC, which boasts the largest number of parishes among all religious organisations in Georgia, has commanded a steadfast level of public confidence since the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite the absence of a systematic registration process within the church, it is estimated that the GOC has approximately 3.5 million followers among the Georgian population of 4.6 million, constituting 83.9 per cent of the religious demographic.[10] The social and legal status converts into funding practices which in turn correlate with political events. The more frequent is the political crisis, the higher church funding.[11] This makes the GOC the richest religious organisation with the state funding and no legal mechanism for accountability.

A Clash of Tradition and Public Health

The first case of the novel coronavirus was registered in Georgia on 26 February 2020. The government's sanitary measures preceded the case detection on the Georgian soil following the news upon the detection of the COVID-19 in Chinese Wuhan province (e.g., ban on flights from China was among the first steps, planning, and organisation of repatriation process from China). Now, what role have religious leaders played in promoting or hindering COVID-19 response efforts? Church's official rhetoric evolved from denial of the threat of the coronavirus to scepticism towards the public health threats posed by it, into the gradual acceptance of the real deadliness of the virus. Some of the most vocal members of the synod of the GOC openly advocated for the continuation of the religious services and communion from the same spoon. For example, Archbishop Nikoloz Pachuashvili (later himself infected with coronavirus) stated that wine that is transformed into the blood in the chalice is antiseptic.

> "The spoon purified in wine is free of bacteria. It is the same as dipping it in medical alcohol. Sprinkle holy water in the house every morning and every evening, and you will not get coronavirus."[12]

Other prominent priests echoed these sentiments, urging 'non-believers' and 'people of little faith' as well as 'theologians' and 'politicians' to 'leave holy sacrament of eucharist alone, until "greater punishments" stroke the nation'.[13]

These statements were in full compliance with the church's official position regarding the strict adherence to the shared spoon communion practice. On 28 February, a couple of days after the first confirmed case of the infection on the Georgian territory, the Patriarchate of the GOC (which is an official administrative body of the church) issued a statement denouncing the news circulated in the media about the Romanian Orthodox Church's decision to allow communion from disposable plastic spoons:

> Information was posted on the internet suggesting that the Romanian Church had permitted the use of disposable spoons for communion to protect itself from the virus. However, this claim was found to be false upon verification. The practice of using a shared spoon for communion has a millennial history, and throughout this time, there have been many cases of life-threatening infections being spread. Despite this, Orthodox believers were not afraid to partake in the sacrament with a shared spoon; on the contrary, they approached this sanctity even more often. As we all know, during the sacrament, man receives the holy blood and flesh of Christ, the purifier and healer of the soul and flesh. At the same time, during public worship, the clergy bring forth ecclesiastical relics such as the Gospel, crosses, icons, and sacred parts, and conduct liturgies.[14]

Less than a month from this official statement, the Holy Synod of the GOC issued a decree that acknowledged the public health threats caused by the coronavirus but attributed them 'to human alienation from God', encouraging believers to pray more intensely and follow religious customs. In the same decree, the Holy Synod issued a list of recommendations for its parishioners, covering various themes. These included installing audio equipment in churches to conduct outdoor services, respecting the efforts of healthcare workers, using disposable cups for an after-communion drink, and executing private communions for those belonging to at-risk groups, as well as for self-isolating or quarantined individuals. The decree also urged for daily prayers. However, the GOC also insisted not to alter what the Synod considered to be a fundamental, foundational, and existential aspect of their faith—communion (executed from the same spoon). The decree stated, 'It is totally unacceptable for church members to doubt the essence of the sacrament of communion by expressing these doubts through a refusal to share a common spoon as a source of transmission of infection'.[15]

As the debate over the method of eucharist raged on, the coronavirus crisis divided the church into what some of my respondents called 'knowledge and anti-knowledge groups'. But what led to this division? As I sat down with Father Ieronymos, an acting priest in one of the parishes in Eastern Georgia, I was immediately struck by his quiet confidence and straightforwardness: 'physical touch is not necessary for a person to get the holy energy or grace of God'—he says, responding to my question whether it was absolutely necessary to give communion from the same spoon during the pandemic, the topic that dominated the public discourse in Georgian at the time. He explained that the church followed the state's regulations, and medical experts had allowed priests to enter into Intensive Care Units (ICU) to execute the holy Eucharist or anointing.

In March 2020, following the synodal decree, the GOC issued an official statement in which it recommended that its parishioners maintain a distance of two meters within the church and that, if possible, priests should conduct services outdoors. Despite this, the same statement expressed bewilderment at the ongoing critical public debate surrounding the communion ritual, particularly as other potential avenues for the transmission of the virus were not being similarly scrutinised. For

instance, the statement questioned why concerns regarding the spread of the virus were not being raised in the context of public transport (e.g., buses, subways), pharmacies, or grocery stores.[16]

In the view of the GOC's Holy Synod, the spiritual needs of its flock are on par with society's medical and gastronomical necessities. The Synod asserted that, for some individuals, medications and public transport are critical means of support, while for others communion and religious practices are essential. As the pandemic brought increased anxiety and encounters with death, the demand for religious services grew. The church, therefore, considered it a duty to meet the spiritual needs of its parishioners. Despite the risks to the public health, the church considered its role in meeting the spiritual needs of its flock to be of utmost importance. The Synod was adamant in its opposition to any challenge to the millennial practice of sacrament, with its statement categorically denouncing those who oppose the shared-spoon communion. According to the Synod of GOC:

> Most of those people in such a position do not possess the proper knowledge or belief in the spiritual significance of this mystery. Communion from the shared spoon is the supreme affirmation of the unity and love of the parishioners with Christ and with one another. Whoever denies it, denies the Savior![17]

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the Georgian government to declare a state of emergency and implement strict measures such as border closures, educational institution suspensions, and public transportation cessation. Essential services were allowed to continue operations, while the rest of the country was placed under curfew with limited mobility. However, the GOC was able to carry out its services and move freely without any hindrance from law enforcement. The rhetoric of the most senior bishops of the GOC echoed earlier synodal sentiments. For example, despite full quarantine being announced in the peripheral Marneuli, Bolnisi, and Lentekhi municipalities due to confirmed internal coronavirus transmission cases, religious services did not stop and bishops continued to downplay the threats of the coronavirus. According to the local bishop, Metropolitan[18] of Tsageri and Lentekhi Stephane Kalaijishvili, quarantine measures did not nullify the power of God. Even during a pandemic, people can still come to God and receive communion without the fear of infection. The Metropolitan argued that while there is always a chance of non-believers getting infected, true believers are protected by God.

In a liturgy held on the day of Lazare's resurrection, an important occasion for Orthodox Christians, the Metropolitan reminded his congregation that Lazarus had been dead for four days before being resurrected by God. According to him, this was a testament to the power of faith and the miraculous workings of God. Despite the risks posed by the pandemic, the Metropolitan emphasised that the liturgy was being performed for the people, as they could not do anything or protect themselves without the help of God. He warned that those who did not accept this truth with faith 'would have problems later when meeting God'. He urged his followers to have faith and trust in God's power to protect them. The Metropolitan's message was clear: even in the face of a pandemic, believers should not lose faith in

the power of God. Time would come when everything they said now would come back to them, and they would wish it was not too late.[19]

The initial denial of the threat posed by COVID-19 and the persistence of the shared spoon communion practice within the GOC exposed the pertaining conflict between religious beliefs and public health concerns. This conflict was exacerbated by the government's unclear stance on the ban of religious gatherings during the pandemic. The GOC's unwavering commitment to maintaining religious practices, regardless of the consequences, on the other hand, demonstrated a power struggle between the church and the state.

God's Own Forest and Church's Sacred Spoon

On 23 March 2020, the Georgian government issued an ordinance that prohibited assemblies and demonstrations, as defined by the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations, throughout the state of emergency. Article 5, Paragraph 2 of the ordinance specifically prohibited gatherings of ten or more people in both indoor and outdoor public spaces. However, there were exceptions for medical institutions, defence forces, penitentiary institutions, law enforcement bodies, public transport (unless otherwise instructed), and construction and infrastructure works. Gatherings in private facilities were not subject to this ban as long as social distancing was maintained according to the Ministry of Health's recommendations.[20]

The ordinance did not explicitly mention religious institutions or whether the restrictions on gathering applied to them. Legal experts raised concerns over whether the regulation could be applied to religious rituals, which were protected under Article 16 of the Constitution on freedom of belief, religion, and conscience and could not be restricted during a state of emergency.[21] The ordinance applied to Article 21 of the Constitution on freedom of assembly, which did not include religious gatherings. Religious gatherings could be restricted under Article 16 (2) of the Constitution and Article 5 of the Law on Public Health, which obliges citizens not to engage in activities that threaten the spread of diseases. However, the government did not issue a separate ordinance based on these articles. This legal ambiguity added to the tension between the government and the church during the pandemic.

The state of emergency during the 2020 Easter celebration and the preceding services resulted in a somewhat paradoxical agreement between the church and the Georgian government. On the one hand, the church agreed to comply with the Ministry of Health's recommendations, which included maintaining a 2-meter distance inside the church building during the service. Some churches decided to perform the liturgy in the morning to avoid overcrowding in the evening and moved some rituals to weekdays. Other churches introduced the practice of wiping icons with dry tissue, while still allowing parishioners to kiss them after each other. Within the framework of the church-state agreement, the government spokesperson announced that the police would be stationed near churches to ensure curfew and physical distancing rules were followed. This statement stood in sharp contrast to the initial message of the prime minister of Georgia, who, shortly before the

church-state agreement, had announced that a ban on public gatherings would be enforced universally, affecting 'everyone and everything'.[22]

The initially imperative tone of the government softened with the growing internal fractures over this topic between the parliament and the government. According to the Patriarchate's press spokesperson, Andria Jaghmaidze, the prime minister's statement regarding the ban on gatherings for ten people or more caused much confusion among parishioners and clergy, and 'Mr. Prime Minister visited the Patriarchate and clarified that ten-person gatherings should not be understood literally. The main purpose is to maintain social distancing. This is the recommendation from the Center for Disease Control'.[23] This followed the statement of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, who reassured parishioners that the decree did not restrict religious freedoms, and participating in religious rites was the inalienable right of the faithful.

The state's ambivalent response to the ban on religious gatherings was promptly echoed in the church's rhetorical cascade. Some of the senior bishops called for the continuation of the practice of shared spoon communion. The initial official storyline of the GOC over the continuation of religious services operated alongside three central claims: (1) wine (used in communion) was sacred, hence sharing a spoon was not threatening to health; (2) not attending the liturgy was a failure of conscience and belief; and (3) form (liturgy) was equally as important as content (of the communion). In his sermon on the COVID-19 pandemic, Patriarch Ilia II encouraged parishioners to not be afraid and expressed gratitude to healthcare workers for their efforts in combating the disease. He also shared a dream he had, which he believed was a sign of victory over the pandemic: 'This was a sign that with God-given power and the power of the cross, man will triumph over this disease'.[24] Some radical clerics, however, rejected any preventive measures and considered it a betrayal of God. One priest condemned non-believers, people of little faith, theologians, journalists, doctors, and politicians for interfering with the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, warning of potential consequences for the nation.[25] Some priests were highly critical of the GOC's position. In his statement, a highly popular priest among the youth Teodore Gignadze acknowledged the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the responsibilities of both the government and the church. He emphasised the importance of the liturgical service and the union with Christ but also called for caution and solidarity among the parishioners to prevent the spread of the disease. The priest stressed that limiting physical gatherings in the temple 'was not a betrayal of Christ, but rather a gift from Christ to protect each other'. The priest also expressed solidarity with healthcare workers and expressed a desire to contribute to preventing the spread of the disease by restricting the attendance of parishioners in compliance with government regulations.[26] To ensure the security of laypeople, new practices emerged in some churches, such as cleaning the icon with a cloth soaked in rosewater.[27]

In parallel with the underlying normative imperatives and the shared spoon debate, the GOC assumed the responsibility of ensuring that worshipers could not leave the church building during curfew hours from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am. The GOC's responsibility to ensure that worshipers did not leave the church building

during curfew hours, even if it meant that they would stay overnight in the closed building, posed major health risks for the spread of the virus. Thus, the GOC complied with the COVID-19 protocol by enforcing social distancing measures within the church building. Paradoxically, however, it compelled parishioners to remain inside the church building for the 9-hour night service while still engaging in the communal practice of receiving communion from the same spoon. This approach went against public health guidelines and created tension between religious traditions and public health concerns. Nevertheless, the GOC spokesperson confirmed that both parties (church and state) had agreed to have parishioners arrive at the churches before the commencement of the service and leave the premises by 6 am. According to the GOC speaker, given the challenging circumstances, this was a favourable agreement.[28] The government maintained its role as a law enforcer (on paper), but allowed the church to perform security protocols which posed a threat to public health.

Although the GOC had initially shown strong resistance to the state, at some point it reached an agreement with the government and downplayed its strong language. Moreover, the GOC was able to negotiate the role of law enforcer, thus playing an influential role in Georgia's national security debate at the same level as the government. How was this possible? It happened most likely when the government initiated a draft law (passed in May 2020) that would allow the GOC to own 20 hectares of forest surrounding the churches and monasteries. These changes would apply to the Forest Code of Georgia, the Law on State Property, and other normative acts. If certain parts of the forests were assigned to the Patriarchate but owned by the government, these changes would allow the government to transfer ownership rights directly to the Patriarchate. Local watchdogs interpreted this move as 'discriminatory' against other religions in Georgia, since this initiative gave the GOC an exclusive privilege and reinforced its financial power.[29] The government's initiative succeeded on 22 May when the Georgian Parliament amended the Forest Code of Georgia, enabling Georgian Orthodox churches and Monasteries 'to gain ownership of forest areas (no more than 20 hectares) adjacent to their church houses'. According to the law, 'the area to be allocated to the churches and monasteries should be defined in a way that does not violate boundaries of existing forest litters'.[30] The law envisaged to resolve the problems persisting in the forest sector, including the protection of forests, their sustainable management, and the improvement of forest governance. One could argue that the 'forest deal' had clientelist intensions: church's economic interests were satisfied by the state in exchange for performance of obedience.

The communion from the shared spoon remained a central issue for the church throughout all phases of the pandemic. The GOC's senior clergy referred to the historical practice of using a shared spoon for the communion, including the times when 'there were numerous outbreaks of life-threatening infections'. In these times, according to the church, Orthodox Christians were not afraid of receiving communion from a shared spoon, and clergy used this sacred instrument even more often because 'a person receives the blood and flesh of Christ during communion, which has purifying and healing qualities for both body and soul'.[31] The official

statements specified how, in the past, 'clergy brought out different church relics—gospels, crosses, icons, sacred parts—and liturgies were performed'.[32]

The GOC's narrative about the usage of a spoon is not supported by the historical evidence. Liturgical historians have recorded diverse traditions of communion practices among various Christian denominations, including variations in the accounts of the Last Supper in the New Testament. The use of a shared spoon in Orthodox churches was adopted in the eleventh century, but faced controversy before becoming permanent.[33] An eminent theologian Cyril Hovorun critiques the assumption (which constituted the basis of GOC's argument) that the body of Christ is ontologically good, while the virus is harmful. He argues that this dualistic doctrine overlooks the fact that the coronavirus is part of the ecosystem created by God and that not all things 'recapitulated in Christ are at peace with one another. Some organisms, including COVID-19, kill humans'.[34] Yet another theologian, Archpriest Alexis Vinogradov, asks whether communion is limited to the Eucharist and re-examines the Eucharist's purpose, which, according to him, reveals the essence of all life as communion. Acknowledging Father Alexander Schmemann's teachings as his primary influence, his answer lies in the term eschatology, the meaning of which he describes as the transgression of the confines of time and space. Liturgy is performed 'on behalf of all and for all' beyond these earthly confines; therefore, communion is not limited to the Eucharist's act but can take different forms for different people.[35] Other scholars have written of 'the habit of sacrificial care', the element of Christian ethics that has been shaped throughout history as Christians have learned how to deal with the plague.[36]

The interpretation and usage of the shared spoon in the Holy Communion varies based on one's theological background and understanding of the Christian tradition. For the GOC, the shared spoon holds significant importance during the pandemic as it is considered a non-secular tool for maintaining health. As the aforementioned Bishop Nikoloz (later himself infected with coronavirus) claimed,

> wine that is transformed into the blood in the chalice is antiseptic. The spoon purified in wine is free of bacteria. It is the same as dipping it in medical alcohol. Sprinkle holy water in the house every morning and every evening, and you will not get coronavirus.[37]

The GOC attempted to limit the influence of secular institutions. At the same time, the government and the Patriarchate of Georgia made a mutual decision, permitting worshippers to attend Easter liturgy, while the state ensured social distancing and draconian lockdown for the rest of the society.

Responses of the Government and the Public to GOC's Demands

Considering the reaction of the general public, the Easter celebrations complicated an already tense public division around the importance of ritual and liturgy amidst the pandemic.[38] A phone survey conducted by the media research company Edison Research showed that the majority of the Georgian population (60 per cent) asserted

that shared spoon communion contained a risk of coronavirus transmission.[39] In the aftermath of the Easter ritual, however, the polls showed that only 4 per cent of Orthodox Christians in Georgia attended Easter liturgy that year (compared to 44 per cent in the previous year). The poll by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) showed that 43 per cent of Orthodox Christians disapproved of the GOC's continued usage of the shared spoon in communion despite COVID-19 restrictions, while 33 per cent agreed to the communal spoon practice, and 21 per cent remained undecided.[40] Evidence showed that even the very faithful Georgian public disapproved of the position of the GOC by mainly withdrawing from the masses and rejecting the 'one spoon' ritual. Nevertheless, the overall lack of protest, together with 33 per cent of those who agreed to the communal spoon practice, shows that the majority of the people did not object to the GOC's powerful status as an institution that exercised its power in defiance of state regulations and continued its practices in times of strict lockdown and compulsory social distancing.[41]

As the death toll rose, people clung to their faith as a source of hope and comfort. They sought solace in the rituals of mourning and burial, needing the support of their religious institutions to help them through the tragedy. However, the virus posed a new challenge, as contact with the dead and the living could easily spread the disease. 'We have so many priests that not a single dead person remains without the comfort of our prayers', said Father Ieronymos, his voice calm and steady. 'Even if there is only a day left before the funeral, our clergyman will definitely go to the deceased and offer solace'. Despite the danger, the priests of his diocese were willing to put themselves at risk to serve their congregants. 'There are clergymen among us who have been infected with COVID-19 themselves', the priest continued, 'but that doesn't stop us from serving those in need. If a priest is busy, he will inform another priest but someone will still go to the deceased to offer prayers and support'. Even in hospitals, the priests of the Diocese of Ruis-Urbnisi, where Father Ieronymos served at the time, were willing to put themselves in harm's way to bring comfort to the sick. 'When a patient in the hospital needs to be anointed with oil, we don't hesitate', he stated. 'We know that it brings great comfort to the patient and their loved ones. Our priests enter the clinic with special equipment to meet with the patient'.[42]

All seven sacraments were performed as per usual, with a few exceptions, particularly among priests who were engrossed in conspiracy theories. The sharp decrease in attendance during various rituals was palpable and not surprising to Father Ieronymos. He mentioned that the number of people present at services, such as weddings, was significantly lower. I wanted to know when the church first realised the danger posed by COVID-19. Father Ieronymos leaned back, his eyes cast downward as he gathered his thoughts. 'Some priests were afraid of the unknown and the challenges it might bring', he said. 'The church doesn't have a responsibility to comment on medical matters. Priests shouldn't substitute for doctors'. He paused, looking up at me with a serious expression. 'They must focus on spiritual matters'. It was then that Father Ieronymos shared his shock at hearing some priests express their thoughts and blessing about vaccination. 'You see', he said, 'some of our priests were ordained during the Soviet Union, a time when

theology was suppressed and not taught to its fullest extent. This constellation also affected our parishioners, who sometimes assume things without a proper understanding'. The form of communion is less important than its content during the pandemic for him. Not understanding this was a problem of education within the church. He sighed, shaking his head slightly. 'We must do better to educate our priests and our parishioners, so that they may understand the changes that need to be made, even in these difficult times'.

The conversation then turned to the communion sacrament, which was the most important for the church. Father Ieronymos explained that the church should not look at the method and believers must receive the Eucharist on their palms. However, the majority of parishioners were not ready to accept a change in the method of Eucharist. When the church sees that the Eucharist has been given with a spoon for years, they do not understand why it should change.

As our discussion approached its end, Father Ieronymos opened up about the difficulties faced by the church during the pandemic. He spoke of a divide within the church between those who valued education and those who did not. Despite some positive reforms, there were still some priests who hindered the education of others. The church was faced with the challenge of adapting to new circumstances while remaining steadfast in its spiritual duties. It would require patience, but with its rich history of reform, the church could rise to meet this challenge, he said with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. I nodded in agreement, feeling inspired as I bid farewell to Father Ieronymos.[43]

When Church Is Aware Others Are Watching: Unpacking Performative Security

Social science has employed the term 'performativity' in various contexts, from the symbolic interactionism perspective, which emphasises that people 'perform' gender[44,45] or social class,[46] to organisational studies that investigate how individuals fit in.[47] I use the word 'performativity' in arguing that religious groups repeatedly emphasised narratives of security and then systematically repeated new rituals (e.g., new prayers against COVID-19) in order to be seen as credible actors who genuinely cared about health and security. In this sense, the word performativity has a double meaning. First, this term is about 'doing security' in order to be seen as a security provider. Second, we also acknowledge that such actions could be seen as idle attempts to endorse security, because social gatherings, in fact, were far from safe. Previous studies did address this aspect of performativity by finding, for example, that the legitimacy of security personnel depended on how well they performed non-racism (Bonnet 2013). In the same vein, in Georgia's case, the legitimacy of religious groups depends on how well they perform security. Following Bonnet,[48] I agree that performances may or may not be sincere. I am concerned with context and power relations that pressure religious groups to perform security, but 'not the sincerity of their performance'.[49]

In Georgia, performative security was manifested as repeated narratives and rituals (e.g., special prayers against COVID-19, special sanitation after Holy

Communion). Social psychology and behavioural science suggest that this type of repetitive action is very efficient in bringing a sense of security and coercion for a group.[50,51,52] Ritualised behaviour is crucial for detecting and reacting to inferred threats, which is not to be equated with the fear systems that respond to manifest danger. In Georgia's case, this implies that religious groups narrow the attention of laypeople first to discourses (e.g., the importance of praying, participation in religious services) and practices (e.g., kissing of icons, communion from the shared spoon) to respond to the perceived threat of COVID-19. Orthodox churches centred their narratives and actions around the theme of potential danger. They insisted that faith, Christianity, and nationhood were in danger once parishioners did not 'attest their loyalty to God' in turbulent times by manifesting themselves in attendance at religious services, taking communion from the same spoon, observing the mass. Therefore, parishioners developed a well-coordinated social action against this perceived danger by performing adherence to the necessary public health security regulations. Religious meanings had to accompany these actions. For example, a priest could obey the social distancing law (no more than ten people in a church) but also make sure that people prayed and kissed the icon, because otherwise they would not be protected from the virus. In other words, legal requirements became embedded in religious practices.

Performative security acquires meaning by connecting the fear narratives to the spiritual dimension of religious practices inside the religious space. It is thus an explanatory narrative frame that operates as an everyday collective practice through which participants may appeal to sacred words, embrace sacred objects, take communion from the shared spoon, and yet at the same time wear a mask inside the church and maintain distance between parishioners.

Conclusion

The Georgian Orthodox Church is a formidable entity in the Georgian polity. Its legal status has been firmly established through constitutional means, allowing it to wield political and economic power and cement its social capital. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new challenge to the church, which faced the threat of the deadly virus and a challenge to reconcile long-standing religious traditions with the public health concerns raised by the pandemic.

The governmental discursive inconsistencies surrounding the ban on gatherings, and its potential impact on religious institutions, exacerbated tensions between the freedom of religious practices and public health safety. The GOC's position fluctuated and shifted in line with the recommendations of the governing authorities and health officials with regards to physical distancing protocols. The church assumed responsibility for ensuring compliance with the 2-meter physical distancing protocol in larger cathedrals, while in smaller churches liturgical celebrations took place in adjacent churchyards. It also harshly criticised the medical narratives which it deemed irreconcilable with its own interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis. I argue that public health protocols and measures were only performed by the church, as worshipers either arrived prior to the start of the service at 9 pm and departed from

the premises by 6:00 am the following day (on Easter celebration), after spending time together in the closed church, or uninterruptedly during an entire pandemic took the communion from the same spoon.

In light of the interpretation of the public health crisis as a threat to the state's national security, the GOC and the state both assumed the role of law enforcer. As the argument went, it was deemed critical for a collective agent (church and state) to take responsibility not only for developing public health protocols but also for enforcing them. In this case, the strong and omnipresent GOC was able to negotiate its role as the national enforcer of public safety.

Despite the potential health risks, the GOC deemed it a sacred obligation to attend to the spiritual needs of its parishioners, placing equal importance on spiritual as on medical and sustenance necessities. The GOC's steadfast and theologically unsubstantiated commitment to the tradition of shared spoon communion, regardless of the consequences, showcased the political influence of religious institutions and their impact on shaping societal and community norms. The GOC exerted a substantial influence on national security discussions and negotiations with the government, as evidenced by the 'forest deal' that granted the GOC ownership of forest areas surrounding their churches and monasteries.

The interview with Father Ieronymos shed light on the difficulties faced by the Orthodox Church from within. The GOC was divided between those who valued knowledge and those who engaged in conspiration theories. Hence, the challenge of adapting to new circumstances while retaining their spiritual obligations. From theological angle, the strict adherence to the shared spoon practice highlighted the supremacy of the form of Eucharist over its content. It also showed the level of education in the GOC's and ingrained fears towards change or revision of certain highly contagious rituals.

In terms of adapting religious practices to the public health protocols, the Orthodox Church and to an extent the Georgian state were engaged in performative security, which allowed them to deflect allegations of carelessness or irresponsibility. This also allowed GOC to keep its churches open and, whenever possible, maintain the traditional rituals and execute sacraments. As the church navigated the tumultuous waters of the COVID-19 pandemic, it proved to be a masterful performer, balancing tradition and own organisational interests in a risky effort that ultimately showcased the power of religious institutions in shaping the collective narrative and influencing public health.

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5 COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity

Communion Practices in Serbian Orthodox Church

Stefan Radojković

Introduction to Contemporary Contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic recorded by the World Health Organization (WHO) at the end of 2019 was a tectonic disturbance of global proportions in its own right. This crisis, with all the consequences it implied, began to manifest itself everywhere in early March 2020, including in volatile regions such as the former socialist Yugoslavia. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was not immune to the global pandemic either, including its dioceses in both Serbia and neighbouring countries, where global health challenges posed moral and ethical issues to the SOC and its believers. In addition to the moral and ethical issues that all religious communities in this region were exposed to, members of the SOC in Montenegro and Serbia's province Kosovo-Metohija experienced political turbulence as well.

Analysis of the pandemic's first-year context in Serbia (Kosovo-Metohija) and Montenegro (March 2020–May 2021) shows that the SOC dioceses, with their believers, were facing different challenges in the region, although some similarities between the three contexts do exist. First of all, the first confirmed cases of people affected by COVID-19 were detected in March 2020. In Serbia, except Kosovo-Metohija, it was 6 March;[1] as early as 15 March (48 confirmed cases), the president, the National Assembly, and the government made a decision to declare a state of emergency.[2] Similar to Serbia, the first cases of COVID-19 in Kosovo-Metohija were reported on 13 March in Albanian communities,[3] followed by Serb communities on 27 March.[4] From that moment on, the Serbian health system in Kosovo-Metohija, together with the government's office for Kosovo and Metohija, assumed responsibility for prevention and defence against the pandemic.

The situation in Montenegro was almost identical. The first registered case of an infected person was recorded on 17 March 2020; ten days later Ministry of Health declared a COVID-19 outbreak in the country.[5] Also, measures to prevent and fight against the pandemic in Serbia and Montenegro, as well as in Serbian and Albanian communities in Kosovo-Metohija, were for the most part identical (quarantine for the infected, movement restrictions, curfew). As expected, decrees and recommendations released by healthcare institutions also applied to religious communities.[6]

However, depending on the legal and political context at the time, SOC dioceses and their believers showed certain differences in their attitudes towards prescribed decrees and recommendations; in particular, this refers to the degree of adjustment

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of their daily religious practices in relation to the legal and political situation in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo-Metohija, which brings me to my first, although more general, question: How has the SOC responded to the global health crisis? On a more specific note, I am interested in ways the SOC perceived it and operated under it.

Given the clearly defined legal status of the SOC in Serbia,[7] as well as the demographic picture of the population,[8] relations between SOC dioceses, its believers, and administration can be described as more or less harmonious. In fact, the only case of crisis in relations was the period shortly before Easter, 19 April 2020. Namely, Serbia's state of emergency would be lifted no sooner than 6 May; by that time a number of recommendations were issued by the government to religious communities in the performance of their rites, such as carrying out liturgies in the absence of believers and, in the case of funerals, limiting the number of people in attendance. This sensitive situation resulted in a telephone conversation between the president and Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) regarding the inability of believers to attend the Easter liturgy. Depending on the diocese/parish, the ban on movement during Easter was either respected, ignored, or something in between. There were no tensions as such between the above-mentioned actors in the subsequent periods. However, the SOC and its believers in Serbia were about to face more challenges.[9]

Unlike SOC dioceses in Serbia, the Diocese of Raška-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija (DRP KM) was in a delicate position. Because of the complex institutional environment, as a result of a territorial dispute between Belgrade and the Priština administration,[10] alongside an unfavourable demographic picture,[11] the DRP KM attitude towards COVID-19, including measures prescribed simultaneously by Priština and Belgrade, was far more cautious and responsible. Also, due to the fact that the competencies of both administrations over disputed territory are intertwined,[12] Bishop Teodosije (Šibalić) in his first pastoral letter underlined the need to address the dioceses' monastics, clergy, and believers, given the pandemic and measures imposed by competent institutions of Belgrade and Priština. Also, the letter brought eight instructions regarding the diocese's liturgical life and administration of the sacraments during Easter Lent.[13] Subsequent DRP KM releases, on 19 October 2020 and 28 November 2020, were similar, calling for compliance with decisions of the competent institutions and prescribing, in great detail, measures to be applied by the dioceses' parishes and monasteries.[14]

I found a similarly complex situation in Montenegro. Geographically, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro-Littoral, as well as the Diocese of Budimlje-Nikšić, are located within state territory. In terms of the legal context, SOC dioceses in Montenegro were in an unfinished position, especially in comparison to other religious communities; in addition to the 2007 Constitution, each religious community, except the SOC, concluded a fundamental contract with the administration of Montenegro, which further elaborated the rights and obligations of the contracting parties. The state tried to remedy the legal shortcomings of the administrative system by passing the controversial Law on Freedom of Religion (adopted by the Montenegro Assembly in late December 2019; it came into force in January 2020).

With this new law, the outdated law from 1977 ceased to apply, while almost simultaneously mass litanies of SOC believers and citizens began every Thursday and Sunday, in protest against the discriminatory nature of the new law. The mass response of citizens and their presence at these litanies, led by SOC clergy, surprised both the Montenegro administration and the SOC; this can be explained by the fact that 72 per cent of the population in Montenegro declare themselves to be Orthodox Christians regardless of ethnic affiliation (as a rule, the majority are either Montenegrins or Serbs).[15] The US state administration reports for 2020, based on estimates by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights, that approximately 90 per cent of Orthodox Christians in Montenegro are SOC believers.[16]

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic started within the context of turbulent social relations. Its presence would add another dimension to the social conflict, within the rhetoric of 'conflicting parties'[17]—on the one hand, in terms of administrative measures taken to prevent the further spread of the virus, and on the other hand, to discredit the opponent, that is, to present SOC dioceses/believers from acting irresponsibly in the general health situation.[18] Due to COVID-19 and pressures imposed by the administration, SOC dioceses decided to suspend litanies during the Montenegro government's interim measures.[19] Generally speaking, until the parliamentary elections held on 30 August 2020, simultaneous pressures and accusations by the administration, along with cautious and responsible behaviour on the part of SOC dioceses/believers, characterised social relations during first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Montenegrin society, hitherto constantly under pressure, experienced a kind of climax two months after the victory of opposition coalitions in the parliamentary elections, when, not by chance, there was a new increase in the number of infected people.[20]

A relaxation of relations between the Montenegro administration and SOC dioceses was confirmed, among other things, by a gradual shift in the society's focus from political to health issues, where the question of population immunisation was predominant during the following period. The beginning of the vaccination process—first in Serbia (and Kosovo-Metohija) on 24 December 2020, then in Montenegro on 23 February 2021—marks not only the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a new change in the daily behaviour of SOC believers; in particular, the liturgical practice of both clergy and parishioners was restored to the way it was practiced before the pandemic. However, 'traces' of behaviour from the first months of the pandemic were still visible.

The Easter celebration across Montenegro on 2 May 2021 did not cause a political disturbance, only condemnation from some media for non-compliance with the administration's decisions.[21] I found a similar situation in Belgrade on that same day. During Easter day in the Church of Saint Tryphon, a significant number of believers were in the building, while a dozen or so people followed the liturgy over speakers placed on the church façade. Circumstances in Kosovo-Metohija, although more favourable due to population immunisation, were characterised by the continuously cautious behaviour of the clergy and believers. Everything mentioned in this paragraph—the systematic immunisation of the population, the mostly relaxed practicing of faith, as well as the opportunity to explore daily religious practice

during COVID-19—constitute the time frame and context in which I researched SOC believers' liturgical practices. At the same time, it brought both theoretical and methodological challenges to the research project.

Namely, just as the return of religion to the public sphere of social life on a global level was noticed during the 1980s (Casanova, 1994), the same was true for the SOC during socialist Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, this global phenomenon, accompanied by a *local shift* within the international scientific community, was not adequately observed, especially by sociologists from Serbia and Montenegro, where the SOC was the single largest religious organisation.[22] The scientific research, theories, and debates that followed were more reminiscent of the debates between proponents and opponents of modernisation/secularisation theories among researchers of religious communities.[23] Accordingly, research methods were appropriate for the modernisation framework—public opinion polls were conducted, SOC documents and official announcements were analysed, or occasional interviews were conducted with prominent church representatives or with their critics among the secularisation advocates. Simply put, the local shift was missing within the local scientific community, although some exceptions confirming the rule can be found.

Zorica Kuburić (2010, 66–69) certainly stands out with her research of Dvor parish near Kruševac, where, in addition to insight into the church's parish books, she also conducted an interview with the parish priest's spouse. Unfortunately, this case study is rather marginal within the broader research of Serbia's religious communities. A research team led by Dubravka Valić-Nedeljković and Srdjan Sremac (2017) made an attempt to apply a *lived religion* approach while exploring the public reaction—in particular, the comments of individuals (believers, agnostics, and atheists) on media Internet platforms—regarding the SOC's letter to the government about the Belgrade Pride Parade event. Their article is truly a pioneering endeavour when it comes to the local scientific community.

In fact, apart from some other anthropological inquiries, such as by Srđan Atanasovski (2015), who was interested in modern pilgrimage practices in Kosovo-Metohija, most scientific and research papers explore SOC history and its attitude towards modernisation, or measure religiosity or ethnic and religious distance between Orthodox Christianity and other religions. Scientific responses by the SOC's theologians to the challenges posed by modernisation/secularisation advocates are also rare.[24] Even after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which was a kind of trigger for scientific and theological debates within the SOC itself, it appears that there will be no local shift in sociological research on religion in this region. Part of the explanation can be found within SOC history[25] as well as within the history of sociological thought during socialist Yugoslavia.[26]

Critical Literature Review

It is indicative that, in addition to sociologists Nancy Ammerman and Meredith McGuire, historians are included among the founders of the local shift within sociology of religion, such as David D. Hall and Robert Orsi.[27] Without considering all the shades of *cultural shift* within sociology,[28] its critical character, expanded

field of interest, and increase in the number of research methods are also noticeable. First of all, the fate of global religions, local beliefs, and the human need for spirituality and meaning has not been overcome. In fact, the theory of secularisation requires, at least, partial reconceptualisation, judging by the findings of Jose Casanova (1994, 3), who points to examples where religion, especially since the 1980s, has emerged from the private sphere and penetrated the field of public action. Actually, Casanova (ibid., 41) points to the porosity of these spheres, both at the level of relations between church institutions and the state, and at the level of the relationship between believers and parish priests. Being more radical in her critique, Ammerman (2020, 7) believes that theories of modernisation/secularisation fail to explain why societies, during the process of modernisation and development, incorporate and promote religious sentiments and practices instead of pushing them into the domain of the private. Penny Edgell (2012, 248) is right when she claims that religion has returned in a grand manner during past 30 years, except perhaps in some Western European/North America countries. Paradoxically, the epicentre of the cultural shift in reflections about religion's return to the historical stage is precisely among scholars from countries that Edgell sees as an exception.

The approach to the study of everyday religious practice known as 'lived religion', after a joint collection of works by American sociologists and historians (Hall 1997), actually presents one of the alternatives to the dominant theory of modernisation. Unlike the theory of secularisation—a sub-theory within the modernisation theoretical framework—emphasis is on researching the authentic religious experience and practice of both individuals and groups (McGuire, 2008, 12-13). McGuire emphasises (ibid., 4), as she is simultaneously abandoning sociological macro-theories of modernisation, the importance of studying the everyday religious practices of individuals, that is their differences in respect of the rules of religious practice prescribed by church institutions. For Orsi (2003, 173), placing the individual at the centre of research implies increasing our attention to the signs and practices of believers as they use, describe, and understand them, as well as to the context in which the said practices are manifested. In short, the lived religion concept refers to the intertwining (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020, 162)—or to put it better perhaps, the embedding—of religion in the everyday life of a believer.

What distinguishes the everyday *religious* practice of an individual from, for example, similar economic interaction is that it is a specific product of culture made up of *spirituality*. Explaining all the explicit and implicit manifestations of everyday religious practices (embodiment, materiality, emotion, narrative, aesthetics, and morals), Ammerman (2020, 15–17) draws attention to the spiritual dimension, the main existence indicator for a special type of individual practice. Referring to Christian Smith (2017), the author also points to the fact that, although religious practices can be equated with a belief in 'supernatural powers', they actually indicate the existence of individual awareness of a special, although not separate, religious reality that is at the same time intertwined with his/her daily life (ibid., 18). In addition to its spiritual dimension, a special quality of individuals' daily religious practices, against the institutionalised religious practice of the clergy, for example, is its spontaneous uniqueness (*bricolage*).[29]

McGuire noticed, during her research on everyday religious practices, the uniqueness, creativity, and eclecticism of individuals in interpreting and practising religious rites. Relying on the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, she names and defines such individuals' religious practices as *bricolage*, meaning a social practice that appears at first glance to be made of—joined together, like a collage—various parts and elements of other practices and meanings (McGuire, 2008, 195). Of course, to an external observer, such an eclectic synthesis of diverse beliefs and ritual practices may seem meaningless, but they do not to the individual who designs and practices them. As Edgell (2012, 251) noticed, emphasis on individuality in exercising everyday religious practices actually emphasises the individual's ability to act, while anything that is official is put in the background.

With this in mind, we must not only take a look at the typology of structures within which the believer exercises religious beliefs on a daily basis—after all, practices are a meeting place for individuals and structures that simultaneously enable and restrict them—but we also have to critically rethink these theoretical reflections. Ammerman (2020, 35–36) recognises several different contexts, religious traditions within which individuals' religious practices take place: entangled, established, institutionalised, and interstitial. According to the author, most of the church institutions which have re-penetrated the public sphere boundaries of social life within the post-communist states of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe fall under the rubric of *established* religious traditions. They are characterised by a clear organisational structure, elaborated theological principles of religion, prescribed ways of performing religious rites, and formal separation from state authorities.[30] Although Casanova (2011, 48) is right when he claims that established churches are in an unfavourable position—between the secular state and the individual (religious) needs of the consumption-oriented society of modern times—it seems to us that Ammerman's observations on established religious traditions are more complete because they do not omit their importance for believers' national identity, especially when it comes to Orthodox Christianity in post-communist states.[31]

Yet, the lack of research on examples of everyday religious practice among Orthodox Christian believers in the European regions mentioned is evident. Scholars—advocates of the lived religion approach within sociological studies of religion—based their theoretical conclusions mainly on the findings from case studies of individuals' everyday religious practices situated within an *institutionalised* context. Therefore, the first remark is of a general nature and refers to a limited number of case studies that have tested the lived religion approach. If it could be assumed, thinking purely logically, that every individual on the planet Earth has the ability to act autonomously in respect of social structures, then it arises that the lived religion theoretical approach is applicable regardless of the context. Does that straightforwardly mean it will generate identical scientific findings and knowledge?

I assumed that findings, and consequently scientifically based conclusions, would contain certain differences—and would not require a radical revision of the basic lived religion theoretical concepts—precisely due to the diverse contexts in which believers' daily practice is explored. Figuratively speaking, if research on everyday religious practice in Western Europe/North America was conducted in

societies where the rule 'belief without belonging' applies (Davie, 1993, 79-89), what findings can we expect from the same theoretical and research models applied to Eastern/South-Eastern European believers, where the rule of 'belonging without belief' presumably prevails?

The following notes, certainly more specific, are addressed to the very concept of individuals' eclectic everyday religious practices, that is the *bricolage* of various religious practices and symbols. While I agree with McGuire's finding of a small percentage of truly consistent individuals in terms of fully understanding as well as acting in accordance with their religious affiliation (2008, 16), on the other hand, I believe that her observations need additional explorations when it comes to the believers' *bricolage* content from established religious traditions. Few Orthodox Christians from Serbia, if any, can simultaneously imagine themselves as a Buddhist or a Catholic.[32] All of the above does not mean that Orthodox Christians in Serbia, or in any other European Orthodox Christian country, do not practice *bricolage* of everyday religious practices; however, the question arises as to what they are made of.

Furthermore, I agree with Edgell (2012, 251) when she claims that the basis for understanding and researching the *bricolage* of everyday religious practices is the emphasis on the ability of an individual to act, while structures are of secondary importance. However, there is a hint of a part that is neglected by lived religions theories and research projects. The basis of this criticism is the understanding that there is no social reality without the existence of the individual, or as Margaret Archer (2004, 124) would put it: 'In short, tribes without individuals never existed, nor could they ever exist'. When it comes to the *bricolage* of individuals' everyday religious practices, why is this almost exclusively reserved for believers, while the same ability to act is denied to the members of structures (priests)? Suppose practice is a hub for encounters between the actions of an individual and a structure which simultaneously allows and restricts those actions. If that is the case, it is possible to imagine, not to mention explore, interaction between these two persons.[33]

It is possible that this 'blind spot' for individuals, who are members of church structures, arises from both Bourdieu's understanding of the Catholic Church in France as a monolithic religious organisation (Dianteill, 2004, 545) as well as from the Western-centred/secularised view of scholars who come from social backgrounds where ecclesiastical institutions, due to 'various supply on the religious market', lose their importance or are seen exclusively through their official announcements and publications. On the other hand, part of the explanation, if not outright responsibility, rests on the shoulders of the local scientific community which focuses its research projects on various religious communities of the former socialist Yugoslavia.

Research Methodology

It was a relatively simple challenge to operationalise and determine the research subject of SOC believers' daily religious practices in Serbia (Kosovo-Metohija) and Montenegro during COVID-19. Due to the theological[34] and also broader social debate,[35] the main question under discussion was the hygienic adequacy of

communion, that is was it necessary to adapt established communion practice to the circumstances? Additionally, the ontological nature of the researched phenomenon of *practice*—the liturgical practice of communion—stood out as a logical starting point for the research project. Apart from the fact that it almost ideally fits into the lived religion theoretical framework and its concepts (it has all seven characteristics of religious practice, from incarnation, materiality, and narrative, through emotion, aesthetics and morality to the spiritual dimension), communion, as one of seven Orthodox Christianity Sacraments,[36] is an example *par excellence* of everyday religious practice. Also, it is an example of physical contact between an individual (believer) and a representative of an ecclesiastical institution (priest), which makes it a focal point of everyday religious practice.

Starting on 21 March 2021—the first Sunday liturgy as part of Easter Lent—until the liturgy held on 13 June, I conducted nine field trips to observe and participate in the liturgical life of the believers at four locations.[37] Of these four locations, two in Belgrade and one in Kosovo-Metohija proved to be of special importance, and therefore became the subject of analysis. In particular, I participated three times each in the liturgical life of the parish Church of Transfiguration[38] and the graveyard Church of St. Tryphon,[39] both located in Belgrade; on the other hand, I started my field work by going to Gračanica Monastery. Due to the unexpected finding in Gračanica, I repeated the observation with participation one more time before the end of the field work on 13 June 2021. The majority of field trips took place during Easter Lent.

In addition to notes and photographs, participation in the liturgical life of Belgrade church communities produced interviews with two focus groups[40] during July and August 2021.[41] It was impossible to apply the same research method when it came to Montenegro and Kosovo-Metohija, because it would imply the continuous presence of the researcher in the field.[42] Due to logistical restrictions, four semi-structured, in-depth interviews with SOC believers were conducted; two each with individuals from Montenegro and Kosovo-Metohija. In particular, two interviewees were from Podgorica, Montenegro's administrative centre, while the two from Kosovo-Metohija were from Kosovska Mitrovica (a Serb urban area) and Goraždevac (a Serb rural area). Logically, due to the scientific and cognitive limitations of focus group interviews as a methodological approach to research,[43] people who were prominent within their communities were chosen as interlocutors. In addition, due to the intrinsic advantages and limitations of both research methods, I conducted two more 'control' interviews with experts from the scientific community and the media sector.[44]

Interviews with Marko Veković (2021), a professor of religion and politics, and Jelena Jorgačević (2021), a journalist in charge of reporting on religious topics, were necessary not only to analyse the behaviour of the SOC and its believers during COVID-19, but also for the critical rethinking of my own initial epistemological and methodological premises alongside my preliminary findings. Interviews with experts served as a kind of 'controlling variable' to review the initial premises on which the research was based as well as to rethink interpretations of available data in order to prevent their misrepresentation to the greatest possible extent.

The fact that the researcher in this case is an Orthodox Christian, as well as secretary of the SOC Jasenovac Committee,[45] brings both limitations and potential benefits to the research project. For example, I understand, to the greatest possible extent, the way of thinking not only of the SOC as an institution but of its believers as well. Having participated in liturgical life from early childhood, I am familiar with it. Moreover, I would not be recognised by other believers as a 'foreign entity' at Sunday liturgies. Finally, the parish church was chosen, among other things, because it is my own parish church, while the graveyard church is a place of prayer for my closest family members.

In addition, while I am epistemologically based within historical science, I am developing an academic career characterised by an interdisciplinary approach, especially in terms of work with original source material. The experience of working with documents from archives as well as with newspapers has been supplemented during my postgraduate studies by preparing semi-structured, in-depth, interviews and fieldwork trips among Serbs of Kosovo-Metohija. Therefore, I am not only familiar with the epistemological and methodological limitations of different data sources,[46] but also of my own limitations regarding the research subject.

Research Findings

Believers' Practices of Communion during COVID-19: Discussions within the Serbian Orthodox Church

According to Veković (2021), the fact that states and their health systems, WHO, and pharmaceutical concerns, to name a few, were caught unprepared by COVID-19 indicates not only the same unpreparedness of the SOC, but also the way it tackled the challenges:

> It seems to me that the Church did not have any answer from the beginning, which is not any kind of criticism because no one had it. The Church decided to stand up to the pandemic on a case-by-case basis, and of course, on a moment-to-moment basis.

If we add to this Jorgačević's (2021) contemplation on the heterogeneity of attitudes within the institution, we get the outlines of an equally complex situation, not only when it comes to the political and legal context around SOC clergy/believers, but also among them:

> You had so many voices, not only voices that differ in nuances, but also completely incompatible voices. If some people said, 'go to church, wear a mask', others would say, 'you do not have to do this all the time'; there were those who said, 'no, do not go to church, God protects you, protect yourself, it is irresponsible to appear anywhere now', to those who said, 'if you do not go to communion now, you will have betrayed the Church and Jesus'. The disagreement got to that level.

The main issue was the (in)acceptability of holding Sunday liturgies in the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic; at its core was the question of the hygienic adequacy of communion. More specifically: Was it necessary to adapt the established liturgical and communion practice of the believers to the situation, and if so, in what way and to what extent?

Both the theological debates and the various statements of SOC Bishops contributed to the ensuing cacophony of attitudes. Bishop Irinej (Bulović, 2020, 8), a member of Synod in that period, decisively states: 'the Church is the Eucharist, and the Eucharist is the Church. Without the Eucharist, that is, without Holy Communion, there is no Church'. In addition to the theological arguments, Bishop Irinej presented examples from the life of the church which further supported the thesis of communion's hygienic adequacy in his polemical publication (ibid., 17–31). On the other hand, several authors, including clergymen, submitted texts to the online portal Teologija.net in an attempt to find answers to these questions. According to Knežević, behaving in accordance with medical workers' instructions does not indicate believers' infidelity; if one follows Christianity's basic principles—Jesus Christ's second commandment—such action 'shows our strength and willingness to care for God's creation'.[47] The author also presents examples of the Russian Orthodox Church's adapted communion practices, alongside the liturgical practices of certain SOC dioceses in the United States and the EU. Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević) offered a contribution to the discussion when, inspired by Giorgio Agamben's thoughts on university lecturing, he discussed the impact of COVID-19 on life in SOC seminaries consisting of common learning (the bread of theology), liturgy (the bread of the Eucharist), and nutrition (the table of love).[48]

When it comes to statements, a plethora of divergent positions was taken by both bishops and their clergy alike. Bishop Dimitrije (Rađenović) made 11 recommendations to clergy and believers of his diocese, some of which refer to the adjustment of previous liturgical practice, but not to the conduct of communion.[49] On the other hand, Bishop Grigorije (Durić) locked all churches in Germany, thus preventing regular liturgical life in accordance with the instructions of the state administration—the exceptions were two monasteries, provided that they did not accept people outside the fraternity—while he warned believers not to 'tempt their faith'.[50] On the same occasion, Bishop Grigorije pointed out the current non-existence of any official attitude of the SOC regarding COVID-19, as well as the rather broad stance of the Synod, which could be interpreted differently.

In fact, the Synod issued two announcements. A letter from the Synod's office on 16 March stressed the importance of medical achievements and recommended that believers follow the advice of doctors and administrative instructions, while also offering believers 'the only *cure for immortality*, Holy Communion, as well as the grace of its Holy Mysteries and overall gracious effect'.[51] As the statement was criticised by part of the public, especially the stance on communion, a new letter followed on 23 March, emphasising, in addition to adhering to all prescribed preventive measures during the liturgy, the fact that the act of communion is inherently voluntary, and therefore it is an 'unreasonable expectation that the Church

itself deny its believers what is most important and most sacred to the Church itself and to them—Holy Communion'.[52]

In addition to the expected criticism from the civil public, there were voices from the SOC itself, which not only questioned some of the Synod's decisions, but also strengthened the impression of the lack of a coherent attitude within the SOC towards COVID-19. Among those voices was the appearance of Fr. Vukašin Milićević on a well-known TV show where, on the one hand, he emphasised the need to adjust communion to the current situation and, on the other, he expressed scepticism about the possibility of applying the Synod's recommendations.[53] In a third letter from 28 March, the Synod's office recommended that sick people and people over the age of 65 should not come to liturgies, but should receive communion at home.[54] Also, the Synod did not ban the holding of liturgies or the administration of communion to believers, although it did try to limit the number of people present at liturgies by calling for respect regarding official prevention measures. The letter specifically mentioned those who were obliged to perform liturgies: 'This means that during the worship service in churches, there will be a priest (or priests) with a deacon, singers and a churchman (based on the needs and circumstances)'.[55]

As Easter approached (19 April 2020), the views of SOC dignitaries did not become any more harmonised than they were at the beginning of the pandemic and its outbreak that coincided with Easter Lent. In her article, Jorgačević not only confirms the diverse range of decisions by SOC bishops—from Bishop Irinej's conservative stance, through Patriarch Irinej's conciliatory position to the call to refrain from coming to the Easter liturgy by Metropolitans Porfirije and Amfilohije—but also tries to point out their attainments.[56] Specifically, Jorgačević raises the issue of respect for the recommendations, both Synodal and episcopal, by believers on Easter day. If the insights presented in her text are to be believed, the reactions of believers were equally, if not more, complex:

> Churches in Serbia were open, and in some churches and monasteries, except those that served the liturgy, there were no others present. In front of some, again, were more or less people. Police officers were also standing there, and their task was to warn the citizens attending the liturgy to keep the prescribed distance. The vast majority of believers remained in their homes.[57]

Believers' Practices of Communion during COVID-19: Belgrade (Serbia)

> The most beautiful trip to church, as far as I know for myself, was Easter 2020. Tears came to my eyes. I took my daughter by the hand and left. My husband asked me where we were going. God was in front of me. Thank God, that was the most beautiful church visit. (Marta, parish church)[58]
>
> That year there was no liturgy on the first Easter day; however, it was held on the second or third day. I remember the sadness I felt that I could not be at the liturgy that day, right on Easter. (Petar, graveyard church)[59]

The parish church and the graveyard church, their priests and believers, are examples that were mentioned earlier. While the parish church, located in a central Belgrade municipality, is surrounded by residential buildings and a park for children, the latter is located on the city's outskirts; also, the immediate 'neighbours' of the graveyard church are the forest and Belgrade's resident tombs from the beginning of the twentieth century. However, regardless of the accessibility of their respective locations, the liturgies during 2021 Easter Lent were attended. Also, traces of changes introduced during the pandemic could be observed on the buildings and believers alike.

The entrance of the parish church was wide open during my first visit, and in front of it stood about five to ten people who carefully followed the liturgy. Most of them stood quietly inside the church, some with protective masks over their faces. During the next two field trips, the situation in and around the parish church was almost the same. Unlike the parish church, the graveyard church did not keep its door open, although speakers were placed on the wall around the entrance. The altar was equipped with a sound system, although the church, significantly smaller in size than the parish church, was completely occupied (approximately 50 people). However, a dozen people stood in front of the entrance while closely following the liturgy over the speakers. The same scene was repeated every week, during three field trips.

Obviously, liturgical practice had undergone certain changes, which remained present during Sunday services. The open door of the parish church suggested use of the churchyard as an alternative space for liturgy. Nada (Parish Church, 2021), a health worker and one of the interlocutors, confirmed this impression: 'Our church worked normally, except during one period when the liturgy was held outside'. In the case of the graveyard church, the churchyard was used as additional space, thanks to the audio equipment.

However, regarding communion practice, more precise insights could not be gained solely through observation (during the observation period, believers, in smaller or larger numbers, received communion from the chalice and spoon, as was the practice before the pandemic) but only by interviewing members of parish church and graveyard church congregations. At the request of the parish church priest, almost a dozen people agreed to stay and share their insights after a Wednesday evening service. Similarly, based on the acquaintances I made during field trips, less then handful believers shared their experiences with me after the Sunday liturgy at the graveyard church. The information I collected provided findings about the believers' groups gathered around these two churches, as well as about other SOC believers.

Petar (Graveyard Church, 2021), who is quoted at the beginning of this section, did take communion, but according to the advice of the graveyard church priest: 'Naturally, we took communion. Our priest advised us not to take the full spoon with our mouths, in the way we usually do'. Alexandar (Graveyard Church, 2021), a regular attendee at the graveyard church's liturgies, agreed with Petar; additionally, he questioned the SOC authorities' unjust treatment of the aforementioned Fr. Vukašin Milićević, who was 'punished for the stance that one should receive

communion with more spoons'. Goran (Graveyard Church, 2021) pointed out that there was no uniform answer by clergy to the question of an acceptable way of administering communion: 'We hear that it was different in other churches. There was not one particular position on the matter, also. Maybe there should have been one'.

Ljuba (Parish Church, 2021), a respondent from another focus group, indirectly confirmed the aforementioned thoughts by providing information about the awkward situation in the church located outside Belgrade: 'I heard from my own sister, when some people came to receive communion, there was a bit of frowning. They wanted to take communion, but they would not open their mouths. Over time, they gradually freed themselves from it'. During the conversation, Dragan (Parish Church, 2021) testified that, during the visit to Mileševa Monastery, he witnessed the specific way in which the priest administered communion; in his estimation, the priest was young and therefore probably inexperienced or inconsiderate: 'He asked me to tilt my head, open mouth wide, so that he could pour from the spoon. Since I am disabled, I cannot stand in that position and open my mouth wide'. Tomislav (Parish Church, 2021) had a similar experience; he even tried to preserve it as memorabilia. During a pilgrimage to a certain diocese in Serbia, he said,

> the priest administered communion with a plastic spoon. I asked him to give it to me as a souvenir, but he didn't know me. … I just wanted to keep it as a memory, not to show other people the wrong practice.

Regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed, approved or condemned, or showed understanding for priests and their adapted ways of communion, the respondents, without exception, agreed on one thing. According to Tomislav (Parish Church, 2021), one of the most unrestrained interlocutors of this focus group, when everything was taken into account, adaptation *per se* was not important, because:

> I need Christ. If you are going to give me [communion] with a metal, wooden, or plastic spoon, give it to me. If you're going to pour it to me from a one-meter or ten-centimetre distance, give it to me. I take communion with Christ in order to live. I don't live to receive communion; I receive communion to keep on living until the next communion.

Despite the lack of a uniform communion practice in churches, and an even less unified attitude among SOC Bishops, the need for it among believers was unquestionable. The only thing that was unknown was the way the local clergy responded to their needs.

Believers' Practices of Communion during COVID-19: Kosovska Mitrovica, Goraždevac, and Gračanica Monastery (Kosovo-Metohija)

Within the section on research methodology, I pointed out the interesting case of Gračanica Monastery which I encountered: the intentional mismatch of the time of

the liturgy with official information displayed at the church entrance. Accordingly, there was a need for an additional field trip. It turned out to be the last one. Despite attempts to attend liturgy from the beginning this time, I was unsuccessful. I received an explanation for this behaviour of the local priest during an informal conversation with a parishioner at hand—aside from 5 nuns, 60 people attended the liturgy, all without protective masks. It was an unwritten rule aimed at reducing the number of believers attending the liturgy. Jorgačević (2021) also noticed the use of this tactic by the clergy:

> I know priests who did that in Belgrade. They say that there will be a liturgy at eight or nine; they start an hour earlier so as not to make a crowd. When communion starts, there are not too many of them indoors. And I heard that from several priests.

Further research on SOC believers' liturgical and communion practices in Kosovo-Metohija revealed additional reasons behind the liturgy adaptations.

In the case of Gračanica Monastery, one of the most important for Serbs in Kosovo-Metohija, the relatively frequent visits of pilgrims from other parts of Serbia also affected the need for adjustments. During my second visit to the Monastery, at the very end of liturgy, about 100 pilgrims arrived to its churchyard. Furthermore, on major religious holidays, such as Easter 2020, the liturgical practice differed from the usual one; in this case it was held in the churchyard with accompanying audio equipment.[60] Similarly, Dečani Monastery, depending on the period, limited or completely banned the presence of believers in liturgies.[61] Finally, the fragile political situation, further burdened by the pandemic,[62] forced both DRP KM and believers to behave cautiously, especially when it came to Serbs from rural areas.

Goraždevac village developed its own liturgical and communion practices. Based on conversations with Darko Dimitrijević, an editor at a local radio station, it turned out that communication between the parish priest and believers was crucial:

> He used to say: 'Don't you all come to church this week, it's very crowded'. This is not a problem, because I know that if fifty people gather, the priest will have serious troubles. So, the goal is not to create a problem for the church or for ourselves, after all.[63]

According to Dimitrijević (2021), in addition to avoiding confrontation with the Priština administration, a limited number of people made it easy to perform the liturgy:

> We organised ourselves so that we had a priest in church with five other people; also, we had five more people at the gate, next to the door on the right; on the left side of the church five more people, so we didn't gather and concentrate in one place. People tried to find solutions.

On the other hand, SOC believers from urban areas did not adapt their liturgical practice. Tatjana Lazarević, editor of a local media portal, pointed out the

drastically different behaviour of priests from Kosovska Mitrovica: 'Our diocese is one of the few that reacted in time. On two occasions, they adopted measures that were very clear. One was in regard to monasteries, and the other regulated relations between people and parish priests'.[64] According to Lazarević (2021), the difference was especially evident during liturgy:

> The church was packed for Easter. I mean, our city temple and the space in front of it were filled with people. In some normal circumstances, I could welcome this. However, only two of us were wearing a mask and one priest had a cloth mask under his chin. That was terrifying for me.

All of the above points to a conclusion about regional differences in liturgical practices—Serbs from urban areas ignored measures and recommendations—they did not change anything in their practice—while priests and believers from rural areas adapted the liturgy service, although the attitude towards communion was unchanged. During the last field trip, I noticed a small number of believers who received communion (25 per cent of the people present at the liturgy) without any noticeable changes in the way it was administered. The same applies to Goraždevac, too. Except for a limited number of believers tactically positioned around the church, there were no adjustments to communion practice. Lazarević, a well-informed journalist with a critical mind-set, was of same opinion. Although she was familiar with the adapted communion practices of certain SOC dioceses, Lazarević (2021) considered the need for communion to be self-evident:

> For example, I fully understand people who treat communion the same way nowadays as they did before. The very act of communion, I completely understand that. I also think that it is completely right for SOC authorities to look for a way to protect believers. I think that is not unfamiliar to Christianity.

Like other believers present at the liturgy in the city church, she would receive communion in the 'old' way.

Can this variation in the findings in Kosovo-Metohija be explained, in regard to Belgrade churches or those in Serbia, by a sensitive political situation? Jorgačević (2021) believed that the parishes outside of Belgrade were 'livelier', and that this had a special credence in Kosovo-Metohija: 'The only institution that, in my opinion, maintains ties with people there, helps them, especially in the enclaves [rural areas], is the SOC. The same goes for those Serbs who are not believers'. In addition to undoubtedly different contexts, the relationship between dioceses/priests and believers was extremely important for Jorgačević—she used the metaphor of a 'living church' in her interview when describing their interaction—which partly explains the liturgical and communion practices in Kosovo-Metohija.

The second part of the explanation, of course, lies in the fact that belonging to the SOC is a part of Serb identity, both in Kosovo-Metohija and in Montenegro. According to Jorgačević (2021), a parallel could be drawn between endangered identities:

> When the litanies began in Montenegro, I did an interview with a woman from there where she said: 'If they take our church, we have nothing left'. That's how she felt. That is the last thing left that they have; as for Serbs, in the end, this is the only thing left in Kosovo and Metohija.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, for Goraždevac inhabitants, any celebration of the village's patron saint (St. Jeremiah), despite epidemiological regulations, is of great importance:

> That year, the saint's day [*slava*] was marked only insofar as it satisfied the religious form. So, we didn't go on a procession, through the village. It was otherwise massive. It was marked very modestly, with a minimum number of people in the church. (Dimitrijević, 2021)

Lazarević's (2021) insights are complementary to the findings stated above:

> Serbs in the south, I would say, are more dependent on the SOC. The Church was seen as the only authority that remained with them, and settlements themselves were organised around monasteries and churches in a geographical and administrative sense. This model was transferred to the north, especially after 2008.

Without going into the medieval history of Serb villages, we cannot ignore the fact that in conditions of 'double isolation'—Rakočević's description of life during the pandemic[65]—SOC churches and monasteries become areas of even more pronounced identity significance.

Believers' Practices of Communion during COVID-19: Podgorica (Montenegro)

No less important is the identity issue—represented by the attitude of SOC dioceses and their believers in Montenegro towards COVID-19—viewed through what was then a tense political situation due to the controversial law. Based on interviews with two persons from Podgorica, I collected information about liturgical and communion practices in that city (Cathedral Church of Christ's Resurrection and St. George parish church). Vesna Krivčević, a sociologist and a part-time employee of the SOC radio station *Svetigora*, gained insight into the behaviour of the police, thanks to a journalist's credentials:

> We were banned from entering because they constantly checked, harassed people and priests. At that time, there was still this previous government, which was quite rigorous. The first thing they did was checking churches, filming people and then making trouble for them [priests]. In order not to cause a nuisance for them as well as for myself, simply I would not go.[66]

Also, due to the fact that the *Svetigora* offices are located in the crypt of the cathedral church, Krivčević (2021) gained insight into the ways its priests adjusted to the circumstances: 'Liturgy broadcasts were also enabled through social networks'. Liturgies were held, but without the presence of people during the first months of the pandemic. Aleksandra Božović, a parish priest's spouse, confirmed that their church was empty for Easter 2020: 'Our church is very small, but it has a large churchyard. … Last year, for Easter, we could not enter the church, nor approach the church gate, nor receive communion. We just couldn't do that'.[67]

Believers were as abstentious as possible during the first wave of COVID-19, according to Krivčević (2021): 'I have a feeling that we as a nation have been abstentious. … and we practiced that, that is, there was no coming to church, we followed liturgy through social networks or through the website'. Yet, there were exceptions, especially for Easter 2020. Jorgačević (2021) noted that everything depended on the agreement with their priests:

> I know two churches where liturgy took place behind closed doors, and then, when the time of communion came, doors were opened so that believers could receive communion. There was no dawdling, at least that. Simply, they thought that you could not but to give communion to people for Easter.

As preventive measures became relaxed after the first three months, possibilities for priests and believers to act became more numerous. The interesting dynamics of the relations was especially noticeable after the administrative permit for people to stay indoors according to the square footage of the premises. Spatially speaking, due to the gallery and the crypt, the cathedral church is one of the largest sacral buildings in Montenegro. So it was possible, as Krivčević (2021) informs us, 'to keep a distance. When that main part was filled, then people went up to the gallery and lined up. And there were some outside, but everything could be heard because there was a sound system'.

Of course, the most important moment of the liturgy in the cathedral church was communion:

> Then one priest would go down to the crypt, because there were people there as well. Speakers were in the crypt, too. And so, priests were deployed. Two or three priests gave communion in the central part of the church, two in the gallery and two or three in the crypt, so that there was no crowd during communion. (Krivčević, 2021)

For her, as well as for Božović (2021), the very act of communion was an inseparable part of the liturgy once they could attend it: 'As far as we are concerned, we received communion each time when we went to church'.

As in the case of SOC believers in Kosovo-Metohija, it turns out that direct communication between clergy and their believers was necessary for successful adaptation of liturgical practice, but not communion practice itself. Given the similarly

sensitive political situation in Montenegro, Jorgačević (2021) used the same metaphor as well, with an emphasis on 'freedom', when analysing the situation:

> Here, a particularly living church was created, literally through the selection of priests as well as through the freedom given to them by Bishops, that is, by Metropolitan [Amfilohije]. The freedom that was created in the church was transferred to the faithful people, as it usually happens.

Also, an established trust between priest and believers is confirmed by Krivčević's (2021) following statement:

> Some would like to have their own spoon, others would like us to receive communion in the same manner as we did before. It is up to the person to decide freely. Let's say that I am in a western country, so the bishop there tells me that everyone must have their own spoon; I would respect that. Thus, I don't have that kind of problem. If anyone of us receives communion from one spoon—that's it.

However, everything stated in this section must be taken with a dose of scepticism, because these findings provide insight into interactions between clergy and believers from Podgorica exclusively. Indirectly, through 'control interviews', it can be inferred that the case of Podgorica is not an isolated example. Veković (2021) believed that liturgies held before and periodically during the pandemic showed the strength of established relations between parish priests and people 'who were considered the stubbornest atheists and communists during the time of socialist Yugoslavia'. Đurđevi Stupovi Monastery is one of those examples:

> On Sundays, the monastery was usually—let's not say empty—but visited by a small number of people. Now that church is full of people. Whether they are true believers—I don't know. However, sociologically, it is a very interesting phenomenon, how the church litanies, in fact, filled churches. (Veković, 2021)

In addition to church litanies, as a testimony to the strength of priest–believer relations, Veković (2021) considered, as did Jorgačević, that belonging to the SOC was perceived as an identity issue: 'In Montenegro, everyone is identity-bound to the church, the state, and part of society. In itself, that is a political thing, absolutely'. Also, the church litanies, as a form of protest against the controversial law, showed that this part of the identity was endangered by the state administration. That is why Veković (2021) concluded that SOC clergy and bishops showed

> their strength when at the funerals [of Metropolitan Amfilohije in Podgorica, and Patriarch Irinej in Belgrade] a large number of believers arrived; not only them, but also a significant number of political actors gathered. In particular, there was no respect for pandemic measures, no distance, and the like. In Montenegro, around fifteen to twenty thousand people gathered.

For Božović (2021), it was a historical event on a par with the funeral of Patriarch Pavle (Stojčević): 'It was completely unbelievable, you know!?! Now, after all these things [the sensitive political context during COVID-19], you have something that brings people together'.

Concluding Remarks

In my critical literature review, I followed up on McGuire's and Edgell's reflections on the *bricolage* of believers' everyday religious practices, pointing out insufficiently explored aspects of their theoretical positions. In essence, the research findings I have presented here indicate insufficient knowledge about the everyday religious practices of Orthodox Christians, within the context of established religious traditions. It has been obvious that *bricolage* exists, but the content differs to a certain extent from that detected by McGuire among believers within institutionalised religious traditions. To quote Milan Vukomanović (2016, 275–76), who notes the ability of Orthodox Christianity, to filter out the contemporary scope of modernisation, it 'accepts globalisation in technical, technological, and even economic terms, but at the same time strives for cultural fragmentation'. Although Vukomanović reduces, somewhat roughly, Orthodox Christians to mere recipients of technological inventions of modernisation without the ability to fully understand it, he is essentially right. The *bricolage* of Orthodox Christians' everyday practices in Serbia (Kosovo-Metohija) and Montenegro are rife with answers—to some extent contradictory, and to some extent complementary—to the demands of medicine and state administration, on the one hand, as well as to recommendations and views of prominent Bishops, theologians, and priests, on the other hand.

This is where the gap within Edgell's theoretical thinking becomes noticeable: he takes into account only the actions of believers in regard to ecclesiastical structures, pretermit to considering everyday religious practices available to individuals from these structures. Depending on the case, my research findings indicate not only the interconnectedness of believers' *bricolage* and their priests' everyday religious practices, but also the existence of a relative manoeuvring space for the actions of clergy.

One gets the impression that, in Serbia (except Kosovo-Metohija), there was a silent understanding between the state administration and the SOC on the rules of conduct during the pandemic, especially during its first three months (March–May 2020). In the case of Montenegro, it turned out that the manoeuvring space left to parish priests/believers, at least during the period March–August 2020, was drastically narrower than that in Serbia. The sensitive political context due to the controversial law, the conflict between SOC dioceses and the administration, which escalated in late 2019 and early 2020, as well as the geographical and demographic structure and size of the state made it possible for the state's decisions to penetrate deeper into the everyday life of the SOC and its believers.

Unlike Serbia and Montenegro, where the extremely flexible or extremely rigid attitudes of state structures clearly affected the scope of the autonomous, creative actions of believers and their priests—whether space available was considerable or

extremely limited—the situation in Kosovo-Metohija was further complicated by the existence of two administrative systems, as well as regional differences between urban and rural areas (the size of Serb communities as well as the extent of their isolation). The DRP KM attitude coincided as much as possible with the recommendations and decisions of both administrative systems, similarly to Montenegro.

The keyword is *adaptation* to the emergency situation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia (Kosovo-Metohija) and Montenegro (March 2020–May 2021). The primary challenge was how to follow, to the greatest extent possible, the medical recommendations and administrative regulations, and at the same time, how to practice one's faith in accordance with those recommendations and regulations, and sometimes despite them. Priests and their parishioners found themselves between a 'hammer' of responsibility towards society in a time of crisis and an 'anvil' of the need to practice their faith. The central refractive axis of the breaking, summarising, and conflicting expectations of society and the needs of believers was liturgical practice with an emphasis on communion, as a focal point. There were various creative solutions, both in the way liturgy itself was performed, and in ways communion was administered.

Taking into account all of the above, especially the research findings, a certain regularity to believers' everyday religious practices emerges, especially when it comes to liturgical ones. In particular, the only reliable pattern of behaviour is the striking absence of a uniform response from the SOC dioceses/clergy to the controversy over hygienic concerns. The extent to which they differed from each other—there are adaptations of liturgical and communion practices in Serbia as well as adaptations of liturgical practices in Kosovo-Metohija and Montenegro only—depended mainly on four factors.

The first level of analysis begins with the legal and political contexts of the three case studies. Undoubtedly, these factors enable and limit the activities of SOC dioceses/clergy and believers. However, to what extent and in what way the behaviour of clergy and believers coincided with or deviated from prescribed decrees and medical recommendations also depended on the views of the bishops in charge. Here is where the second level of analysis comes into play. To quote Jorgačević (2021), if someone is looking for a homogeneous SOC position on an issue, 'it does not exist. The SOC is a heterogeneous multitude, and we see it in dozens of examples, on most important social issues. As a final point, that is the case with the pandemic'.

It was shown during the research that SOC bishops, as a factor in their own right in addition to representing a new level of analysis, also influenced a third group of factors. Bishops on the basis of their canonical jurisdiction enabled or limited the space for the activities of their priests. It is this level, the third level of analysis, that provides an opportunity to observe all the consequences of the first two factor groups' influence. From the interviews, as well as from my own observations, it can be concluded that parish priests, to some extent in agreement with parishioners such as Goraždevac, applied certain tactics aimed at reducing the number of believers present; consequently, a reduction in the number of those who wished to receive communion was achieved. I noted a similar practice of tactical deployment

in Podgorica as well. The relationship between clergy and parishioners, the fourth group of factors, described as a 'living church' by Jorgačević (2021), suggests freedom to act. A certain level of priestly autonomy exists. Right here at the site of the creation of a *bricolage* of everyday religious practices—within the sacral building at the liturgy and during communion, when priests and believers meet each other—the existence of various, sometimes creative, adaptations of these practices is confirmed.

The fourth level of analysis shows that SOC believers, in various ways, depending mostly on the first three groups of factors but not exclusively, either respected administrative decrees and medical recommendations, partially respected them (*adaptation*), or completely ignored them. Due to the manner and subject of research, it is impossible to say what percentage of believers fully complied with the provisions and recommendations—that is were absent from liturgy. Indirectly, based on the analysis of the data, it is clear that, at least during the first three months of COVID-19, a number of believers, otherwise regularly present, did not participate in liturgies; therefore, they did not take communion. The question of reasons behind this behaviour remains open, but my impression is that it can be explained, at least theoretically, by their acceptance/understanding of medical recommendations and administrative regulations.

The second and third groups of believers—those who were ready to adapt liturgical and communion practices and those who absolutely were not—are included in the research. It turned out that both groups of believers were exposed to influence from all three groups of factors, or at least some of them. In the case of Serb believers from urban areas, the sensitive political context in Kosovo-Metohija prevailed over the bishop's attitude; that is the unchanged practice of the liturgy and communion was noticed. Although rejections of recommendations and decrees were present in Serbia as well, it seems that they were rather a consequence of the decisive influence of the bishop in charge. However, these are not final conclusions; the impression is that these examples were relatively rare and additional research is needed to achieve more reliable insights.

My analysis of the behaviour of believers who were ready to adapt their liturgical and/or communion practices has shown not only their readiness to adopt some or all of the recommendations and decrees for a while, as in the case of Serbia, but also believers' ability to adapt to them, to 'creatively interpret' them, or to evade them. Specifically, this means that this group of believers finds form irrelevant; what matters is the essence of the liturgy, which is communion. Some used plastic spoons, some used standard spoons; that is the way of administering communion suffered certain adjustments (social distance when receiving communion, changing the angle of the head and spoon when administering, avoiding wiping the faces with a napkin).

On the other hand, unlike priests/parishioners in Serbia, I did not notice any adjustments regarding the manner in which communion was administered in Montenegro and Kosovo-Metohija. I saw a particularly interesting example of adaptation regarding the Podgorica cathedral church, where priests were able, due to the size of the church, to divide believers into smaller groups so they could

administer communion to each group, without creating larger clusters or queues. In Gračanica Monastery, the priest, similarly to some Belgrade parishes, changed the time for beginning the liturgy, but did not change the official notification for believers.

The research results regarding behaviour patterns for the aforementioned groups suggest that they accepted, at least in part, the medical recommendations and administrative regulations or, in creative ways, tried to reconcile them with their religious needs. They seemed to be influenced, to some extent, by all three groups of factors. As for the described variations within liturgical and communion practices between believers in Serbia, on the one hand, and believers in Montenegro and Kosovo-Metohija, on the other hand, they can be partly explained by the closer relations established between priests and believers—the 'living church'—as well as by the specific importance that the SOC has within sensitive political contexts. The importance of identity was only further enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The extent to which demographic characteristics in these three case studies, in addition to the listed factors, affected believers' behaviour patterns could not be investigated due to the design of the research project and its methodological approach. I am sure that additional, thorough study of SOC believers' practices, based on sociological and/or anthropological research methods within the lived religion approach, would further elucidate this and some other issues arising from this research project. If the project's findings have been successful, at least in part, in supplementing our accumulated knowledge on Orthodox Christians' daily religious practices from established religious traditions, their better understanding through *bricolage* of liturgical and communion adaptation practices, we can justifiably be optimistic that some of these questions can be answered.

Notes

1 Ministry of Health, 'Health Warning'.
2 Pravno informacioni sistem Republike Srbije, 'Odluka o proglašenju vanrednog stanja: 29/2020-3'.
3 Kosovo Sever portal, 'Prva dva slučaja korona virusa na Kosovu'.
4 Kosovo Sever portal, 'Vučić potvrdio: Prvi slučaj korona virusa u srpskim sredinama na Kosovu'.
5 Institut za javno zdravlje Crne Gore, 'Mjesečni izvještaj o kretanju zaraznih bolesti. Crna Gora—mart 2020'.
6 Compare following decrees: Pravno informacioni sistem Republike Srbije, 'Zaključak (Vlade kojim se preporučuje crkvama i verskim zajednicama bezbedno vršenje verskih obreda za vreme trajanja vanrednog stanja i epidemije): 43/2020-13'; Kenan Hrapović, 'Naredba za preduzimanje privremenih mjera za sprječavaje unošenja u zemlju, suzbijanje i sprječavanje prenošenja novog koronavirusa'. p. 1; Kosovo Sever portal, 'Svećla i Krueziu: Severna Mitrovica i Zvečan stavljeni u karanti uz punu koordinaciju sa Vladom'.
7 The legal framework for SOC in Serbia is based upon the 2006 Constitution and Law on Churches and Religious Communities (27 April 2006); also see Pravno informacioni sistem Republike Srbije, 'Zakon o crkvama i verskim zajednicama'.

8 In 2011 census, out of 7.1 million, not including Albanians from Kosovo-Metohija, almost 6 million people declared themselves Serbs, while a certain number above this figure declared them Orthodox Christians. See Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije, 'Stanovništvo prema nacionalnoj pripadnosti, starosti i polu'.
9 After death of Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radović), 30 October, Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) soon fell ill and passed away (20 November 2020). In one month, the SOC lost both its head figure and one of the most influential theologians and archbishops.
10 DRP KM is also recognised by Priština on the basis of Law no. 02/L-31 (2006), its amendments and supplements from 2012 (Law No. 04/L-115). It should be noted here that none of the present religious communities in Kosovo-Metohija has been recognised as a legal entity by Priština institutions yet.
11 Number of Orthodox Christians, as well as Serb population, is not reliably determined by Priština institutions' 2011 census (estimated at 1.4 per cent of about 1.9 million people). Serbs are, at least declaratively, Orthodox Christians and for the most part residents of ten Serb-majority municipalities. See US Department of State, 'Kosovo 2019 International Religious Freedom Report', p. 2.
12 For example, implementation of curfew in Kosovo-Metohija is almost exclusively in the hands of Priština's Kosovo Police Force (KPF), except in four Serbian municipalities in the north. However, there are two health systems—one is part of Serbia and other of Priština administration—the services of which are used by both Serbs and Albanians, whereby Serbs primarily use healthcare provided by Serbia.
13 Bishop T. (Šibalić), 'Pastirsko pismo Episkopa Teodosija'.
14 Eparhija raško-prizrenska i kosovsko-metohijska, 'Obaveštenje vernicima o novim merama zaštite u Eparhiji raško-prizrenskoj u situaciji pogoršane epidemiološke situacije'.
15 US Department of State, 'Montenegro 2020 International Religious Freedom Report', p. 2.
16 According to the 2011 census, 45 per cent of the population declared as Montenegrins while 28 per cent as Serbs; nearly 37 per cent of citizens speak Montenegrin, while 42 per cent speak Serbian. All of the above data taken together indicate fluidity of ethnic identities, while the same cannot be said for the religious affiliations of both Serbs and Montenegrins.
17 Pravoslavna Mitropolija crnogorsko-primorska, 'Mitropolit Amfilohije za 'Sputnjik': Boričemo se protiv dva virusa'.
18 Janjić, 'Tensions grow in Montenegro following arrest of priests', pp. 2–3.
19 Pravoslavna Mitropolija crnogorsko-primorska, 'Saopštenje za javnost: Mitropolija crnogorsko-primorska zbog prijeteće epidemije privremeno obustavlja litije'.
20 In October 2020, 7,896 COVID-19 infection cases were recorded, including 132 death outcomes due to the infection. See Institut za javno zdravlje Crne Gore, 'Mjesečni izvještaj o kretanju zaraznih bolesti. Crna Gora—oktobar 2020', pp. 1–2.
21 Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Vaskrs u Crnoj Gori: Pričešće vjernika jednom kašičicom'.
22 During the socialist period in Serbia, there was no specialised institute for sociological research of religion because it was considered a relic of the past rather than a modern phenomenon. See Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, *Religioznost i tradicija*, pp. 14–15.
23 Compare Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century*; Vukomanović, 'Ecclesiastical Involvement in Serbian Politics: Post-2000 Period', 115–149.
24 Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century*, 7–8.
25 On the history of the SOC, see Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, *Knj. 3, Za vreme Drugog svetskog rata i posle njega*; also see: Kuburić, 'Serbia and Montenegro', 307–312.
26 On the history of sociology in Yugoslavia, see Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, *Religioznost i tradicija*, 13–15; also: Đorđević, 'Religijsko-crkveni kompleks, raspad druge i budućnost treće Jugoslavije (fragmenti)', 330.

27 Ammerman, 'Rethinking Religion', 10.
28 In fact, the term 'cultural shift' would probably be more acceptable among social science theorists, implying a whole range of different epistemological foundations and starting points in the study of topics that could be put under the sociology of religion umbrella. See Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; also see Edgell, 'A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions', 247–265.
29 A simplified, literal, translation of the French word *bricolage* means 'do it yourself'. In fact, this term means doing various things, amateurism, and amateur work. See Slobodan A. Jovanović, *Savremeni francusko-srpskohrvatski recnik sa gramatikom I-II* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1991), 64.
30 Unlike the *institutionalised* religious traditions, which are characterised by a clear separation of state and religious institutions, in the case of *established* ones they are connected, usually in an informal way, due to their cultural importance for the identity of the majority in post-communist states.
31 Ammerman emphasises the struggle of established religious traditions for influence in and recognition by the society, after the fall of communist regimes, against liberal segments of society that advocate secularism according to the institutionalised religious traditions. See Ammerman, 'Rethinking Religion', 35.
32 Allusion to McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 11. Available survey data seem to support it; see Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 'Religioznost građana Srbije i njihov odnos prema EU—sociološki ugao', 27–31.
33 This shortcoming is especially noticeable if we take into account the fact that parish priests are an important part of the believer's religious practices within established religious traditions (e.g. at funerals, together with believers, they create religious practice as such).
34 Compare articles published by *Teologija.net*; also see (Bulović), *Sveto pričešće—Lek besmrtnosti*.
35 Jorgačević, 'Dan odškrinutih vrata'.
36 On the theological and ritual aspects of the liturgical practices of communion, see Roeber, 'Eastern Orthodoxy', 173–182; (Velimirović), *Vera svetih*, 74–77; Vukašinović, 'Savremeni tokovi liturgijskog bogoslovlja u Srpskoj Pravoslavnoj Crkvi', 33–69.
37 The researcher was guided by the instructions set out in Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 431–452.
38 Dates are as follows: 11 April, 18 April, and 23 May.
39 Dates are as follows: 4 April, 2 May, and 16 May.
40 See Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 501–513.
41 Although researcher is part of the religious community, parishioners needed time to get used to him in order to do interviews. Dates for focus group interviews are as follows: 28 July (parish church) and 8 August (graveyard church).
42 The findings and scope of the research are limited by the fact that the field research was not conducted evenly in respect of all three case studies—the most consistent field work was done in Serbia (Belgrade), sporadic research was done in Kosovo-Metohija (Gračanica Monastery), and no research was done in Montenegro—hence the interviews were needed.
43 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 516–518.
44 Ibid., 469–491.
45 As Dianteill notes, one can argue that my position within the SOC is somewhere on the borderline between volunteer and wage earner. See Dianteill, 'Pierre Bourdieu', 540.
46 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 405–407.
47 Knežević, 'Uzajamno poslušanje medicine i bogoslovlja—suočavanje sa pandemijom COVID-19'.
48 (Vasiljević), 'Vera kao ispunjenje razuma (Koji je kurikulum za studije bogoslovlja posle koronofobije?)'.

49 Kosovo Sever portal, 'Crkva o pandemiji: Eparhija ZH izdala uputstvo vernicima, Mitropolija obustavila litije, Alo podsetio na tamjan'.
50 Kosovo Sever portal, 'Vladika Grigorije: Pričešće ne može da bude izvor zaraze, ali—ne kušajte Boga'.
51 Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 'Saopštenje za javnost Svetog Arhijerejskog Sinoda'.
52 Pravoslavna Mitropolija crnogorsko-primorska, 'Saopštenje za javnost Svetog Arhijerejskog Sinoda Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve'.
53 Janjić, 'A Career: Vukašin Milićević, A Priest with Attitude. Not in the Patriarch's Favor', p. 6.
54 Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva, 'Saopštenje za javnost Svetog Arhijerejskog Sinoda'.
55 Ibid.
56 Jorgačević, 'Dan odškrinutih vrata'.
57 Ibid.
58 Parish Church, focus group interview on 28 July 2021.
59 Graveyard Church, focus group interview on 8 August 2021.
60 Eparhija raško-prizrenska i kosovsko-metohijska, 'Direktan prenos Vaskršnjeg bogosluženja manastira Gračanice, preko Fejsbuk naloga Eparhije raško-prizrenske, počinje u ponoć'.
61 Ibid., 'Obaveštenje vernicima o novim merama zaštite u Eparhiji raško-prizrenskoj u situaciji pogoršane epidemiološke situacije'.
62 Rakočević, 'Srbi na Kosovu u dvostrukoj izolaciji'.
63 Dimitrijević, interview on 28 August 2021.
64 Lazarević, interview on 9 August 2021.
65 Rakočević, 'Srbi na Kosovu u dvostrukoj izolaciji'.
66 Krivčević, interview on 26 July 2021.
67 Božović, interview on 26 July 2021.

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6 Immunity to COVID-19? The Russian Orthodox Church under Global Crisis

Maria Toropova

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a kind of tectonic shift that changed the way of life, even aspects that had seemed unshakeable. The formats of social interaction changed, forcing social institutions to rethink their rules, regulations, and strategies. These changes have been so powerful that they have placed societal and cultural systems under extreme pressure, which has exacerbated all the existing problematic points and called into question the existing foundational principles of these systems. In this regard, it is especially interesting to analyse the processes taking place in religious public institutions due to their intrinsic rigidity, but at the same time their increasing importance for society at the moment of crisis. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) represents in this context an extremely interesting object of study, because the COVID-19 pandemic has become a kind of a test for the strength of the foundations on which the church has built its positioning and self-representation in recent decades. In order to analyse the transformative processes which the ROC has had to undergo since the beginning of 2020, in this chapter I consider the global, structural changes which are taking place on both the axis of the church–state relationship and the church–parish axis, since it is this aspect of church life which has drawn considerable attention as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic, raising the research question: How did the pandemic affect church–state relations and what implications do those changes have for the ROC?

In order to answer this question, this chapter begins by analysing the framework within which the ROC existed at the time of the pandemic. The current model of church–state relations is examined from an institutionalist perspective, along with an analysis of the role that the so-called new symphony of church and state plays in this framework, which the Moscow Patriarchate has so diligently promoted as it builds its position in contemporary Russia. I also outline the 'pain points' that have emerged for the church in connection with its chosen course, and give my thoughts as to what consequences they may have for the future of the ROC in the post-COVID-19 era. In order to answer the main question, I focus particularly on a few aspects: To what extent has the global health crisis affected the socio-political role of the ROC? How has the church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic affected church–state relations? How has the pandemic affected the parishes and priests? What is happening to the institution of the Orthodox faith in today's Russia?

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Church–State Relations in Russia on the Eve of the Outbreak of the Pandemic

In order to understand and make any predictions about the further dynamics of the processes that have begun, it is first necessary to comprehend the status quo in which the ROC was found. When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, there was a social demand for establishing order across systems. The freedom of all markets, including the market of institutions, in addition to chances and opportunities, had brought with it also a loosening of the institutions critical to the country's sustenance and sovereignty. The era of the 'free market' was short-lived, quickly replaced by 'managed pluralism' (Lamoreaux and Flake 2018).

The state was looking for partners within the country—institutions that would help the Kremlin to preserve statehood and become the mainstay of the new Russia. Because of the complex processes the country went through, the ROC had the opportunity to become one such partner for the state as part of their institutionalised cooperation. Although the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993, Art. 14) explicitly refers to the secular nature of the state, in practice, since 1997, when the Russian Federation Federal Law 'On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations' (1997) was adopted with a preamble ranking the importance of religious institutions according to their tradition for the country,[1] space was opened for interpretations of the 'old new role' of the ROC. Although the freedom of conscience enshrined in the constitutional order and the secular character of the Russian Federation were recognised again, according to the precise way the preamble is worded, the religions in Russia were ranked hierarchically. The highest position is occupied by Russian Orthodoxy, which enjoys special recognition for the 'special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia in the formation and development of its spirituality and culture' (Willems 2012, 179).

Thus, for the last couple of decades, it has been the ROC that has been positioned as the bearer of a nation-forming identity. It was the ROC that formulated certain ideologemes that formed the basis of Russian public self-perception at the turn of the twenty-first century. Narratives about traditional values, the Russian world (*Russkiy mir*), and Russia's special mission resonated with the general population and gradually moved from the church vocabulary to the political one (cf. Toropova 2021). Narratives originally articulated by the ROC have, in many ways, shaped the image of Russia today, both externally and internally. Strikingly, national and religious identities now converge as closely as possible in a region where the regime of atheism once reigned (cf. Pew Research Center study 2017, 4). In contemporary Russia, according to a Pew Research Center study (2017, 5), most respondents indicate that belonging to the Orthodox Church is an important condition for a person to be considered a 'true Russian'. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has seen a dramatic increase in the proportion of the population who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, from 37 per cent in 1991 to 71 per cent in 2017 (Pew Research Center study 2017, 7). These figures have largely determined the format of the church's relationship with the state in post-Soviet Russia.

In the cultural spaces dominated by Orthodox Christianity, close cooperative models of church–state relations are favoured, and the symphony model is seen as the ideal form of coexistence. The initial term *symphonia*, literally translated as 'harmony', was first used in the preface to the Sixth Novel of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (sixth century) and implies the cooperation of secular and ecclesiastical authorities for the benefit of the common whole (cf. Beljakowa 2010). The symphony model assumes that the spheres of state and church form a unity that inevitably leads to cooperation between church and state. This results in the need for rapprochement between the two parties: in this conception, the state plays the role of a protective power for the church and the church supports the secular power (cf. Losehand 2007, 23), and this is also the original usage by Emperor Justinian. However, church and state are supposed to avoid merging, because the church is ecclesiologically distinct from the state (cf. Nikolaou 2011, 128f.); political issues therefore do not fall within the competence or powers of the church. This paradox is due to the fact that the terminology of the sixth century, in which the symphony concept was coined, cannot be transferred to today's circumstances. It should be emphasised that Justinian does not speak of 'state' and 'church', but of 'empire' and 'priesthood'. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most Orthodox believers live in states where the Orthodox churches are organised as national churches or, as in the case of Russia, as a national majority church. This often leads to a levelling of the ecclesiologically prescribed distance from the state (cf. Bremer and Toropova 2019, 161).

Although today the term 'symphony' is being used in Russian Orthodox vocabulary again, it is clear that the original concept of *symphonia* from the sixth century (cf. Codex Iustiniana cit. in Traut 2011, 62) no longer applies and is not able to adequately explain the modern relations between state and church in twenty-first-century Russia. Nevertheless, the need to search for the 'ideals of symphony' is spoken about again and again (cf. Zubov 2004; Bremer 2007; Stricker 2011). According to the ROC, today's relations between state and church should be inspired by the ideals of the symphony model. This statement was the core message of Patriarch Kirill's inaugural address in 2009, which found no opposition from President Medvedev (cf. Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate 2009):

> In modern circumstances, we are aware of the impossibility of realising the ideals of the first millennium. But we, the Church, acknowledge the need to be inspired by the symphony ideal in church–state relations, so that this ideal guides our thoughts and actions accordingly. (Patriarch Kirill in Kuzmin and Yakovleva, 2009)

Although the church acknowledges the impossibility of transposing the sixth-century model of church–state relations, nevertheless, even a reference to it, which has not found any contradiction from the top representatives of secular power, sets a certain tone for bilateral relations. It should be noted that, despite the church's aspiration to establish symphonic relations with the state, the ROC still reserves the right

to disagree with the state, at least theoretically. For instance, the document 'The Basis of the Social Concept of the ROC' (Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations 2000), better known as the Social Doctrine, in Subsection III.5 on the relationship to the state, articulates the following:

> The Church remains loyal to the state, but God's commandment to fulfil the task of salvation in any situation and under any circumstances is above this loyalty. If the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatise from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the state.

Nevertheless, the church sees disobedience as a measure of last resort, since it positions itself as responsible for the well-being of the national majority:

> If we had a population half divided along religious lines like in Germany, the Church could behave differently, but since we have 90 per cent of the Orthodox population, the Church cannot enter into open confrontation with the state. There have been historical precedents—Nikon's conflict with Alexei Mikhailovich, Metropolitan Philip against Ivan the Terrible, Arsenii Matseevich against Catherine the Great—the consequences, as we know, were dramatic. If you follow the Patriarch's latest speeches, you can find out, he is talking about a symphony. Of course, this is an outdated concept, certainly today we are not talking about the Byzantine or Russian pre-revolutionary models, especially if we remember the Synodal period and the accompanying Caesaropapism, when everything was decided by the Tsar and the appointed Ober-Procurator. But the symphony is resounding today again. Under Patriarch Alexis, there was talk of co-operation, but under Patriarch Kirill, symphony is spoken of as more desirable. (Vasyutin 2018)

Indeed, a new reading of the Byzantine model, building a so-called new symphony, has become a priority for ecclesiastical forces in Russia in the twenty-first century. While during Perestroika and the first post-Soviet years the church revival promised to take a form consistent with the democratic mainstream of the early post-Soviet period (cf. Chapnin 2015), subsequently this course changed in line with the way the state itself was changing. The church revival has undergone significant changes and evolved along with the state revival. While in the 1990s the church lived primarily as a context for parish life, since 2000, which Kathrin Behrens (2002) named as the 'Holy Year' for the Orthodox Church in Russia, the focus of the church's attention has begun to shift towards establishing an institutional relationship between state and church (cf. Behrens 2002, 359).

The nature of this change becomes more visible over time. For example, 'The Basis of the Social Concept of the ROC' (Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations 2000) is essentially a liberal document, written in language that the conservative public will also comprehend, while 'The ROC's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights' (Russian Orthodox Church.

Department for External Church Relations 2008) is a document that is already absolutely conservative in both its content and form (cf. Bremer and Toropova 2019, 166). Despite the fact that there is only eight years difference between the documents, the ROC underwent incredible changes over those years. The way the Moscow Patriarchate has chosen is the way of institutionalising its relations with the state, in which the latter has essentially become the main counterpart and recipient of church ideas. This way, in many senses, has been defining the church's development for more than 20 years. The return of the church to public space has essentially become a task of national importance (cf. Mchedlova et al. 2020, 266). The choice of such a course and its warm welcome by the state began to determine a gradual and visible separation of personal and public orthodoxies in Russia.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a situation in which three different Orthodox realities had formed and coexisted in Russia, which, although interrelated, still held a potential for internal conflict that was exacerbated many times in crisis conditions, as the whole system came under pressure. These three Orthodox realities can be described as follows: (1) civil Orthodoxy; (2) personal Orthodox faith; and 3) deep-rooted Orthodoxy.

In early 2020 in Russia, faith, personal beliefs, and parish life often existed in parallel with civil Orthodoxy, which was expressed across a very wide spectrum—from the reality constructed by the Moscow Patriarchate, through the popularisation of its narratives (primarily the traditional values narrative), the loud and often vulgar Orthodox activism, the successful church status events, for example, resulted in the form of Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia (Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate 2016), to the availability of a Lenten menu in all restaurants and cafes in the country before Easter. This is not to say that the personal and the civil in the context of Orthodoxy do not intersect; I would venture to suggest that often this difference is not even reflected, and that the majority of Russian citizens who consider themselves Orthodox combine in different proportions their personal stances towards the Orthodox faith and the context in which they live, which is strongly influenced by Orthodox symbols and meanings. A third Orthodox reality is the existence of a historical and cultural datum—Orthodoxy existed in a given territory (whatever the form of its governance) and influenced the formation of statehood, language, and culture. Deep-rooted Orthodoxy is meant as a metaphysical category that defines a mental code common to the territory and its inhabitants, attitudes, and values that are shared by most people from generation to generation, a kind of a constant spiritual bond of space and people united by a sense of community and belonging.

However, neither deep-rooted Orthodoxy nor the private faith that were actually the prerequisite for the formation, cultivation, and consolidation of Russian civil Orthodoxy have much to do nowadays with it. The media and reputational discrediting of Orthodox institutions due to accusations of pharisaism and the servility of the church has meant that, even before the pandemic and the implementation of the accompanying restrictions, a significant number of people have separated for themselves the concepts of faith and church. This separation, however, did not reach a critical point, so civil Orthodoxy did not lose popularity. One notable success of

the ROC in recent pre-COVID-19 years has been the mile-long queue to the relics of St. Nicholas—which, incidentally, can be accessed in 25 Moscow churches at any time (Titko 2017), demonstrating the demand in society for a collective experience of the sacral Orthodoxy. This same mile-long queue also testified to the fact that the encouraged format of living this experience has been moving further and further away from private personal prayer and more and more into the collective and public sphere (cf. Chapnin 2018). Such a perception of reality is supported by numbers; in 2017, only 15 per cent of Russians believed that Russian society was 'very religious' (3 per cent) or 'fairly religious' (12 per cent) in the 1970s and 1980s, while 55 per cent believed that Russian society was 'very religious' (8 per cent) or 'fairly religious' (47 per cent) at the time of the survey (Pew Research Center study 2017, 10).

However, despite these optimistic figures, the cost of this measurable success may be excessively high for the church and deep-rooted Orthodoxy. The stated priority and preoccupation with synergy-building in relationship with the Russian state proves to be quite dangerous for the church itself in the long term, making it more vulnerable to external influences, including changes related to the changing secular environment. And those problems which were not so visible in the normal routine began to surface in the crisis situation triggered by the new coronavirus pandemic.

Controversy over Restrictions: Church Closures as a Dividing Line

Thus, at first glance, the situation of the church at the beginning of 2020 looked more than optimistic. From a disgraced and persecuted institution during the Soviet era, the ROC had become one of the most prosperous Orthodox churches in the world, with queues to visit its shrines and students learning the basics of its teaching as part of the school curriculum. The state has not contradicted the church's articulated desire to build mutual relations in accordance with 'symphonic ideals'; rather, it encourages church narratives and integrates them into the state agenda, and allows constitutional amendments loyal to the church's vision of modernity (RIA Novosti 2020b; State Duma 2020). But in March 2020, Russia faced the rapid spread of a new coronavirus infection about which scientists knew very little at the time; it put both the state and the church, as a weighty public institution, before the need to take decisions and measures to limit the spread of infection, and to take responsibility for the decisions taken.

It should be noted that, at this point, Western churches were already taking decisions to close churches; the first reaction of the ROC to these was denial and vehement rejection of such attempts to reduce the spread of the virus.

> 'Look at what is being done in Italy, France, other countries, where churches are being closed, people are being deprived of the comfort of worship. This is unthinkable for us', Bishop Savva (Tutunov) of Zelenograd, Deputy administrator and Head of the Control and Analysis service of the Moscow Patriarchate, wrote in his Telegram channel. (cit. in Vasyutin 2020, 507)

Such a reaction is not unexpected if one looks at how the church's (and also the state's) agenda has been shaped in recent decades. On every possible occasion, Russia opposed the allegedly decadent liberal West and claimed to be a true bastion of European culture representing modern and Christian values in today's world (cf. Fidler 2013). The ROC claimed that contemporary liberal values are exclusively anthropocentric, ignoring the category of sin and calling on humans to release their sinful side. Therefore, the church contrasts Western anthropocentrism with theocentrism, arguing that human nature is weak and imperfect and that only a person who trusts in God is truly capable of doing good. Individual freedom of conscience is also questioned, since, according to the church, freedom without moral responsibility leads to absolute arbitrariness in moral decision-making (cf. Elsner 2018, 326ff.). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated precisely this pole of tension between church and secular agendas. Modernity, with its horrific experience of two world wars and the omnipresent discourse on human rights, has raised a generation for whom the primacy of human life exists. Science, technology, and progress (especially visible in developed countries) have provided humankind with a reality in which the average person lives longer and better than ever before in history. And modern humans are not ready to give that up. The novel coronavirus has exacerbated not just the conflict of the secular and the spiritual, and not even just the conflict of the two paradigms, anthropocentric and theocentric; it has called into question the very value core of today's faith, in this case of the Orthodox faith. The pandemic provoked not just arguments about the closure of churches and the order of communion; it raised a broader question: What do Orthodox Christians believe in general, how do they understand the teaching of Christ, and, as provocative as this might sound, what is His place in the doctrine of the ROC today?

As of March 2020, it has been at least a decade since both the church and the state began questioning in unison Western morality and way of life. It is not surprising that the first reaction of the ROC to the restrictions being introduced in the Western world was criticism and rejection of the decisions that have been made to contain the spread of COVID-19. A clarification must be made here: the ROC is not only located in the republics of the former Soviet Union; it maintains dioceses all over the world. When the pandemic broke out, the Russian Orthodox eparchies had to comply with the regulations of the respective governments of their countries and regions (cf. Vasyutin 2020, 504). While in early 2020 Western Europe was already imposing serious restrictions, including on the practice of religious worship when it involved the gathering of people indoors, in Russia these measures were regarded with great distrust. Despite the fact that the first cases of COVID-19 in Russia were registered on 31 January 2020, on 3 March of the same year the Chairman of the Synodal Department for Relations with Society and the Media, Vladimir Legoida, noted that no changes to normal liturgical and prayer practices in churches were planned in connection with the spread of COVID-19 (Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate 2020a). A week after this press conference, on 11 March 2020, a 'Statement of the Holy Synod in connection with the spread of the coronavirus infection' (Russian Orthodox Church. Official website

of the Moscow Patriarchate 2020b) was nevertheless issued, which in fact did not clarify the position of the church. The text was formulated in such a way that it can be interpreted differently; for example, the church stressed that it has not ceased its services during epidemics and draws 'attention to the fact that believers should not give in to panic and fears associated with the spread of unverified information about the infection', while at the same time speaking about the inadmissibility of taking the threat lightly. The text in general refers only to preventive measures and expresses condolences to 'the families and friends of victims of the disease in China, South Korea, Iran, Italy, France, Germany, Spain and other countries', as if the coronavirus had not already claimed human lives in Russia. The church's actions looked like a denial of the immediate problem, or at least an extreme underestimation of the seriousness of the situation. In Russia, the pandemic flywheel had not yet spun to its full capacity; but the ROC has parishes abroad from which one could obtain information about the dynamics of the situation in other countries and draw practical conclusions while Russia had a temporary head start. But despite the fact that around the world there was already a realisation that the pandemic was a serious test for humanity, priests of the ROC claimed that it was impossible to catch the new coronavirus in the church through communion (RIA Novosti 2020a), while the archdiocese of Belgorod offered to protect the parish from COVID-19 by ringing bells (Interfax 2020).

Instead of starting an immediate crisis-prevention work, the church leadership preferred to see how events would unfold, which led to a significant delay in any concrete actions. However, the new coronavirus, predictably, spread widely in Russia as well, and in a situation where humankind did not yet have vaccines or proven treatment protocols, lockdowns were the only solution to contain the rate of spread of the virus. At the end of March 2020, Russian President Putin introduced so-called work-free days from 30 March to 3 April to contain the spread of the COVID-19 infection releasing the Presidential Decree No. 206 (President of Russia 2020). These work-free days were extended until the end of April 2020 by Presidential Decree No. 239 (Official internet portal for legal information 2020a), and then until mid-May by Presidential Decree No. 294 (Official internet portal for legal information 2020b).

The state response on the spread of COVID-19 puts the ROC in an ambivalent and uneasy position. From the legal point of view, there is only one authority in Russia that is authorised to implement any measures in case of an emergency, namely *Rospotrebnadzor*.[2] The church formally follows the dictates of the secular authorities. On 11 April 2020, Metropolitan Dionisii of Voskresensk sent out a Circular Letter of the First Vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia for Moscow, with the following decisions:

> On the introduction of additional sanitary and anti-epidemic measures from 13 April 2020 to 19 April 2020 with possible further extension, taking into account the unfolding epidemiological situation, whereby it is necessary to: 1.1. take measures to prevent mass events with large numbers of people; 1.2. ensure temporary suspension of visits by citizens to territories, buildings,

> structures (premises therein) belonging to and/or subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate Department for Moscow City, except for clergymen and persons whose presence is necessary for the performance of worship services and the functioning of places of worship, as well as for online broadcasts of worship services. (Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate 2020c)

This meant the closure of all Moscow's churches for Holy Week and Easter services. The Circular Letter was signed not by the Patriarch Kirill himself but by his vicar, a figure unknown to the parishioners and possessing no media or spiritual authority, and the expected decision to extend the 'mode of restriction of visiting churches' was published with a reference to Moscow Chief Sanitary Inspector Elena Andreeva in an impersonal manner on 20 April (cf. Luchenko 2020). This implies that the ROC chose to formally follow the injunctions, but tried to distance itself as much as possible and therefore did not take responsibility for them fully. Such a reaction is understandable in terms of a desire to avoid intra-church claims against Patriarch Kirill and criticism from spiritual authorities, who loudly proclaimed the fundamental impossibility of closing churches in Russia. The impression given was that the church was acting by inertia—through its restrained statements, the ROC was trying to maintain a balance between the different poles of power, both secular and religious—which it had succeeded in doing before. But in a crisis situation, this strategy ceased to work, or rather, began to work against the church.

It must be borne in mind that the Russian Orthodox dioceses primarily focus on local precepts; in the far abroad, the appeals of the Orthodox hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate differed greatly in form and content, and in timeliness. For example, in Norway, all services of the ROC Moscow Patriarchate were cancelled a month before they were in Moscow (from 13 March 2020), and a day later, the Patriarchal Exarch of Western Europe, Metropolitan Anthony of Korsun and Western Europe, advised everyone to 'strictly follow the instructions aimed at preventing the epidemic, and also to be sensitive to such difficult decisions, which inter alia impose temporary restrictions on the liturgical life of the Church' (Diocese of Sourozh 2020). But the difference in reactions is not only noticeable between Russia and the far abroad; even within Russia, different sanitary–hygienic regulations were introduced in different regions (cf. Vasyutin 2020, 504). Decrees by regional medical officials and *Rospotrebnadzor* were issued across the country, which the local bishops in practice either executed or not.

This raises the question of whether churches are hygienic places, which society was asking even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A rather resonant one was the creative experiment of Daria Fedorova, a student at the British Higher School of Design, who in 2017 took samples from icons in Moscow churches to 'look at what remains on the icon after the faithful kiss'; her aim was to 'collect samples from icons from different churches, grow these microorganisms and visualise them' (Fedorova for Novye Izvestiia 2017). The results of the

experiment showed that pathogenic organisms, including *Escherichia coli* and *Staphylococcus aureus*, were present on the icons (cf. Fedorova 2017). At the time, the ROC considered the experiment illegal and inappropriate (Agenstvo Gorodskih Novostei Moskva 2017). But while it was a one-off incident in 2017, by 2020 churches were perceived as breeding grounds for COVID-19. *The Washington Post* wrote with indignation that Orthodox people continue to kiss icons in the midst of sickness (Khurshudyan 2020). In Russia and Ukraine, the image of the church as a hotbed of infection prevailed in the media space. Moreover, prominent clerics started dying from the new coronavirus, and iconic temple and monastery complexes (such as the Diveevskii Monastery or Trinity-Sergius Lavra) were affected by the virus and closed (cf. Luchenko 2020). As of 16 April 2020, the ROC stopped publishing data on those infected within its ranks, but it was already known that even if one took the official figures of those diagnosed by testing, it appeared that the percentage of Moscow clergy infected with the coronavirus was much higher than the average of Muscovites (cf. Luchenko 2020).

Lack of transparent data on cases, inadequate protocols, and funeral rites have shown that the church, which for 20 years had built up the image of a united, powerful institution with a strong hierarchical management, had in fact no unified strategy for responding to a crisis situation. In particular, there were no clear prescriptions about the restrictions; moreover, the decisions that were made were voiced by personalities unknown to the masses at large. The need to respond coincided with the pre-Easter and Easter season, when even unchurched believers (the so-called cultural Orthodox) are more religious than usual, observe more than usual, and go to temples more often. That was exactly the time when the maximum number of people were waiting for answers to their questions from the church. Furthermore, the principle of building the church's relationship with the state was based all through the years on the perception of the ROC as a 'Church of the national majority' which is supposed to play 'a stabilising role for the Russian social and political system, acting as a unifying, mobilising and amortising resource' (cf. Mchedlova et al. 2020, 267). But in the crisis situation, this resource was not activated. The church within Russia waited for the state's decisions before taking any measures of its own; it was unclear about its position, leaving room for sometimes polarised interpretations, and it did not take full responsibility even for this ambiguous position. In addition, due to the lack of a unified standard of measures to prevent the spread of the virus, the Russian Orthodox Church did not want to recognise that many monasteries and parishes had become hotbeds of infection, which in the long term could spoil the attitude to Orthodoxy of a significant part of society, causing irritation on the part of secular authorities and within the parishes themselves, as clerics found themselves in a situation of extreme vulnerability—facing both the dangerous virus and pressure from higher instances. Thus, the debate about church closures has become a dividing line not only in a religious context, but in a much wider one, as it has gone beyond the ecclesiological field and has touched upon dimensions such as the relationship of church and state, church and society, and church and its brethren.

Implications for the Church

In this section, I analyse what consequences such an indecisive position at the beginning of the pandemic in Russia might have for the ROC as an institution, and what are the possible long-term consequences of this indecision. Certainly, it would not be possible to give an exhaustive answer to this question in one chapter. Therefore, I elaborate primarily on the following three dimensions, as they seem to be the most significant in respect of the research question: (1) What changes have taken place in the relationship between the ROC and Russian society, and consequently in the church's socio-political role? (2) How have these changes affected the relationship between the ROC and the state, and what are the perspectives of this change? (3) How have the parishes and priests been affected?

Challenges for the Church's Socio-political Role

If, in the Western Christian world, one observes mainly 'believing without belonging' (Davie 2005), for contemporary Russia the inversion 'belonging without believing or, as Mchedlova et al. (2020) write, 'believing and belonging without conduct', which has not been verbalised or reframed in any way within the country, would be more apt. Despite the fact that the proportion of the population observing religious injunctions strictly is very small, many Russians consider religion to be one of the components of belonging to national culture (cf. Pew Research Center 2017, 5), and they identify with it even if they do not follow Orthodox dogma in everyday life or interpret it in their own way.

Even acknowledging the fact that the wording of questions and research methodology may differ, it can still be stated that the number of Russians who consider themselves Orthodox has approximately doubled since the collapse of the Soviet Union[3] (cf. Pew Research Center 2014). At the same time, the results of surveys conducted as part of the New Russia Barometer[4] project indicate that the proportion of adults practicing religion has remained largely unchanged since the collapse of the USSR: the number of adult respondents who said they practiced a religion and attended church each month was approximately the same in 2007 as it had been in 1993 (12 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively) (cf. Pew Research Center 2017, 25). The statistics prove that the number of Orthodox Christians in Russia is continuously increasing, but many can be described as 'cultural Orthodox', which rather reflects the identity-forming and cultural character of Orthodoxy for Russian society (cf. Bremer 2007, 198). Thus, 84 per cent of respondents agree with the thesis that, even if a Russian has not been baptised and does not attend church, that person is still Orthodox 'in soul' (cf. Willems 2012, 180).

Even considering such different shades of religiosity in Russian society, it should be noted that the overall increase in the role of the church has not gone unnoticed. Reactions to the church's revival have ranged from an enthusiastic attitude toward religious revival to outright rejection and condemnation of clericalism, obscurantism, and sacerdotalism (cf. Mchedlova et al. 2020, 268). This is not surprising; since 2012, the church has increasingly become the object of new civic

activism. The broad spectrum includes very different actions: from the prominent 'punk prayer' with the words 'Virgin Mary, chase Putin' by the group Pussy Riot in the Church of Christ the Saviour (cf. Adrian 2013), to the provocations of the activist group God's Will, who want to justify their radically conservative convictions with Orthodoxy, to the politically engaged events of the Orthodox youth association Georgievtsi. This wide range of actions illustrates quite well the difference of opinion among the population regarding the civil role of the ROC in today's Russia (Bremer and Toropova 2019, 167). However, all of this depicts non-crisis times.

In respect of the research question, it is interesting to examine closely the extent to which the church shaped opinion about the pandemic in Russian civil society. There was 'parity' on the issue of restrictions during Easter: in 43 regions of the Russian Federation, churches were open to parishioners, while in another 42 they were closed (cf. Mchedlova et al. 2020, 294). Nevertheless, opinions on these decisions were polar opposites. The church was criticised both for not opposing the closure of churches and for not closing churches immediately as soon as the figures for the spread of COVID-19 in Russia began to rise. It seems to me that, in its decision not to make unequivocal decisions, the church was guided as always by its desire not to set precedents for public controversy and confrontation; according to Lunkin (2020, 3), 'none of the pessimistic predictions about the conflict between the state and the church have come true'.

While not harmful to society, such a policy of neutrality has, however, proved to be quite harmful to the church itself. Paradoxically, the most loyal part of Orthodox believers of the pre-COVID-19 times—the churchgoers—criticised the church most strongly for 'driving the sacrament and the celebration of Easter into an online format' (Faustova 2020), emphasising the unconvincing position of the diocesan bishops. In the absence of the ability to physically visit churches, many Orthodox parishes have 'digitalised' certain practices. A particular point in the digitalisation of Russian Orthodoxy was the widespread broadcasting of services from churches. Whereas before the pandemic broadcasts were centralised and conducted from large churches rather for television, this changed as restrictions were introduced, namely more and more churches chose to broadcast services so as not to lose their flocks. This issue has become very acute for the church, given that all the clergy I was able to interview noted the same thing: a decrease in the number of parishioners. This was true for small village parishes, for large parishes in the Russian capital, and even for parishes abroad. Priests differed in their assessment of why the number of parishioners had decreased, but this observation was common and is likely to continue for a long time, according to the insiders' opinions:

> For how long will this decrease continue? I think for a long time. Many people have stopped going to the churches, their faith has weakened. It will be hard to bring people back to prayer. People are lost, unfortunately. (Priest of a small regional parish 2022)

> We have lost some of our parishioners. And it's not those losses that are related to the death of people. We lost about 30-40 per cent of parishioners,

> they are afraid to go to church and it is unclear when it will end, because it is related to the mental restructuring of people. (Hegumen Nikon 2022)
>
> Parishioners are beginning to come back, but not to the same extent, less. (Vasyutin 2022)

Once again, it became clear who was the priority and focus of significance for the church: the state and society as a whole (which was more likely to have a cultural rather than religious connection to Orthodoxy), and not a small percentage of truly religious Orthodox believers. There is a view that the events of the Easter celebration on 19 April 2020 showed that 'faith and affiliation without conduct' among those who consider themselves Orthodox believers allowed the secular authorities to neglect the interests of the truly religious population, which confirms the judgement about the secularisation of the ROC as an institution in contemporary Russia. This judgement was made even before the pandemic began:

> This phenomenon, in my opinion, speaks of a critically dangerous secularisation of the Church. The ROC is, in fact, at the moment incredibly secularised. The whole agenda that is there, almost all of it, approaching a hundred percent, is not about its own religious life, it is not about Christ, prayer, the Gospel, but about completely earthly activities. And when people come into contact with this agenda, they ask a logical question: what does all this have to do with Orthodoxy, faith, and Christ? If the Church constantly blurs its focus, if it is about everything in the world, then the general public that considers itself Orthodox raises the question—what is the ROC really about? Not only is the focus shifting, there is a complete blurring of the image of the Church. Even prayers can no longer be heard. Let's imagine as it normally is—the Patriarch arrived, gave a solemn service, the Federal Security Service cordoned off the altar, the chorus rang out—that is the image that predominates today. Is it a prayer, or just another manifestation of power, authority, beauty, status? It seems to me that this is where the main problem arises, or will arise in the near future. People who come to church, they want prayer, communication with God, spiritual growth, *metanoia*, but they are fed with the endless bravura of the earthly political agenda. This cannot work in the long term, even if it is very charming and approachable for a while, it will cease to be attractive after a while. And even within the Church it provokes contradictory reactions: some see the status quo as a career lift, while others refuse to participate. (Chapnin 2018)

The intra-church split over the restrictions aimed at preventing the growth in COVID-19 cases has become very visible and deserves separate consideration because it is highly atypical of the public image of the church that has been forged over the past decade, namely that of a monolithic institution not only speaking, but even thinking in unison with the first hierarchs of the church.

Divide and Conquer: Church Unity Questioned

At the start of the pandemic, we had an image of two institutions: an extremely centralised state and an extremely centralised church, despite the latter's inherently pluralist, conciliar nature. In the 1990s, while Patriarch Alexis II was in power, a greater polyphony of church voices was still allowed, but since the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill, the official church narrative has sounded more unanimous to the outside world (cf. Stähle 2017). This voice is increasingly that of Patriarch Kirill or his closest associates, expressing an extremely balanced and moderate opinion. Five years before the pandemic, it was clear that the church did not want any extreme polarised opinions in its ranks. In December 2015, two important Orthodox opinion leaders—the conservative Vsevolod Chaplin and the liberal Sergei Chapnin—lost their high positions within the church apparatus. This was understood as a clear message to both the church and the secular public: no radicalism, neither conservative nor liberal, is desirable (cf. Bremer and Toropova 2019, 168).

A balanced, mediating view was an extremely effective tactic in the years of the status quo, but in the pandemic crisis, it turned out that the church had neither a clearly articulated strategy and opinion on what was happening nor voices to articulate it, and the mediating position was not credible; the image of a single institution built up over the years began to fall apart. By choosing the interests of the non-churchgoing majority, the church found itself in a very vulnerable position in terms of the relationships within its own fold. There are two important aspects here: the first is that visible opposition to the official decisions of the church's leader became evident for the first time in a long time. Before the closure of the churches for Holy Week and Easter, intra-church crises were of a sporadic nature—there might have been church court cases or single acts of defiance against church decisions, but usually the church preferred to resolve all disputes internally, drawing minimal attention to its internal affairs. This time, however, the situation was clearly marked by the degree of discontent. The case of the suspended founder of the Sredneuralskii Convent, Sergius (Nikolay Romanov), who is awaiting trial, is widely known; he did not hesitate to react loudly to the closure of churches due to the pandemic coronavirus, criticising 'our spiritual leadership together with the forerunners of churches close to the anti-Christ, referring to the pseudo-pandemic, covering up their cowardice and offering to communicate with God online' (cit. in Amirdzhanov 2020). He explicitly called the Patriarch an 'apostate', suggested that President Putin should hand over power to him instead, and hurled curses and anti-Semitic insinuations (Shtorm 2020), thereby making himself a completely grotesque and non-threatening character for the unity of the church. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, over time, most of the priests showed understanding of the restrictions. 'Eventually it became clear that restrictive measures were justified. When we learned the statistics and saw how people were suffering, all the outrage and protests came to naught instantly', said Alexander Vasyutin, Priest of the Church of the Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessaloniki in the Moscow region, in an interview (2022).

Second, beyond the high-profile media scandals involving well-known names in Russia, there is also a quiet, unnoticed fault line within the church that has potentially far more serious consequences for Russian Orthodoxy than the curses of eccentric abbots—namely the disappointment and frustration of the ordinary priests, who were often left alone with the crisis situation on the ground. Even in Moscow, priests spoke only on condition of anonymity:

> I would have stayed at home, I have five children and hypertension, but the church is open, I can't not serve, otherwise I will remain without pay, which has already been cut. And people come and come. Secretly. We buy our own means of protection with our own money. (cit. in Luchenko 2020)

Moreover, in the conversations I was able to hold, it turns out that the situation in the regions is even worse—for example, a priest who serves several villages said that there were cases when people, knowing they were sick with COVID-19, attended the church to seek help, ignoring the risk of infecting those around them. One such parishioner caused this priest, whom I was also able to speak to on condition of anonymity, to require hospitalisation, with damage to more than 90 per cent of his lungs, and after long treatment and almost a year of rehabilitation he still had not returned to his service at the time of our conversation occurred. The loss of health and disappointment both from his parish and from his church leadership, which effectively left simple peripheral priests alone on the ground, tipped the scales in favour of giving up the ministry for an indefinite period of time. And his story, unfortunately, is not unique. The 'small' people of the great church have lost a great many across the country.

Nevertheless, as far as possible, the Moscow Patriarchate tried to support the priests. According to one interviewee with whom I was able to speak, all Moscow priests received financial assistance from funds collected at the request of the Patriarch Kirill from benefactors who wished to remain anonymous. However, regional parishes have also tried to find a solution to the predicament. It is worth noting that, although at the beginning of the pandemic it seemed that Protestant and Catholic churches were far more prepared for life in the absence of face-to-face live worship than Orthodox churches, Orthodoxy in various countries showed itself to be no less active (cf. Shimanskaya 2020). Russia could boast a highly developed and competitive online services market by 2020. Virtually all areas of life are organised by residents of major Russian cities via the Internet from their smartphones—almost everything can be purchased online. Not surprisingly, with such a high level of digitalisation of all spheres of life, there has been tremendous success in transferring occasional Church services to the digital realm. On social networks and in messengers, Orthodox people posted names for commemoration 'in health' and 'for the repose', ordered veneration services, and transferred money to the cards of priests. During my research, I was for some time a member of a similar messenger chat room on WhatsApp, where requests for remembrance prayers were constantly coming in. There were no prices attached to the requests; all donations were voluntary. Nevertheless, there was an interesting sense of spiritual

'online-shopping'. From the testimonies of priests with whom I was able to speak, private donations and remittances helped many churches and clergy to survive the closure of churches and the lack of salaries.

First Evident Disharmonies of the 'New Symphony'?

It would seem that, by choosing the interests of a fairly secular majority, the Church is re-actualising itself in its relations with the state, once again confirming its loyalty and status as the church of the national majority. However, there have also been challenges on this front. The fact is, the special status of the ROC in relations with the state was based on an unwritten contract that the church is a huge mobilising resource and a weighty authority (cf. Gvosdev 2021). This was confirmed by history when, in the face of external threats, the church acted as both an 'activator' of the nation's latent, deep potential and an advocate of spiritual and cultural identity, and by figures from public opinion polls that consistently showed high ratings for the church (WCIOM Novosti 2018). The COVID-19 crisis has put the ROC in a situation where its authority will either be confirmed or refuted not by hypothetical assumptions, but by concrete results of public behaviour, and therefore the church's status may be reconsidered by the state. Here are some reasonings for this assumption.

First of all, the lack of active patriarchal agitation in favour of the Russian vaccination programme is a clear indictment of the limited applicability of the symphony model to Russian church–state relations. The reluctance of the population to accept vaccines in Russia, as elsewhere, seems to be the result of a general lack of trust in the state and its related institutions—it is no coincidence that the 'COVID-dissident' part of the Orthodox population distrusts both the Putin government and the established church leadership equally (cf. du Quenoy 2021). Moreover, Patriarch Kirill's inability or unwillingness to comment publicly on the vaccination—news of his own vaccination was leaked to the media and was confirmed by Vladimir Legoida, head of the Synodal Department for Relations with Society and the Media, several weeks after the fact (RBC 2021)—can be seen as an attempt to strike a balance between the different factions within the ROC. A certain problem with this is that it has exacerbated the patriarch's ever-diminishing popularity among the Orthodox believers. While it is unclear whether an unequivocal church statement in support of the government's vaccination programme would generate widespread support, it's highly likely that the government will re-evaluate its own positioning towards the church in the future if the vaccination rate doesn't significantly increase (cf. Gvosdev 2021)

Secondly, *symphonia* presupposes mutual support between the involved parties in times of crisis. Since in Russia both the state and the ROC have been building governance hierarchies for years, it is expected that the leaders at the top of the hierarchies—the President and the Patriarch, respectively—will be involved on both sides in resolving the COVID-19 crisis. From this point of view, the parity of the parties is clearly broken, due to the unconvincing role of Patriarch Kirill in resolving the pandemic crisis. As previously stated, the documents imposing

restrictions on church visits in the days before Easter and Easter 2020 itself were signed not by the Patriarch, but by his vicar, and immediately after the news of a possible infection in October 2020, the Patriarch retired to a residence in the Moscow suburbs and has hardly been seen in public since that time (cf. du Quenoy 2021)

Conclusion

The pandemic was a transformational period for the church. First of all, parish life changed in form while preserving its content. Such a conservative institution as the church, which was often burdened by its rigidity in resisting change, was forced to nurture the flock in crisis and therefore assimilate new practices in the shortest possible time. Secondly, the 'new symphony' experienced a crisis, given that the manifestation of its asymmetries has become more visible in comparison to pre-crisis times (cf. Agadjanian and Kenworthy 2021; Hovorun 2021). Thirdly, the ROC has begun to sound like more than just the voice of the Patriarch. Against the backdrop of the church's controversial decisions and the increasing role of the internet, personal brands of priests—both the odious ones who grotesquely anathematise the Patriarch in their social networks, and the progressive apologists for vaccination who address the flock in accessible language—began to take shape.

Thus, it can be said that there have been parallel transformational processes in the ROC, which at first glance seem contradictory, since by prioritising the interests of the culturally Orthodox over those of the churchgoing minority, the church has both won and lost. For instance, the church has both lost and gained parishioners. While the flock physically present in the churches decreased, more parishes went online, and thus reached more people, including different age groups. Furthermore, the ROC has not contradicted government policies—on the contrary, it has supported them. Nevertheless, the impression is that the 'new symphony' has weakened markedly. In addition, Patriarch Kirill, who had spent years building up his image and reputation, and who distanced himself as far as possible (including physically) from making deliberately unpopular decisions, began to rapidly lose popularity in comparison to the priests who bravely visited 'red zones' and led online broadcasts from churches and COVID-19 hospitals.

To sum up, having chosen, as the church of the 'national majority', the flexible position, which was to satisfy the aspirations of the widest possible masses, the church received reproaches from both the churchgoing religious parishioners who condemned the implemented innovations and from the unchurched Russians who considered the introduced measures insufficient. However, in my view, the danger of this decision, although it is in line with the current trend, lies in the fact that, with the transfer of the Orthodox narrative into the public sphere, its deep potential, which has been for centuries a unique resource capable of mobilising and preserving the country and the Fatherland even in the face of severe trials, is drying up. There is an opinion that the church today is de facto virtually ungovernable, with

the church leadership and the bureaucracy around it living their lives while the people of the Church live their own lives. Thus, it turns out that the problem is not even so much situational as it is systemic, in that it implies a de facto lack of interest by the two groups in each other. The episcopate acts and communicates not for the flock; and the people, in turn, do not really enter into the thinking of the episcopate (cf. Chapnin 2018).

Assuming that Orthodoxy in Russia exists today on at least three planes—private, civil, and deep cultural—the balance between these planes has not yet been found, and a tilt towards one of them would mean the deformation of all three. Intrinsic contradictions between these three Orthodox realities that had emerged by early 2020 were noticeably accentuated due to the pandemic. And the fact that the existing non-reflexive status quo has been subjected to revision in view of the anti-COVID-19 restrictions could not fail to have an impact on the church as a system as a whole—especially since it is in times of crisis that the need for faith and for the church as its guide becomes more acute, as the demand for a deep, mobilising resource to survive. This demand by the people inhabiting contemporary Russia, united by a common sense of belonging to one mental space, for a resource that is paradoxically rooted in deep Orthodoxy and simultaneously feeds it, has become more than challenging for all three Orthodox realities that coexist today.

Taking into account the 'red flags' discussed here, as well as the catastrophically weakened position of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine (cf. Gluschenko 2022), it is highly likely that we will see a different ROC in the next decade. Nevertheless, some clerics have expressed the opinion that the adaptation of certain rituals in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic may have shown to the unchurched majority of Russians that, in the church to this day, content prevails over form, salvation remains the main goal even in the most difficult times, and, therefore, the ROC has a future.

Notes

1 'Confirming the right of each to freedom of conscience and freedom of creed, and also to equality before the law regardless of his attitudes to religion and his convictions; basing itself on the fact that the Russian Federation is a secular state; recognising the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia's spirituality and culture; respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples; considering it important to promote the achievement of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect in questions of freedom of conscience and freedom of creed; hereby adopts this federal law'.
2 Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing.
3 For example, surveys conducted in Russia as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1991, 1998, and 2008 indicate that the proportion of Orthodox Christians has more than doubled (from 31 per cent to 72 per cent), while the proportion of those who do not identify with any religion has dropped from 61 per cent in 1991 to 18 per cent in 2008.
4 https://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/catalog1_0.html.

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7 Shots of Faith

The Influence of Christian Nationalism on Vaccination Behaviour in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tymofii Brik and Tornike Metreveli

Introduction

The intersection of religion and nationalism has been a significant topic of study within the fields of sociology and political science. Specifically, in the region that is the focus of this book, Orthodox Christianity has played a profound role in shaping governance and public discourse. The relationship between political elites, citizens, and Orthodox churches is such that they tend to agree on the unique role that the Orthodox faith plays in shaping national identity. This agreement has resulted in Orthodox churches having a legitimate voice in public debates, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent scholarly research has demonstrated that the fusion of religious and nationalistic beliefs can have a significant influence on individuals' attitudes and behaviours related to pandemics. Studies have found that Christian nationalism is a predictor of anti-vaccination attitudes[1] and opposition to science.[2] Furthermore, an index of Christian nationalism predicted how and when Americans prioritise economic liberties and government COVID-19 restrictions,[3] support for Donald Trump,[4] and anti-migration sentiments.[5] These findings are crucial for understanding the complexity of the relationship between religion and nationalism and their impact on public health issues. Furthermore, they highlight the important role that Orthodox Christianity and its institutions (the various Orthodox churches) play in shaping the public discourse and decision-making process.

The concept of Christian nationalism has been extensively studied and defined within the American context. It is an ideology that has its roots in a specific framework of American intellectual, cultural, and theological tradition, and is often associated with a specific socio-political agenda and structural limitations. The term 'Christian nationalist' was coined in the United States to describe an ideology that blends American civic life with Christian identity and culture. This ideology promotes the idea that Americans are God's chosen people and possibly protected by divine intervention. The proponents of this ideology believe in the notion that 'The United States was founded as a Christian nation' or that 'America holds a special place in God's plan'. These beliefs are often advanced by American radicalised evangelical groups, who seek historical and cultural parallels between the United

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States and Old Testament Israel, and idealise the notion of cultural purity and even racial and ethnic exclusion.[6]

The concept of Christian nationalism is a multidimensional construct that encompasses various aspects, such as political, social, and cultural beliefs. It also has an emotional dimension, incorporating feelings of patriotism, national pride, and a sense of superiority, which could lead to discriminatory attitudes and actions towards minorities. The implications of Christian nationalism are multilayered and can have a profound impact on various aspects of public life, from political decision-making to economic and social policies, and from attitudes towards minorities to attitudes towards pandemics and public health issues. According to scholarly research, it is essential to understand the complexity and nuances of this ideology in order to grasp the reasons behind certain attitudes and behaviours in American society.

In this chapter, our goal is to explore the potential applicability of the index of Christian nationalism, which has been developed and validated in the American context, to the Orthodox Christian context. Specifically, we aim to investigate whether this index can be replicated outside of the United States, and what its predictive power is when analysing attitudes towards vaccination in other countries. This research is particularly relevant in the context of Orthodox countries, where the complex historical interdependencies between Christianity and nationalism have been studied. One of the key arguments in this field of study is that religious institutions can offer a symbolic yet powerful contribution to hegemonic ideas of national territory by adding a sacred meaning to the land in question, or they can operate with a vastly different understanding of space and its political organisation. This creates a geopolitical parallax, where their ideas about what constitutes a territory might contradict a standard nationalist vision. The question of how these differing visions of territory and national identity might affect attitudes towards vaccination is an important one, and one that we aim to explore in this chapter. Additionally, this study also aims to understand the extent to which this index can be replicated in other cultures, and whether it is accurate in predicting attitudes towards vaccination in those cultures.

In this chapter, our objective is to build upon the research conducted by Whitehead and Perry (2020) and contribute to the growing body of literature on the cultural dimension of the sociological study of Christian nationalism. To achieve this, we analyse two surveys in order to assess the external validity of the arguments developed by Whitehead and Perry through an online pilot project targeting religious respondents in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro. The primary aim of this pilot survey is to evaluate the validity of the index of Christian nationalism and its correlation with the vaccination attitudes of the respondents.

In addition to the pilot survey, we also conducted a more extensive survey in Ukraine, which used a sample representative of the urban population.[7] This sample was sufficiently large to control for various socio-economic covariates. By using a sample representative of the urban population, we aimed to account for any potential variation in attitudes towards vaccination that might exist between rural and urban populations. The results of this extensive survey in Ukraine allow us to gain

a deeper understanding of the external validity of the index of Christian nationalism in other cultures and its correlation with vaccination attitudes in those cultures. This enables us to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between Christian nationalism and vaccination attitudes and make more informed conclusions about the potential for the index of Christian nationalism to be replicated in other cultures.

Methodology

In order to thoroughly investigate the correlation between religiosity and nationalism during the pandemic, we employed a variety of digital tools to reach a diverse and representative sample of respondents in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro. From February to March 2022, we distributed a link to online questionnaires produced in Qualtrics[8] via social media (Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp), targeting religious respondents in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro. All questions were translated into the relevant languages by local researchers and verified with a group of volunteers. We used the so-called convenience sampling design, which is a widespread methodology to test the validity of the scales in different cultural environments.[9,10] Despite the limitations of this method, research has shown that the replication of 27 survey experiments with a total sample size of over 100,000 individuals suggests that convenience sampling can produce findings similar to representative sampling methods.[11] The survey had questions addressing demographic factors as well as participants' occupation, education level, income, and political affiliation, as well as level of trust in government, which may be an important factor influencing vaccination attitudes. In addition, the survey collected information on the participants' level of trust in science and in media, as well as the level of their anxieties and fears, which may be an important factor influencing vaccination attitudes. To ensure the validity of the scales and generalisability of our findings, we also commissioned a larger online survey in Ukraine, collecting 1,001 responses from urban areas and applying weights based on socio-demographic characteristics to make the sample representative of the Ukrainian urban adult population under age 60. Additionally, to control for potential biases, we took specific precautions—such as excluding respondents from conflict zones in Ukraine's east and the Crimean Peninsula, and recruiting participants from cities with a population of at least 50,000 residents.

As Tables – show, a pilot survey targeted religious respondents in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Montenegro, with a total of 351 respondents. Of those,

Table 7.1 Study 1: Overview of survey completion rates, absolute numbers ($N = 233$)

	Serbia	*Ukraine*	*Georgia*	*Montenegro*
Completed	75	71	51	36
Did not complete	42	31	16	26
Total	117	105	67	62

Table 7.2 Study 2: Ukraine, descriptive statistics, online survey ($N = 1{,}001$)

Variables	**Valid per cent**
Atheist	16.2
Greek Catholic Church	5.0
Orthodox Church of Ukraine (received Tomos)	15.0
Orthodox Christians—Moscow Patriarchate	6.9
Orthodox Christians—Kyiv Patriarchate	15.4
Orthodox Christians—no affiliation	29.7
Other religious groups	11.7
Attend church at least for religious holidays and more often	35.8
Pray at home at least during religious holidays and more often	43.8
Believe in God	69.5
Russian language of the app	58.6
Ukrainian language of the app	41.4
Higher education	42.5
Below higher education	57.5
Males	47.8
Females	52.2
18–24 years	11.5
25–34 years	25.2
35–44 years	27.5
45–54 years	21.8
55–60 years	14.1
Eastern Ukraine	15.9
Western Ukraine	15.2
Northern Ukraine	10.2
Southern Ukraine	17.5
Central Ukraine	24.2
Kyiv city (capital)	17.0
Scales	Summary statistics
Index of national identification	Mean = 4.1, SD = 0.8, Min = 1, Max = 5
Index of Christian nationalism	Mean = 11.5, SD = 6.4, Min = 0, Max = 25
Willingness to vaccinate	Mean = 49.5, SD = 39.8, Min = 0, Max = 100

Table 7.3 Study 3: Ukraine, mean and standard error values of index of Christian nationalism by different social groups (N = 1,001)

Variables	**Mean**	**SE**
Atheist	6.7	0.8
Greek Catholic Church	13.7	1.0
Orthodox Church of Ukraine (received Tomos)	13.5	0.7
Orthodox Christians—Moscow Patriarchate	12.6	1.1
Orthodox Christians—Kyiv Patriarchate	12.6	0.8
Orthodox Christians—no affiliation	12.6	0.6
Other religious groups	12.6	0.6
Attend church at least for religious holidays and more often	13.4	0.5
Do not attend church	10.4	0.5
Pray at home at least during religious holidays and more often	13.2	0.5
Do not pray	10.1	0.5
Believe in God	12.9	0.4
Do not believe in God	8.1	0.6
Russian language of the app	10.9	0.5
Ukrainian language of the app	12.4	0.4
Higher education	11.6	0.6
Below higher education	11.3	0.3
Males	12.3	0.6
Females	10.8	0.4
18–24 years	9.4	1.5
25–34 years	10.6	0.6
35–44 years	12.5	0.6
45–54 years	11.3	0.6
55–60 years	13.1	0.9
Eastern Ukraine	11.2	0.8
Western Ukraine	12.4	0.9
Northern Ukraine	12.9	0.9
Southern Ukraine	11.0	0.8
Central Ukraine	11.7	0.7
Kyiv city (capital)	10.3	0.9

233 completed the questionnaire, with a success rate of 64 per cent in Serbia, 67 per cent in Ukraine, 76 per cent in Georgia, and 58 per cent in Montenegro.

The second study was a more extensive survey in Ukraine with a sample size of 1,001 respondents. The sample is representative of the urban population of Ukrainians, weighted by gender, age, size of the settlement, and region (weights were provided by the polling company). The survey shows that the majority of

the respondents are Orthodox Christians, 16.2 per cent are atheist, 69.5 per cent believe in God, and 35.8 per cent attend church at least during religious holidays. Additionally, the results show that 58.6 per cent of the respondents use Russian language, 42.5 per cent have a higher education, and males make up 47.8 per cent of the sample. The survey also measures the attitudes towards vaccination, with an average willingness to vaccinate score of 49.5. The index of Christian nationalism has a mean of 11.5, while the mean values of the index of Christian nationalism among different social groups show an average of 12.6 for the Orthodox Christians and a range of 6.7 to 13.7 for other groups (atheists had the lowest score).

This scale is based on the Baylor Religion Surveys and the Chapman University Survey of American Fears.[12,13,14,15] The scale is composed of six questions that measure agreement with the following statements: 'The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation', 'The federal government should advocate Christian values', 'The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state (reverse coded)', 'The federal government should allow prayer in public schools', 'The federal government should allow religious symbols in public spaces', and 'The success of the United States is part of God's plan'.

In previous research studies conducted in the United States, researchers have reported high levels of reliability for this scale, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.85 to 0.90. These studies have utilised this scale to create an additive scale, where scores can range from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating a greater agreement with Christian nationalist beliefs. In our online samples, we administered this scale in four different countries: Montenegro, Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine. In all four countries, we found that the reliability of the scale was relatively lower than what was observed in previous studies conducted in the United States. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for our samples were 0.63 (Montenegro, $N = 36$), 0.79 (Georgia, $N = 51$), 0.84 (Serbia, $N = 75$), 0.66 (Ukraine, $N = 71$), and 0.77 (Ukraine, $N = 1{,}001$).

Upon closer examination, we found that the item that was most significantly impacting the scale's reliability in all countries was the third statement, 'the government should strictly follow the separation of church and state (reversed)'. Most respondents in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro agreed that the state and the church should be separated, even if they agreed with all other aspects of Christian nationalism. This might be due to the fact that, in these countries, the state and the church are often seen as friendly institutions that serve a common purpose in coordination and collaboration. Thus, there is no perceived need for further integration or division.

After eliminating this statement from the index, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients improved significantly to 0.76 (Montenegro, $N = 36$), 0.89 (Georgia, $N = 51$), 0.92 (Serbia, $N = 75$), 0.86 (Ukraine, $N = 71$), and 0.88 (Ukraine, $N = 1{,}001$). These results are comparable to the reliability of previous American surveys.[16,17,18,19] Thus, based on this analysis, we created an additive scale based on five items in each country, and excluded the statement 'the government should strictly follow the separation of church and state (reversed)'.

Results

Our survey explored the correlation between individuals' Christian nationalist beliefs and their attitudes towards vaccination for COVID-19. The results found that 66 per cent of our sample had received the vaccine, which is a relatively high percentage, likely due to the length of the pandemic and the fact that our sample skewed towards more educated and wealthy individuals who tend to prioritise their health. The time frame of the survey, from February to March 2022, was one year after the pandemic had started, and by this time, vaccination rates had increased significantly. We found that vaccination rates varied among different countries, with 33 per cent of respondents in Montenegro, half of respondents in Serbia, 80 per cent of respondents in Georgia, and 90 per cent of respondents in Ukraine having been vaccinated.

As shown in Table 7.4, we also found that after controlling for other socio-demographic variables and attitudes, the index of Christian nationalism does

Table 7.4 Results of the Logit model

	Logit Model 1
Christian nationalism	0.187***
	(0.067)
Christian nationalism*Ukraine	–0.370**
	(0.154)
Christian nationalism*Georgia	–0.246**
	(0.121)
Christian nationalism*Montenegro	–0.100
	(0.118)
Support of online liturgy	0.106
	(0.072)
Coronavirus can be cured by praying	–0.332***
	(0.116)
Ukraine	6.935**
	(2.729)
Georgia	4.545**
	(1.994)
Montenegro	0.482
	(1.475)
Male	0.064
	(0.449)
Employed	0.321
	(0.446)
Wealthy	0.252
	(0.482)
Intercept	–1.731*
	(1.024)
AIC	165

The dependent variable is whether the individual has been vaccinated against COVID-19 or not ("Have you been vaccinated against COVID-19?") 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '+' 0.1 ')

correlate positively with vaccination attitudes, even after controlling for other factors. Interestingly, the correlation in this sample is positive; people who score high on the index of Christian nationalism are also more likely to be vaccinated. This correlation could be explained by the higher presence of vaccinated individuals in the sample. When we look at the correlation between the index and vaccinations across different countries, we see that the effect is still positive, but significantly weaker in Ukraine and Georgia than in Serbia and Montenegro. More precisely, Table 7.4 shows a logit model where the dependent variable is whether the individual has been vaccinated against COVID-19 or not. The independent variables include the index of Christian nationalism, the interaction of Christian nationalism with the country of origin (Ukraine, Georgia, and Montenegro), support of online liturgy, belief that coronavirus can be cured by praying, country of origin (Ukraine, Georgia, and Montenegro), gender, employment status, wealth, and an interaction term. The reference category for the interaction term is Serbia.

The results show that the index of Christian nationalism has a positive and statistically significant association with vaccinations against COVID-19 (coefficient = 0.187, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the interaction term of Christian nationalism and country of origin is also included in the model. The results show that when controlling for other variables, the effect of Christian nationalism on vaccination behaviour is weaker in Ukraine and Georgia than in Serbia and Montenegro. Specifically, the coefficients for the interaction terms of Christian nationalism and Ukraine, Georgia, and Montenegro are –0.37 ($p < 0.01$), –0.246 ($p < 0.05$), and –0.1 ($p = 0.1$), respectively. This means that in Ukraine and Georgia, Christian nationalism is less likely to predict getting vaccinated compared to Serbia and Montenegro. However, the results for Montenegro are not statistically significant.

Additionally, other variables that are positively associated with getting vaccinated include support for online liturgy and being employed. On the other hand, the belief that coronavirus can be cured by praying and country of origin (Ukraine and Georgia) were found to be negatively associated with getting vaccinated. The AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) of the model was 165, indicating a good model fit. In conclusion, the results of this model suggest that Christian nationalism is positively associated with vaccination behaviour, but the effect is weaker in Ukraine and Georgia.

Our analysis has revealed a correlation between Christian nationalism and vaccination behaviour among religious individuals. However, it is important to note that this sample is limited to only religious respondents, and thus the influence of religious nationalism on vaccination attitudes may differ among non-religious individuals. Our data showed the influence of religious nationalism on vaccination in Ukraine and Georgia is weaker than this influence in Serbia and Montenegro among religious people. Additionally, it is crucial to compare the influence of this index among other religious groups. To further explore this correlation, we employed a larger sample in Ukraine, comprising 1,001 urban respondents. The dataset includes a variable assessing respondents' willingness to receive a COVID-19 vaccine on a scale of 0–100. After controlling for factors such as religious affiliation, national identities, religious practices, geographical regions, and

socio-demographic profile, our results indicate that the index of Christian nationalism is a significant predictor of anti-vaccination attitudes among Ukrainians. In simpler terms, the more strongly an urban Ukrainian adheres to Christian nationalist beliefs, the less likely they are to be in favour of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.

Table 7.5 features the results of three linear regression models that predict the willingness of Ukrainians to take a COVID-19 vaccine once it is available to them. The dependent variable is a continuous measure of respondents' willingness on a scale of 0–100. The independent variables include an index of Christian nationalism, index of national identification, religious beliefs and practices, demographic characteristics, and geographical regions. While Model 1 has only the main effect of the Christian nationalism index, Model 2 and Model 3 add more control variables. In order to ensure the validity of the index of Christian nationalism, we added the index of national identification ('I identify with other Ukrainians', 'I feel Ukrainian', 'I like to be Ukrainian', 'I have a connection with other Ukrainians', 0.86 Cronbach's alpha coefficient). As Models 2 and 3 show, the effect of this index is significant and positive—namely it works in the opposite direction of Christian nationalism and increases the willingness to vaccinate.

Model 1 includes only the main effect of the index of Christian nationalism, which is significant and negatively related to the willingness to vaccinate. Model 2 adds an index of national identification as a control variable, which is also significant and positively related to the willingness to vaccinate. Model 3 further adds additional control variables such as religious affiliations, religious practices, and demographic characteristics. According to the coefficients of the independent variables, people who score high on the index of Christian nationalism are less likely to vaccinate compared to others. On the other hand, people who score high on the index of national identification are more likely to vaccinate. The effect of religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices on the willingness to vaccinate is also displayed, where people who believe in God and attend church are more likely to vaccinate. Furthermore, age, gender, education, and geographic location also impact the willingness to vaccinate.

Additionally, our Model 3 also explores the variation in willingness to vaccinate across regions. It appears that respondents living in northern and central Ukraine have a higher willingness to vaccinate, while those living in eastern, southern, and western Ukraine have lower willingness to vaccinate. This could be due to a number of factors such as cultural differences, level of information, and accessibility to healthcare, or even a difference in the spread of the disease in these regions. The overall adjusted R^2 for Model 3 is 0.159, indicating that about 16 per cent of the variation in willingness to vaccinate is explained by the variables included in the model. This means that there are other unmeasured factors that also influence the willingness to vaccinate.

The results of our analysis suggest that there may be a connection between religious practices and willingness to vaccinate. Specifically, individuals who attend church and hold a belief in God have a higher inclination to receive a vaccine, while religious practices such as praying at home did not have a significant impact. Additionally, our findings reveal that the role of religious affiliation varies, with

Table 7.5 Linear regression models predicting the willingness to vaccinate

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Index of Christian nationalism	–0.522***	–0.875***	–1.084***
	(0.195)	(0.205)	(0.210)
Index of national identification		5.747***	5.728***
		(1.488)	(1.475)
Believe in God			10.779***
			(3.528)
Attend church at least for religious holidays and more often			8.430***
			(2.763)
Pray at home at least during religious holidays and more often			–1.803
			(2.761)
Ukrainian language of the app		3.388	4.696*
		(2.730)	(2.727)
Greek Catholic church		6.212	–6.015
		(6.946)	(7.394)
Orthodox Christians—no affiliation		–11.169***	–19.636***
		(3.895)	(4.395)
Orthodox Christians—Kyiv Patriarchate		1.410	–9.596*
		(4.461)	(5.146)
Orthodox Christians—Moscow Patriarchate		–6.408	–18.319***
		(5.628)	(6.241)
Orthodox Church of Ukraine (received Tomos)		14.486***	4.570
		(4.505)	(5.048)
Other religious groups		–3.848	–12.952**
		(4.578)	(5.045)
Females		–11.497***	–12.149***
		(2.428)	(2.442)
25–34 years		–12.761***	–12.591***
		(4.253)	(4.220)
35–44 years		–14.459***	–14.004***
		(4.255)	(4.238)
45–54 years		–6.647	–6.402
		(4.500)	(4.473)
55–60 years		0.660	1.278
		(4.854)	(4.822)
Higher education		4.515*	3.604
		(2.461)	(2.469)
Western Ukraine		–2.799	–3.805
		(4.621)	(4.589)
Eastern Ukraine		–7.607*	–5.697
		(4.321)	(4.307)

(*Continued*)

Table 7.5 Continued

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Southern Ukraine		–4.854	–4.765
		(4.133)	(4.106)
Northern Ukraine		6.198	6.332
		(4.682)	(4.641)
Central Ukraine		5.463	5.721
		(3.788)	(3.768)
Constant	55.483***	49.370***	49.974***
	(2.570)	(7.347)	(7.289)
Observations	1,001	998	998
Adjusted R^2	0.006	0.143	0.159

atheists serving as the reference group. Notably, members of the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine did not exhibit a significant difference in their willingness to vaccinate compared to atheists. This may imply that these religious groups may not be as heavily influenced by religious beliefs in their vaccination attitudes.

At the same time, members of other Orthodox groups were less likely to vaccinate. This could be because they may not have received the same level of encouragement or guidance on vaccination as members of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine. While the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) indeed discouraged public health practices during the pandemic,[20] the reaction of the Kyiv patriarchate is more nuanced. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) in fact merged with the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine prior to receiving a Tomos of autocephaly in 2019. However, soon after, the leader of this church opted out from the agreement and announced that the Kyiv Patriarchate should remain independent. This suggests that the willingness to vaccinate may not be as strongly tied to religious beliefs and practices as it is tied to specific religious organisations and their public positions on vaccination. Thus, all Orthodox Christians who do not agree with the public position of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine are likely to cluster around other Orthodox churches and may be less likely to vaccinate. Overall, this data suggests that religious beliefs and practices do play a role in determining willingness to vaccinate, and that this role varies between religious groups and organisations.

Figure 7.1 plots the results of Model 3, which includes all controls and shows a statistical association between Christian nationalism and predicted willingness to vaccinate.

Robustness Check

In this analysis, the dependent variable is formulated as the willingness to vaccinate on a scale of 0–100. Given that many individuals tend to struggle with probabilities,

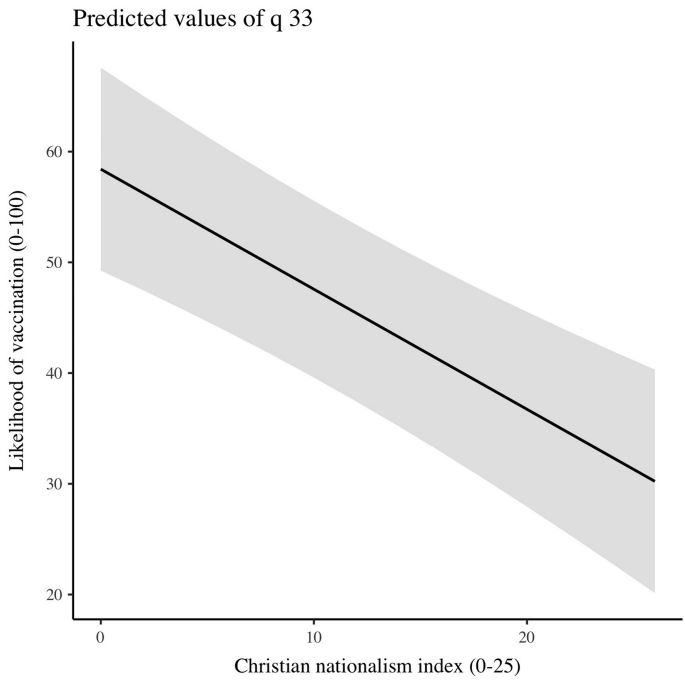

Figure 7.1 Results of Model 3, predicted values of willingness to vaccinate ('Q33' in the dataset).

and that the responses provided by the participants were inclined towards extreme values of the scale (very low, precisely at the middle, and very high values), we also recorded the scale of vaccination from 0 to 100 into a categorical variable. These categories are '1. Low probability of getting a vaccine' for values below 49, '2. Medium probability of getting a vaccine' for 50, and '3. High probability of getting a vaccine' for above 51. To further ensure the robustness of our findings, we applied an ordered logistic regression to the data with all control variables included. Although we did not present all of the regression outputs for the sake of brevity, we have included a visual representation of our findings in the form of Figure 7.2. This figure illustrates that the probability of getting a vaccine decreases as the index of Christian nationalism increases, further reinforcing the robustness of our results to different model specifications and the validity of our conclusions.

Limitations

One of the key limitations of our study is that our data collection was restricted to urban populations in Ukraine, thereby precluding the possibility of generalising our findings to the rural population. It is likely that the influence of Christian nationalism in rural areas may be more pronounced than what is observed in our

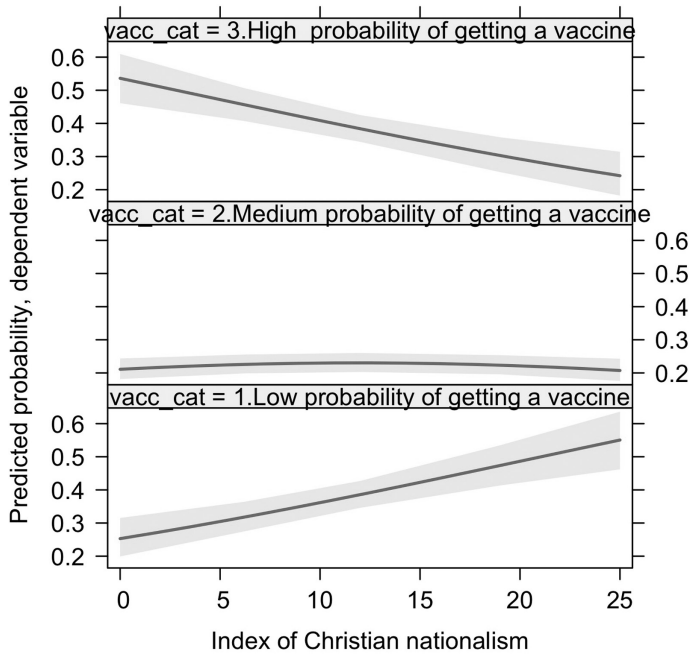

Figure 7.2 Results of ordered logistic regression.

sample. Furthermore, our models exhibit modest R-square metrics, indicating that a significant proportion of the variance in the willingness to vaccinate remains unexplained. This is not unexpected, given that vaccination attitudes are influenced by a complex interplay of social–psychological factors such as anxieties and fears, trust in science and government, and media exposure.[21,22,23] Despite the lack of data to control for these variables, our study demonstrates that the index of Christian nationalism remains a significant predictor of vaccination attitudes, even after controlling for national identities, religious practices, and socio-demographic factors.

It is important to note that our research has a temporal limitation, as it was conducted during a specific period, which may not reflect the attitudes and behaviours of the population at other times. Additionally, more research is necessary to better understand the complex dynamics that underlie vaccination attitudes among different segments of the population. It is crucial to investigate the influence of Christian nationalism in rural areas and to compare the attitudes and behaviours of religious and non-religious groups in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Discussion of the Results

This chapter employs an online survey methodology (in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro) and combines it with representative survey in Ukraine to

investigate the relationship between vaccination behaviour and religiosity among Orthodox Christian societies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising a pilot survey that employs an index of Christian nationalism to assess religious groups in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro, the study subsequently employs a larger randomised sample in Ukraine to further explore the findings. The results of the study indicate a correlation between Christian nationalism and vaccination behaviour, even when controlling for factors such as gender and social status. Furthermore, the study finds that religious individuals are more likely to vaccinate compared to those without strong religious commitments. However, when religious commitment is combined with nationalism, the results diverge, consistent with previous research in the United States. The study notes that while the concept of Christian nationalism may take different forms in different societies, the index employed in this study effectively captures the fusion of nationalism and Christianity. However, the study's main limitation is its focus on urban populations in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro, which may serve as a conservative estimate of the overall influence of Christian nationalism on vaccination behaviour. However, the study also notes that the effect of Christian nationalism on vaccination behaviour varies among the different countries examined. In Ukraine and Georgia, the effect of Christian nationalism on vaccination behaviour is weaker than in Serbia and Montenegro. Additionally, the study employs a larger sample of Ukrainians to further explore the findings, which yields similar results to previous studies conducted in the United States.

It is noteworthy that the study also finds that religious commitment, as measured by church attendance and belief in God, is positively associated with vaccination behaviour. All respondents who were selected for this pilot were quite religious in the first place. We found that 66 per cent of them were vaccinated already in 2022, when the survey took place. This finding is consistent with the idea that citizens tend to follow the public health advice of their religious leaders and prioritise their own health and the health of others. Additionally, the study finds that the index of national identification is also positively associated with vaccination behaviour, suggesting that those who feel a connection with other Ukrainians tend to be more prosocial in their health behaviour. However, when religious commitment is mixed with nationalism, the results are quite different. This is in line with previous findings in the United States that religious commitment does not stimulate incautious behaviour unless blended with the specific worldview of Christian nationalism.[24]

We do not claim that Ukrainian citizens adhere to the same Christian nationalism as the American evangelists—quite the contrary. The history of Ukrainian (and Orthodox) nationalism has its unique features which are significantly different from the US case. Most Ukrainians endorse churches and agree that religion is a significant part of their culture, but they do not support the idea that the state should be governed on exclusive Christian values. Most importantly, there are different competing canonical authorities—the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church. Ukrainians are trapped between competition narratives about religion and the origin of the Ukrainian state.[25] Therefore, most Ukrainians acknowledge the role of religion, but their views about the church can vary

significantly depending on religious affiliation, region, and other social factors. At the same time, we suggest that the *index* of Christian nationalism taps into a larger concept that amalgamates nationalism and Christianity. This amalgamation might have different forms in different societies depending on the cultural and historical context. For example, some urban Ukrainians agree that their government should declare Ukraine a Christian nation and promote Christian symbols in education and elsewhere. However, the roots of these beliefs are not evangelical. Instead, they are rooted in the confrontational narratives of major Orthodox churches that compete against each other (and sometimes against the state) for the status of the national church. Those Ukrainians who agree that their government should rule on the basis of Orthodox Christian values also do not want to vaccinate. Given that the pandemic and the anti-vaccination behaviour is a global phenomenon, sociologists will benefit from studying how nationalism, religion, and public health attitudes correlate around the globe using standardised metrics and approaches and paying attention to local cultural and historical context.

Finally, from the policy perspective, Ukrainian religious groups have been criticised for incautious behaviour during the pandemic (especially during the Easter celebrations). Our data suggest that church attendance or belief in God per se does not pose a threat to public health. However, when religious commitment is mixed with nationalistic worldviews, the risk of not vaccinating increases. Specifically, this means that rather than simply focusing on religious affiliation or church attendance as potential predictors of vaccine hesitancy, policymakers and media outlets should also take into account the specific worldviews and discourses that may influence individuals' willingness to vaccinate. One example of this could be conducting more targeted outreach and education efforts to individuals who may hold nationalistic or Christian nationalist beliefs, in order to counter any misinformation or mistrust of vaccines that may be prevalent within these groups. Another example could be focusing on increasing the communication and collaboration between health agencies and religious leaders to promote the importance and safety of vaccination; this could be done by providing them with accurate information on vaccines and their benefits, and also by involving them in the distribution process of vaccines. Additionally, it can be achieved by offering incentives for vaccination—for example, a symbolic recognition for vaccinated individuals by their religious leaders could be a way to ease their concerns about the safety of the vaccine and at the same time increase their willingness to vaccinate.

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8 ‘Locked Doors Slam against the Very Essence of the Church’[1]

Finnish and Swedish Orthodox Priests’ Pastoral Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Johan Bastubacka

Introduction

Different Orthodox responses to the COVID-19 crisis can be characterised as creating a wide range of practical solutions. They extend from ignoring the seriousness of the situation or focusing on faith-based solutions alone to strategies and efforts to prevent the spread of the virus in worship, and helping people to grasp the seriousness of the situation and its effect on their social and spiritual lives.[2]

These responses can be expected to appear as somewhat different in Finland and Sweden, largely based on the different social and institutional structures of the two neighbouring countries. Orthodoxy in Finland appears as a nationalised second, minority state church with a thousand-year history in the complex and shifting realities of historical Karelia.[3] In Sweden, Orthodoxy first emerged in public knowledge when refugees from coastal Estonia arrived in Sweden in the aftermath of World War II.[4] Thereafter, Sweden has opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of immigrants and refugees from Finland, the Balkans, Middle East, and Africa. As a result, basically all branches of Eastern Orthodoxy, its different historical and modern era patriarchates, and Oriental churches are residing and worshipping in Sweden.[5] Simultaneously, Sweden is regarded as one of the most secularised countries in the world despite its prominent Lutheran history and cultural influences.[6]

This rather fragmented ecclesiastical reality can be suspected to mean that responses to several issues, COVID-19 included, become differently nuanced, and the institutional framing of potential responses to crises may differ from that in Finland. There the close institutionalised relationship the Finnish Orthodox Church has with the state (by a national legislation) makes the church appear as a traditional element of the Finnish society, even as belonging to the official sphere of it.[7]

However, in both countries, Orthodoxy is not only institutions and hierarchies. The church as an institution consists of people, and they endeavour to figure out how to realise their religious perceptions and heritages and navigate with them in the realities of their daily lives—now with the pandemic that heavily influenced all cultural and religious activities. This is the sphere of lived religion, people’s responses, personal solutions, and applications—as related to institutional, cultural, and historical frames.[8] It is a sphere inside of which the institutional coincides and coexists with the personal. As Knibbe and Kupari pointed out, ‘All religious

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phenomena—e.g., practices, rituals, beliefs, norms, values, doctrines, objects, institutions—can be studied as lived religion'.[9] And as far as lived Orthodoxy is concerned, it is my hypothesis that these aspects are closely intertwined, especially in the lives and practices of Orthodox priests.

As Edgell wrote:

> From a practice-based perspective, a core task for the sociological study of religion is analyzing the empirical variation in practices oriented to sacralization, the institutions (religious and other) that facilitate such practices, and the resulting religious experiences and moral orders that emerge in specific times and places.—Moreover, research at the intersection of lived religion and institutional analysis helps us to get past the idea that the analyst must choose between understanding religion as operating on the surface (as tools that people use to solve problems or position themselves strategically) or as being deep (formative of preconscious or automatic habits and dispositions).[10]

In this study, I find this lengthy citation elemental in describing the focus on the intersection of the personal and institutional, lived, material, and corporeal yet simultaneously religious and spiritual realities that became visible in the research data.

In the case of Orthodoxy, the different effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been thorough and severe. Churches have been temporarily closed to the faithful, access to temples and services has been restricted, and people have been instructed to follow streamed services at home. The all-important Mystery of the Eucharist became suddenly difficult to access.

These measures were crafted differently in both Finland and Sweden at the different phases of the pandemic: the object of study here is not these phases and related government or health officials' measures, but their effect on the parish priests. The beginning of the pandemic was most dramatic in the spring of 2020,[11] occurrences thereafter were not generally that drastic and their effect on worship already familiar. As a result, the beginning of the pandemic features more in the data, and it was especially discussed in the interviews. Moreover, in Finland, specific crisis legislation that restricted civil rights was enforced on 17 March 2020.[12] Since the interviews of this research were all realised in the springtime of 2021, the data describes basically the experiences, problems, and solutions of the first year of the pandemic.

These measures and strategies hit hard at the core of constructing Orthodox communality. It can be characterised as Eucharistic at heart, emphasising the theological significance of the *koinonia* created by and experienced in the Divine Liturgy.[13] As the Church (with a capital letter, understood by the Orthodox as a Divine–Human entity) is understood as manifesting itself in and through the mystery of the Eucharist,[14] this liturgical togetherness can be regarded as vulnerable to restrictions and efforts of substitution in terms of digitally transmitted services.

Parish priests in their churches with their traditional priestly obligations of the pastoral care of their people have been in the hub of this crisis. They have found themselves in interesting and challenging positions between the faithful, the church hierarchy, their larger societies, the liturgical tradition, and government instructions while functioning as counsellors, administrators, and liturgical experts. In all this, they themselves also need to be cautious and thoughtful regarding their own and their family's health and well-being.

Within the realm of Orthodoxy, the COVID-19 crisis has had far more than mere practical dimensions. Issues of faith, sickness, and health, healing, and death were touched on as the virus was discussed in this religious realm. Since the COVID-19 pandemic affected participation in worship and especially the manners and frequency of taking part in the Eucharist, it appeared as a theological question. Many Orthodox discussions have taken a position in or tried to solve the controversial issue of whether the virus (or viruses and bacteria in general) can be transmitted through consuming the Sacrament or while attending a church service. These discussions have touched both learned theologians and local parish members.[15]

Another faith-based or faith-related discussion has emerged around different conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. There has been faithful who doubt the existence of the virus or regard the entire pandemic as a deceitful scheme to influence or guide people's lives and behaviour, or to subject their bodies and minds to medical experiments. These ideas and narratives can reflect many things: deep mistrust of governments and state authorities, a doubtful attitude towards medical science, the influence of social media and its phenomena, even disinformation in terms of hybrid warfare. Circulating conspiracy theories and misapprehensions of the pandemic have been publicly opposed by government, health, and ecclesiastical authorities.[16] Local priests are often the first to encounter these schemes and their effect on people's and parish life. They need to address the worries and they get to hear the narratives which reveal the thought patterns of the people. This makes them subject to people's expectations and disappointments in understanding their lifeworlds. Simultaneously, priests are not in general themselves unaffected by these theories themselves.

Both in Finland and Sweden, Orthodox communities represent Eastern influences and are in minority positions in relation to the (Lutheran) majority religion, but in different ways. The Orthodox Church of Finland is a minority state (or folk) church, with a thousand-year history, autonomous under the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and with its own national legislation. It has approximately 50,000 members, roughly 1% of the 5.5 million population, and consists of three dioceses.[17] In Sweden, there are numerous Orthodox and Eastern Christian communities, basically all of them with immigrant backgrounds and organised according to their national legacies and respective patriarchates. Together, they have some 95,000 members in comparison to the 10.4 million population. In the Christian Council of Sweden, there are 17 member churches from the Eastern Christian section.[18]

Figure 8.1 Ascension Day vigil in Ouspensky Cathedral, Helsinki, during COVID-19 restrictions. A screenshot of the service from the channel of Helsinki Orthodox parish shows the almost empty church.

Research Questions, Sources, and Methodology

This chapter focuses on the different responses to the crisis that emerged within Orthodox Christianity as the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread in March 2020. The focus is on Finnish and Swedish Orthodox priests' responses to the crisis. I was especially interested in figuring out how they acted in difficult situations. What were their practical solutions to the different communal and individual needs and ideas of their parish members, on the one hand, and the institutional and societal regulation and demands on the other? Which questions emerged as theologically significant in their experience? In the light of the debated social, religious, and health issues, the following research questions appeared as significant:

(1) How have priests responded to the crisis in terms of pastoral practical solutions and theological reasoning?
   (a) What problems became prominent, and what solutions or interpretations have been developed?
   (b) What theological perspectives and questions became discussed or debated and how?
(2) How do the priests see people's experiences of the church as community and fellowship been affected by restrictions on participation? In other words, how has lived Orthodoxy been transformed because of the pandemic?

These aspects are scrutinised in this research from the perspective of lived religion and as related to underlying institutional, cultural, and national structures and contexts. It is apparent that the priests of these minority Orthodox communities had to respond to the crisis, yet in different manners in differing circumstances. The emerging crisis had great effects on worship and pastoral work, but it is pertinent to ask which specific problems emerged, and how solutions were crafted by priests in regard of worship, togetherness, and the sense of community.

The sources of this chapter were gathered in two distinct ways. The first was in-depth interviews, online using Zoom and Teams, which were recorded. The second was to find published texts, instructions, and debates that illuminated the occurrences that the priests had to cope with and act on. The church administrative documents related to these occurrences are in themselves such a large body of data that their analysis was beyond the scope of this chapter.

For the interviews, I contacted Orthodox priests in different parts of Finland and Sweden and wrote them email invitations to take part in an interview.[19] I told them in the invitation which questions I was intending to pose and informed them about the general theme of the research.

I easily got responses from several priests in Finland, and none of the four priests answered negatively or wanted to withdraw themselves from the research. Instead, they wanted to be heard and to share their experiences. They were chosen to represent different positions and different parts of the country. The interviews were much more difficult to organise in Sweden. There I needed to scrutinise several webpages to find the email addresses of different communities and their priests. As I initially got only two positive answers, I asked for help from a colleague, Dr. Sara Gehlin, who was working at the Sankt Ignatius Institute in Södertälje and Bromma in Stockholm. With her relationships, I easily got two more positive answers to interview requests. As a result, four interviews were realised in Finland, three in Sweden, one of which was a double interview of one Coptic priest and his assistant, who also was a deacon. In addition, one Orthodox bishop answered my letter, and he wanted to answer interview questions via email. As for the background variables of the informants, half of them had immigrant backgrounds, and others were Finnish and Swedish natives. Interviews were conducted in three different languages: Finnish, Swedish, and English, between April and June 2021.

This sample is small and cannot be used to generalise the results and phenomena featuring in these interviews, but the text they together produced was profound and touching. These men (in the Orthodox churches, only men can be ordained) wanted to talk, and even if they often focused on practicalities and theology, they talked sometimes with great emotion. I initiated each discussion by posing the same questions to each one: What took place in the parishes especially regarding the liturgy as the pandemic started? What problems emerged in parishes? Which discussions have been relevant in the Church regarding the crisis? Are there theological dimensions that have been essential? Even regardless of these questions, I allowed the stories and associations of the informants to flow freely.

As a result, the main sources of this chapter are the research interviews of these Finnish and Swedish Orthodox parish priests, one deacon, and one bishop

(hereafter when I refer to the priests, I include the deacon and bishop in this). These data are related to different media outcomes, public discussions, parish and church publications, online and in print. In terms of theological discourses, certain Orthodox theological texts are referred to as secondary sources.

Special attention was paid to the ethical concerns of these data. All personally revealing details were anonymised, the data was kept safe in one location only, and all data were deleted carefully after the research was completed. Informants were made conscious of their right to withdraw from the research at any time.[20]

The main mode of analysis was thematic content analysis[21] with a predominantly inductive approach. All data were considered as one large set of different positions and then divided according to the themes expressed in the contents. The use of qualitative thematic content analysis meant methodological focus on lived religion and the 'Eucharistic ecclesiology'[22] that has largely characterised Orthodox Eucharistic thinking since the second half of the twentieth century. Since all the informants were consecrated into priesthood or the diaconate and acted as servants of the church, it was fascinating to ponder the relationship of personal responses, cares, and concerns as related to the public, institutional self. Since priesthood is regarded among the Orthodox as one of the Mysteries (Sacraments), it became a theological question as to how they lived out this sacramental priesthood—specifically in a crisis.

Themes emerging in the data were regarded as starting points and then organised in the manner typical of the thematic content analysis. Certain themes emerged

Figure 8.2 A view from the altar in Divine Liturgy during the pandemic in Ouspensky Cathedral, Helsinki. Screenshot of the service from the channel of Helsinki Orthodox parish shows the priest with facemask and the scarce congregation standing in the nave with masks and with safety distances.

as comprehensive and encompassing, and others appeared as their subthemes or related themes.[23] This manner of studying people's positions, perceptions, notions, and outcomes gives a relatively comprehensive image of the cores, margins, and side-paths of the issue: the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on priests' lives and actions as caretakers of Orthodox Christians and members of certain local, cultural, and national communities.

Taking into consideration these larger social structures and relating them to the results of the research was one crucial element in the methodology. Since the chapter is built on the idea of making comparisons between the Swedish and Finnish discourses, certain thematic differences needed to be figured out as related to these to national cultural and religious spheres.

Care for Health and Lives: Restrictions, Regulations, and Modifications

'And then people, then I all the time had to think for them as to how to act as priest so that they feel safe. I have been giving the Eucharist at the church door, outside'.[24]

> The local Churches, as well as ours, which belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, dealt with the appearance of the pandemic with great prudence. In fact, we must emphasize that the decisions have always been in line with those of the state committees set up in each country by epidemiologists and have the sole purpose of protecting humans.[25]

Undoubtedly, the appearance of the pandemic in early 2020 caused great anxiety, and these feelings and concerns could be sensed in all the interviews. They motivated actions and were channelled into the pastoral work of all the informants.

First, there was anxiety for the safety of parish members—how could the priests keep people away from the church? Especially one Easter night service in Sweden in the spring 2020 was described as difficult to celebrate safely, as people desperately wanted to participate, to come to the temple and still feel the Easter joy as community—but restrictions had to be maintained.[26] Frustration caused by the carelessness and denial of the gravity of the situation by some communities and their priests became expressed in the data: 'Some communities continue celebrating the Liturgy [in a usual manner] regardless of the restrictions'.[27] And there was amazement of the decreasing numbers of participants in the Divine Liturgy, as the attending people were gradually reduced to only one priest and deacon, and the same applied to other sacraments and services.[28] Exhortations for prayers at home were made in Sweden.[29]

In both countries, in areas and periods where the pandemic was less widespread, sometimes 20 people could attend services with no body contact,[30] depending on the size of the temple, but these restrictions changed during the pandemic, from the most severe restrictions at the initial phase of spring 2020, easing in summer and fall, to become more strict in the winter of 2020–2021, and then again in the winter of 2021–2022. But, during the time of the interviews, this second pandemic winter

was still in the future. Moreover, in Finland, from fall 2020, all the different phases of the restrictions became essentially regional, depending on the decisions of each of the six Regional State Administrative Agencies.[31]

In the interviews, there appeared a great amount of sorrow and worries as known parish members and colleagues passed away both in the informant's own country and especially abroad, and there was anxiety for the safety of colleagues.[32] For example, the passing away of Bishop Milutin of Valjevo, Serbia,[33] caused great concern in the global Orthodox community. Similar alarming messages, from Greece, for instance, also caused anxiety and sorrow.[34]

One specific problem was understanding complex restrictions and recommendations and how to apply them in worship, as guidelines changed from March 2020 to May 2021. For example, according to the recollection of one informant, in Southern Finland only priests with permanent positions were allowed to serve in temples.[35] And there were difficulties in communicating the necessity of restrictions to parish members, difficulties in listening and answering to people's disappointment, especially during lockdown.[36] One specific problem was that people were making comparisons. They compared Orthodox restrictions to the restrictions of other churches and communities: 'Why can the Catholics congregate and not us?' 'Why is it different in the neighbouring diocese?'[37]

It was especially difficult to realise worship safely, which practically meant not touching, keeping safety distances all the time, and abstaining from kissing icons and the Gospel, which could seem blasphemous, not to mention the restricted access to services.[38] Safety precautions not only meant abstaining from or suspending liturgical practices, but also gave rise to new ones with the goal of protecting parish members. One specifically difficult question was the realisation of the sacrament of repentance. In most of the local Orthodox traditions it is performed each time during the liturgy of the catechumens for all those who are prepared to take part in the Eucharist. Queuing and proximity in the encounter between the parish member and father confessor at one front corner of the naos (close by the iconostasis) had to be somewhat different. The sacrament of repentance could be performed privately and separately, and since the 1970s, Finnish Orthodox had been acquainted with the local custom of going to confession once or twice in a year, and not before every Eucharist.[39]

In Sweden, the sacrament of repentance during the liturgy of the catechumens was replaced at least in one ecclesiastical realm by a congregational joint confession of sins, in Swedish *syndabekännelse*. This appears as an interesting Western solution that has its counterparts in many Western worship traditions.[40] In this same community, the Eucharist was now realised by administering the Body and Blood to the hands of the laity, realised with the Body moisturised from the chalice with the Blood using the spoon.[41] These realisations differ in detail radically from both the general Orthodox tradition of using the one Eucharistic spoon and the Finnish practice during the pandemic of using multiple wooden spoons that were burned afterwards.[42] Giving the Body into the hands of the communing person is not a liturgical novelty. It has roots in the fourth-century mystagogical instructions by St. Cyril of Jerusalem, a practice that was common before the introduction of the

Figure 8.3 Great Entrance in the Divine Liturgy during the pandemic in Ouspensky Cathedral, Helsinki. After the lockdown people could attend services with safety distances, and masks were recommended. Simultaneously, services were screened and published on YouTube for domestic use. Screenshot of the service from the channel of Helsinki Orthodox parish.

Eucharistic spoon in the medieval era. Also, in the liturgical rubrics of the Liturgy of St. James, as applied in concurrent Finnish custom, the Body is given to the hands of the participating laity.[43]

Altogether, safety precautions immediately became liturgical in this thoroughly liturgical ritual environment. When everything was performed by corporeal actions, and when corporeality was at the epicentre of the people's performance of their lived religion, both movement and gestures, or their absence, became charged with meaning. For the priests, this meant a challenge to consider simultaneously the different safety, practical, administrational, and theological aspects of worship.

None of the informants showed any negligence or inattention regarding government safety instructions or prohibitions, and not even any serious critical attitude towards changing restrictions and the problems they caused for worship. In other words, it was evident that all those who wanted to be interviewed wanted to present a responsible and cooperative attitude to even arduous restrictions and regulations. Those who had different attitudes and positions did not want to present them in research.[44]

Care for the Soul: Support and Counselling

'Yes, yes yes, that dimension of care is really important. Experience of it. Oh yes [sigh]. It became a great many practical issues, theological questions, and dimensions of pastoral care'.[45]

Another significant cluster of anxieties concerned spiritual and mental wellbeing, and they were related to questions of how people could cope in terms of health, finances, and medication.

The spiritual was not separate from the practical. In one rural parish the priest delivered medication to people with his Lutheran colleague. This was done to help both the elderly people and less mobile people living long distances from urban centres to get their medication during the dangerous phases of the pandemic. Another aim was to create and maintain social relationships, to give aid in experienced isolation by being in contact with people.[46] As religious privatisation and anti-institutional secularisation feature remarkably in current-day Finland,[47] these visits can also be seen as priestly counter-strategies to reach out to distanced people (both in terms of physical and mental or spiritual distance) by combining practical care, social togetherness, and the spiritual presence of the priest as father of the parish.

A remarkable and idiosyncratic Orthodox feature was the care for souls associated with the Eucharistic ecclesiology of the church.[48] It caused anxiety to the priests that they could not administer the Sacrament to the laity freely in Divine Liturgies during lockdown. And after the lockdown the numbers of the faithful allowed into the temples were reduced to only 20 or in smaller temples less than 20 people. Thus, people did not have full access to the source of salvation and healing—as the Eucharist is understood in Orthodox spirituality. Non-access to the Mystery meant lacking koinonia and touched the deep essence of the church.

This problem was faced with different solutions. One was to administer the Eucharist to the faithful outside of churches, after the Divine Liturgy on the doorstep, or while visiting people's homes at their doorsteps and, finally, by creating digital means, streaming Divine Liturgies in the effort of creating visual substitutes for Eucharistic participation. The creation of these substitutes, however, meant both practical and theological problems. Streamed services were not always experienced as authentic,[49] and neither were they easy to realise.

It was practically challenging to figure out with local digital knowledge how to find functional cameras, stands, and microphones, and how to make streamed services visually and audibly functional to enable a joint or individual experience of being part of a gathered congregation. Unlike some Protestant and the Catholic churches and denominations, in the data there was no emphasis on notions emphasising 'spiritual communion'[50] or celebrating the Eucharist at home.[51] The only exception was found in the last interview.[52] These notions were clearly not generally fitting to the theological–spiritual landscape that the interviewed priests were navigating. The focus was rather on lamentation about the arduous efforts of creating streamed worship and the experience that it was realised poorly. As a contrast to these technical and practical problems, the streams from the Ouspensky Cathedral in Helsinki appeared as beautifully realised and technically skilful. Yet, even they could not act as true substitutes of the worship in flesh and in community. Care for the soul had, thus, practical and technical dimensions and hindrances.[53]

But the most serious problem was obviously the incapability of the acquired digital means to deliver an authentic corporeal and spiritual experience of taking part in the Mystery. Digital means could give glimpses of how the Mystery was celebrated, even behind the iconostasis, but they could not realise the

corporeal–spiritual koinonia of the gathered congregation with Christ and His sacrifice. Here, in terms of all the interview data a rather unanimous pastoral and spiritual-theological experience was expressed. I call this experience 'spiritual-theological', but it could be also denoted as 'corporeal-theological', since in the lived Orthodoxy of these informants there appeared a strong tendency to emphasise the material and corporeal dimensions of faith and spirituality.[54] This notion is in line with the traditional Orthodox doctrinal idea of the Incarnation, God assuming human flesh to save and uplift humanity and the material world into the heavenly realm. Subsequently, flesh and materiality appeared as the 'place' for the encounter with the Divine.[55] And these notions were specifically confronted during the pandemic and the restrictions it placed on corporeal togetherness.

Yet, paradoxically, restrictions and special circumstances emphasised the significance of the Eucharist and its 'right', Orthodox, understanding. The priests felt a need to communicate to the people the meaning of the Eucharist, especially in terms of the participation of the laity.[56] One informant stated that COVID-19 even uncovered a misunderstanding of the Divine Liturgy, the 'work of the people', meaning 'people of God communing with Christ' by revealing how clerical the previous understanding of the Divine Liturgy had been in that community.[57] In other words, the absence of the people emphasised the significance of the laity in worship and the theological meaning of their presence. Teaching the 'right' understanding of worship to the people meant priestly responsibility for the basic requirements of their spiritual well-being. This well-being meant participation, and the laity appeared as an essential element in the realisation of the Divine Liturgy.

This understanding is nothing new in the global Orthodoxy but a result of the long durée influence of the Liturgical Movement and its effect on the Eastern liturgics, especially as it featured in the heritage of Alexander Schmemann.[58] In his interpretation of ancient liturgical documents, the celebration of the Mystery of the Eucharist appeared as a joint task and effort of the church—including both priesthood and laity—in which the church emerged as its true self. These notions have become prominent within Orthodoxy, and their influence reaches out far beyond the confessional borders of Eastern Orthodoxy.[59]

Online services were organised sporadically in the parishes of the interviewed priests, depending on local resources.[60] Other pastoral responses to the restrictions and lockdowns were counselling via cell phones and online, confessions (the sacrament of repentance) via cell phones, and online hours where the priest was available to meet parishioners.[61] All the references to these digital religious practices are revealing: notwithstanding the critical tones towards infusing digital religion in the lived realities of Orthodoxy, these practices were developed and used—differently by different priests.

In two interviews, pondering about the digital presence of the church for the younger generation and those living in the countryside led to ideas about a continuous digital presence of the church at least for these specific target groups.[62] The digitalisation or mediatisation of the younger generation[63] was clearly noticed—and the practices developed in exceptional circumstances were regarded as potentially useful and applicable in other contexts. As Campbell pointed out:

> There is still a need for a more nuanced understanding of the negotiation of the internet as a medium for religious practice within some religious groups. Also more careful consideration is called for regarding what some scholars have described as 'digital religion'—the relationship between the online–offline religious contexts—within some religious traditions.[64]

How these aspects could be understood in Eastern Orthodoxy is a huge topic to be researched. In this chapter, only a preliminary sketch can be drafted with this data.

Care for the Tradition: Problems and Worries

'Well, why in Finland they use wooden spoons whereas in for example Greece they dispense it [the Eucharist] with one spoon'.

> And then that the Holy Gifts are so holy that they don't infect… That they are so holy that viruses don't have effect in there. And then … one needs to emphasize that from the point of view of faith they are holy, but we people infect each other.[65]

'So, in a sense it [the Divine Liturgy] became a performance for the camera'.[66]

The digital solutions that were crafted in the emergent situation had a dimension that at least partially met the need to communicate with the congregation. But they also touched largely on the question of living out the Tradition in worship. The feeling of oddity when celebrating the Divine Liturgy without a congregation, streamed online with the technical difficulties that entailed,[67] appeared in this Orthodox context not only as technical or personal problems in reaching out to or having contact with parish members, but also as problems of entangling with or modifying the Holy Tradition.[68]

The notion of tradition (often with capital T) is significant in understanding the actions and positions of the Orthodox. As the church is believed to be living in the stream of tradition inspired by the Holy Spirit, in which Biblical texts, worship, spirituality, and normative aspects of Orthodoxy are understood as interrelated,[69] it is no wonder that personal, singular, or new interpretations or modifications appear as problematic. Practicalities and especially liturgical actions appear as simultaneously theological and practical, personal, and communal. Lived Orthodoxy appears as simultaneously perplexingly institutional and communal. It emerges as 'situated knowledge being used to do things, embedded beliefs implicit in action'.[70] The following aspects in the data shed light on this idiosyncratic amalgamation.

The priests found themselves in difficult positions simultaneously as both safeguards of the authenticity of the tradition and pastoral experts dealing with a dangerous pandemic. In this position, they had to face people's accusations of aversion from the tradition, especially regarding the veneration of icons by kissing, and the use of wooden spoons in administering the Sacrament, a practice that quickly became commonplace in Finland.[71] The following narrative excerpt of an interview

illustrates these questions and the transnational nature of Orthodoxy and Orthodox influences:

> Or when they call from Greece and say 'I have sinned'. How come? 'I haven't kissed an icon when I went to church because I was afraid'. What sin is that? 'Well, when everybody watches and doubts and…' Hear me, you did just what needs to be done. When you go to church and ask for blessing, you don't kiss the hand [of the priest]. You don't kiss the icons, and you use the mask.[72]

Altogether, great questions emerged in 'the greater Orthodox community':[73] How could the Holy Body and Blood ('For the health of the body and of the soul'[74]) be associated with lethal sickness?[75] What is the theological anthropology of sickness as related to worship and sacramental theology? And how can medical science and theology be related to each other?[76] Obviously, the holiness of the temple did not protect believers, but what about the Mystery of the Eucharist?

These questions were clearly crucial and current for the priests, and they reached no clear or self-evident answers. As far as the refined theological reasoning of the relationship of the two (human and Divine) natures of Christ and their presence and function in the Eucharist was concerned, no argumentation deriving from these theological concepts was presented in the interviews. This might be the result of several influences, including perhaps the novelty of the theological discussion, and even the modesty of parish priests to engage in a discussion usually driven by the hierarchs of the church.[77] Altogether, for example the reasoning by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpactus and the question of potential 'Eucharistic monophysitism' (an understanding in which the Divinity of Christ in union with humanity could mean in communion practice that all germs and viruses were obliterated),[78] which is crucial for the Orthodox, did not feature directly in the data. However, 'scholastic thinking' concerning the Eucharistic spoon, for example, was heavily criticised as the form and shape of liturgical action seemed to emerge as more significant than the content.[79] Simultaneously, the long continuum of history was seen as a significant hermeneutic horizon: 'This is not the first epidemic in the history of the Church'.[80]

As for the parish members and their relationships to the modifications made to the worship tradition, basically two different outcomes featured in the interviewees' perceptions on the issue. Firstly, consent and acceptance in times of need. 'They have been able to understand this. No conflicts or schisms'.[81] Secondly, according to the priests, this was by no means the only perceptible attitude. 'Some have gone to other communities where the celebrate the Liturgy [with open doors, without restrictions]'.[82]

One outcome was highly personal regarding one's own priestly self-image. 'It is a question of identity; who am I as priest if I can't go to church and celebrate with my people?'[83] This perception of one's changing or threatened identity in times of liturgical emergency interestingly reveals how the institutional and personal are combined in a priestly vocation and in the practical and social realisation of the sacrament of priesthood.[84] With regard to priesthood, it is tempting to

conceptualise priests in their habitus as institutional objects—among many others like religious phenomena.

Friedland and Arjaliès defined institutional objects as 'good-dependent objects whose objectivity depends on the good they are presumed to produce through the practices they afford, a good whose production depends on the object'.[85] They stated:

> Institutional objects both afford and signify forms of practice that constitute the objectivity of the world, as a world that is, can be, and ought to be organized around particular goods. Institutional objects are vehicles by which goods are instituted, produced, evaluated, and territorialized'.[86]

In my view, these concepts are fitting in efforts to understand and describe the complex communal, personal, and traditional yet contemporary habitus of the interviewed priests. They live sacramental lives, which means continuous performing of and participation in the Mysteries. They appear as institutional actors that have become institutionalised. They responded to the expectations of the people and of the institution, of which they themselves were a part. To be a priest was to act as a priest, and in the crisis, this meant acting as an interpreter of the tradition in a manner that worked for all related partners. The sacrament of priesthood is one core of Orthodox religious life: priests are not only ritual experts, or administrators, but also institutional objects.

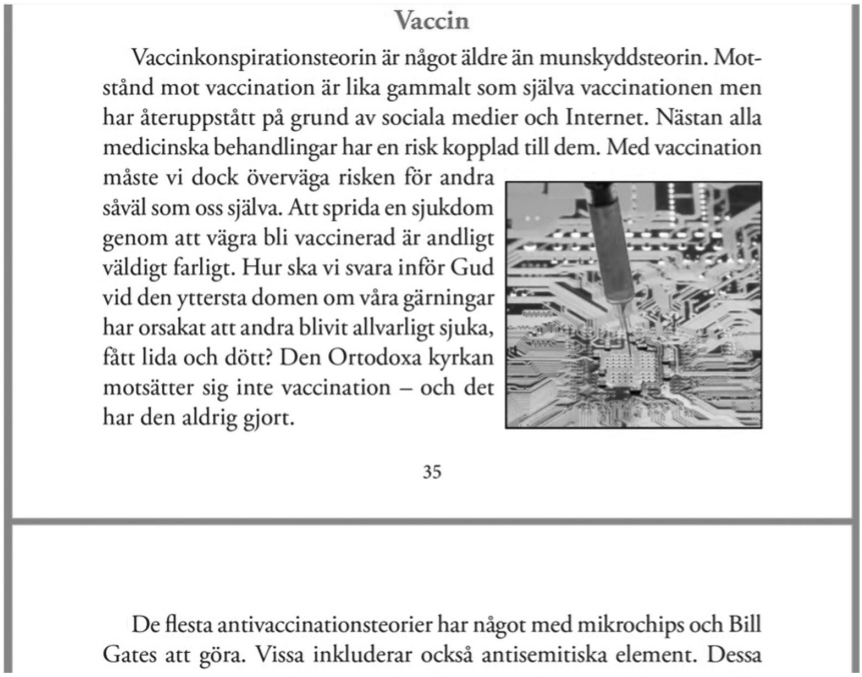
Changes in the social realisation of religious ritual changed something essential in this configuration, and it is no wonder that worries regarding the continuity of the significance of gathering to the Divine Liturgy emerged. Lockdowns and restrictions could potentially threaten the continuity of the Tradition. People become alienated from liturgical life as habits were broken by the pandemic. The togetherness, interaction, and communality of worship, the corporeality, and sensory, spatial, and haptic dimensions were on hold,[87] and it was questionable whether they could be fully revived.

But all this insecurity gave impetus to theological reasoning and creativity. The church was narrated as being on the road, as in the Easter Night procession, in insecurity, the church together with all of creation, as in Noah's Ark where 'all are in trouble, and also the Church'. This cosmic view somehow reflected the traditional Orthodox notion of the salvation as a cosmic reality.[88]

Finally, one aspect typical of the Catholic theological tradition was also found in the above-mentioned statement that 'even a longing for the Eucharist is communion with Christ'.[89] This comforting perspective greatly resembles Western theological reasoning regarding spiritual communion, and it is no wonder that similar questions and theological notions can be seen on different confessional grounds.

> Spiritual communion means a conscious longing to receive Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar when there is no possibility to commune. In this manner, a Christian can uphold and strengthen his or her relationship to the redeemer in all conditions of life.[90]

Similar problems gave impetus to like reasoning in different religious contexts.



Vaccin

Vaccinkonspirationsteorin är något äldre än munskyddsteorin. Motstånd mot vaccination är lika gammalt som själva vaccinationen men har återuppstått på grund av sociala medier och Internet. Nästan alla medicinska behandlingar har en risk kopplad till dem. Med vaccination måste vi dock överväga risken för andra såväl som oss själva. Att sprida en sjukdom genom att vägra bli vaccinerad är andligt väldigt farligt. Hur ska vi svara inför Gud vid den yttersta domen om våra gärningar har orsakat att andra blivit allvarligt sjuka, fått lida och dött? Den Ortodoxa kyrkan motsätter sig inte vaccination – och det har den aldrig gjort.

35

De flesta antivaccinationsteorier har något med mikrochips och Bill Gates att göra. Vissa inkluderar också antisemitiska element. Dessa

Figure 8.4 Excerpt from a parish leaflet opposing conspiracy theories in Sweden. This figure presents an excerpt of a Swedish Orthodox phenomenon: a parish leaflet with priestly debate publicly confronting conspiracy theories—which obviously had become if not prevalent, at least known in the parish. The text emphasises that the Orthodox Church does not oppose vaccinations, and denotes microchips, Bill Gates, and antisemitism as elements of these theories. Anders Åkerstöm, Vad ska vi tro om coronaviruset, vaccin och 'vilddjurets märke'? In *Ortodoxt kyrkoliv*. Utgiven med välsignelse från H.E. Metropoliten Kyprianos av Oropos och Fili. Årgång 33, 2020, pp. 32–38, esp. pp. 35–36.

Comparison of the Two Neighbouring Countries

'In this I think that the Orthodox churches have been a bit 'under the radar' in comparison to those churches more at home in Sweden. They have been more restrictive and followed the restrictions'.[91]

A brief comparison of the data from the two neighbouring countries shows firstly a great similarity in terms of questions, positions, and priestly, pastoral reflection of the situation. Since the total number of informants was only nine, it is impossible to draw any meaningful generalisations: the data reveal individual yet, simultaneously, surprisingly communal patterns of thought and action. Some differences might loom in the background. I suggest that the prominent immigrant situation versus a historical position as the second state or folk church may become visible even in a small amount of data. Finnish priests seemed to emerge in their own reflection more as actors in local and nationwide state and communal governance.

'This has to do also with our Finnish context that is so strongly connected to legislation'.[92] In Sweden, a more pluralistic position could be deciphered—and with questions related more directly to immigration.[93]

'I've grown up in Sweden, I have faith in that state officials don't want to harm me',[94] one Swedish informant could point out in a somewhat frustrated tone. And in Sweden priests had to encounter not only the pandemic and its effect, but also different conspiracy theories concerning the pandemic.[95] They can be interpreted as manifesting mistrust and doubt towards state and health officials.[96] These theories have most likely not been totally absent in the Finnish Orthodox realm, even if they do not feature in these data.

As if diametrically opposing the parish members' mistrust of authorities as expressed in Sweden, one Finnish interviewee emerged as an administrator who had the obligation to respond to juridical questions concerning the rights of the people, especially freedom of assembly and freedom of religion, to ensure they were properly realised during pandemic restrictions. In Finland, parish members could question state officials' decisions and ask their priest to act for them.[97] However, as stated above, the small amount of data allows only preliminary observations. More comprehensive research is needed regarding these aspects.

Altogether, the local priests in both countries had to mediate between the church (patriarchate—diocese—parish), the state, health officials, regional state administrative agencies, and local parish members as the one celebrating the Divine Liturgy—even as streamed and without a physically present congregation during lockdown. In both countries priestly anxiety, worries, and a deep care for both people and the continuity of the liturgical tradition could be detected. Finally, some of the new or revived habits were reflected on in the data. Could it be possible to administer the Eucharist without the spoon also in the pandemic-free future?[98]

Conclusion and Methodological Reflection

I started this research by asking how Orthodox priests in Finland and Sweden have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of pastoral practical solutions and theological reasoning. What problems became prominent, and what solutions or interpretations have been developed? What theological perspectives and questions became discussed or debated and how? I also wanted to focus on how people's experiences of the church as community and fellowship have been affected by restriction in the priests' view. One focus was how lived Orthodoxy was shaped during the pandemic. The data consisted of eight research interviews online with nine informants, examined through qualitative thematic content analysis. This small sample did not allow for generalisations but opened up deep perspectives on the lives and worlds of the informants.

The main results were that priestly lives and practices were radically changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns and worries emerged, and problems had to be solved. The informants demonstrated a deep concern to protect peoples' lives and health. Pastoral counselling, communication, and togetherness had to be reconfigured—and it was troublesome even, and sometimes especially with digital

solutions. Sacramental life and communion with parish members became weaker. Finally, the entire Tradition of Church seemed to be under reconsideration, as theological and practical problems had to be solved, especially concerning the meaning and worship and the celebration of the Mystery of the Eucharist. Considerations concerning the continuity of the Tradition became current as informants pondered church life during and after the crisis.

In their multiple relationships, the priests had to act as sacramental and pastoral experts, and as administrative officials related to Patriarchate, local bishop and bishops' council, health officials, and legal and governmental actions and regulations. Their lived Orthodoxy as institutional objects was shaped in these multiple relationships.

Altogether, in the crisis human bodies appeared 'at the intersection of culture with the material and natural world'.[99] The pandemic made this embodiment crucially visible, and the bodies of the priests appeared at the intersection of the micro-level of religious practices and the cultural and institutional structures defining them and shaping them—while being shaped themselves.

Edgell wrote how 'at the individual level, the meaning of religious identities may vary a great deal, and religion's influence on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and actions may also vary across time or social location'.[100] This seems self-evident, but as far as this data is concerned, the outcomes and responses of the informants were remarkably similar with only small variation. Clearly, institutional priestly Orthodoxy appears as a coherent and relatively uniform set of institutional objects and practices. Lived and institutional merge—most likely more than in the case of parish members. But also this aspect calls for more comprehensive research.

'In the moment of institution, belief matters and is material. Instituting entails objectification'.[101] This idea of Friedland and Arjaliès fits perfectly to the multiple material-spiritual conglomerations that lived Orthodoxy consists of—starting with icons, touching, and kissing, and continuing all the way to the Mysteries and even the Eucharistic spoon that became crucially significant during the pandemic. Moreover, these authors state that 'institutional objects are icons whose institutional meaning depends upon their deployment in valuation process, not idols located in individual selves'.[102] This definition is especially functional in the context of this research for several reasons. Institutional objects understood and defined as communal icons can easily be used to point out the idiosyncratic character of lived priestly Orthodoxy. As institutional objects, their iconicity was grounded in their multiple roles and positions and the fundamentally visible and social character of their habitus. How that could be maintained during the pandemic was a crucial question.

Obviously, lived religion becomes lived institution. Regarded from a theological perspective it is evident that these men see their lives and actions within an ecclesiastical and sacramental frame. They live priesthood with their parish members, as leaders, as experts, as co-passionate and concerned people. Lived religion for them is also lived institution, living in the Tradition.

'Locked doors slammed against the very essence of the Church[103] —but they could not hinder the interviewed priests to figure out ways of reaching out to their people.

Notes

1 Interview 1. X. X. 28 April 2021, "'låsta dörrarna slår mot kyrkans själva väsendet." All interviews transcribed and, in the author's private archive.

2 See: Elias Halswanter, 'Arznei der Unsterblichkeit? Gottesdienst umd Kommunion in Griechenland zwischen Kirche, Politik, un Pandemie' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 606–608, on the Holy Synod of Greece March 9th, 2020, press release on COVID-19. In it, despite certain hygienic precautions in churches, the communion was seen as a place where it was not possible to be contaminated with the virus. This view was opposed by state and medical authorities. This statement was repeated in the March 10th encyclical. The Body and Blood of Christ could not become a means of sickness. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate emphasised in its' March 11th statement respect for medical knowledge without engaging into discussion on the doctrinal aspect of the issue. Its line of action was followed by certain local churches. On the lockdowns and closing of churches in Greece in 2020 and gradual opening, see pp. 609–13, 616–22.

3 Johan Bastubacka, 'Ortodoksien pyhät tekstit' in J. Jokiranta, & N. Nikki (eds.), *Kirjakääröistä digiraamattuun: Pyhän tekstin idea, muoto ja käyttö*, Helsinki: Suomen Eksegeettinen seura, 2021, pp. 14–17.

4 Juha Malmisalo, 'In Pursuit of the Genuine Christian Image: Erland Forsberg as a Lutheran Producer of Icons in the Fields of Culture and Religion' Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Diss., 2005, p. 133, and esp. footnote 609 that informs that in Svenska Kyrkans Årsbok 1965, 191, several Orthodox communities were presented for the reader, e.g., the Estonian Orthodox Church, 'Finska ortodoxa församlingen i Sverige', and 'Grekisk-ortodoxa Kristi Förklarings församling'. Svenska Kyrkans Årsbok 1966, 172, stated that the total number of Greek Orthodox was about 20,000–25,000 people, and half of them were refugees from Eastern Europe.

5 Currently, in Sweden there are numerous Orthodox and Eastern Christian communities, basically all of them with immigrant background and organised according to their national legacies and respective patriarchates. See Ortodoxa och österländska kyrkor, 17 April 2022, https://www.skr.org/kristen-tro/kyrkorna/ortodoxa-kyrkor/.

6 Marie Demker, Yvonne Leffler, & Ola Sigurdson, 'Introduction. How Gloomy Is Sweden at the Millennium?' in M. Demker, Y. Leffler & O. Sigurdson (eds.), *Culture, Health, and Religion at the Millennium Sweden Unparadised,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, esp. 2.

7 Laki ortodoksisesta kirkosta 10.11.2006/985 [The Finnish Law on the Orthodox Church of Finland].

8 See Nancy Ammerman, 'Rethinking Religion: Toward a Practice Approach' *American Journal of Sociology* 126, no. 1, July 2020, pp. 6–51, p. 9, 'religion, like all social practice, must be understood as both structured and emergent, habitual and agentic'. 'All social practice, I will argue, is characterized by embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, and narrative structuring. What distinguishes religious practice, in turn, is a seventh dimension, a spiritual dimension that invokes direct or indirect (institutionalized) connection to something that is "more than" everyday reality'. 'A practice based study of religion gives sociologists tools for analyzing what people are doing when they say they are doing religion, as well as what they are doing when their culture, their history, or their laws complicate the use of that term'. On the concept of lived religion, see also pp. 10–11, 19–32, and analysis by Kim Knibbe & Helena Kupari, 'Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2, 2020 esp., p 164 on the concept of everyday religion.

9 Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, 'Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2, 2020, p. 167.

10 Penny Edgell, 'A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions' *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, 2012, pp. 247–65, esp. p. 255.
11 Described concisely regarding Finland, e.g., by Maria Takala-Roszczenko, 'Kirkkokuorolaiset ja koronapandemia keväällä 2020: Raportti ortodoksisille kirkkokuoroille suunnatusta kyselystä' *Ortodoksia* 61, 2021, pp. 100–19, esp. pp. 100–1. As for the Swedish measures of the Folkhälsomyndigheten (the Public Health Agency of Sweden), they are carefully chronologically reported in När hände vad under pandemin? 18 April 2022, https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/folkhalsomyndighetens-arbete-med-covid-19/nar-hande-vad-under-pandemin/.
12 Valtioneuvoston asetus valmiuslain 86, 88, 93–95 ja 109 §:ssä säädettyjen toimivaltuuksien käyttöönotosta 17.3.2020, 125/2020 [Finnish State decree on the introduction of the Emergency Powers Act].
13 John A. McGuckin, 'Divine Liturgy, Orthodox' in McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011a, pp. 190–95.
14 On the characteristic Orthodox liturgical view of the Church, see Tamara Grdzelidze, 'Church – Orthodox Ecclesiology' in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 128–29.
15 See Elias Haslwanter, 'Arznei der Unsterblichkeit? Gottesdienst und Kommunion in Griechenland zwischen Kirche, Politik, und Pandemie' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 603–632, esp. 613; Alexander Vasyutin, 'Die Corona-Pandemie als eine neue Herausforderung für die Russiche orthodoxe Kirche' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 641–46; Daniejel Cvjetković, 'Short Overview of the Situation at the Time of the Pandemic (COVID-19) in Serbian Orthodox Chruch' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 656–57.
16 E.g., Anders Åkerström, Ortodoxt Kyrkoliv 33 / 2020, pp. 2–3. 'Under detta märkliga år har vi sett många självutnämnda experter även i kyrkliga sammanhang. Personer som utan någon som helst utbildning, erfarenhet eller välsignelse från andlig fader påstår sig veta allt om epidemiologi, virologi, vaccinforskning och vår Kyrkas eskatologi för att de sett filmer på Internet som sår konspirationsteorier, osäkerhet om vad som är sant, 'fake news' och skapar 'filterbubblor'. Aldrig tidigare har jag som präst tvingats till att svara på vad Kyrkans anser om detta eller vad jag personligen tycker'. Ortodoxt Kyrkoliv 33 / 2020, 'Vad ska vi tro om coronaviruset, vaccin och 'vilddjurets märke'? Tror vi verkligen på en barmhärtig Gud som låter oss luras att acceptera Antikrist genom medicinsk behandling?' pp. 32–41.
17 Ortodoksinen kirkko Suomessa, 17 April 2022, https://ort.fi/tutustu-ortodoksiseen-kirkkoon/ortodoksinen-kirkko-suomessa.
18 Ortodoxa och österländska kyrkor, 17 April 2022, https://www.skr.org/kristen-tro/kyrkorna/ortodoxa-kyrkor/.
19 See Appendix 1.
20 The ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity were followed. See Advice and Materials, Guidelines, 20 April 2022, The Finnish National Bord on Research Integrity, https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials.
21 See, e.g., Pentti Moilanen & Pekka Räihä, 'Merkitysrakenteiden tulkinta' in Raine Valli (ed.), *Ikkunoita tutkimusmetodeihin 2, Näkökulmia aloittelevalle tutkijalle tutkimuksen teoreettisiin lähtökohtiin ja analyysimenetelmiin*, Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus, 2018.
22 Tamara Grdzelidze, 'Church – Orthodox Ecclesiology' in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 128–29; Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Orthodox Theology' in Ian A. McFarland (ed.),

The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011a, pp. 358–60; Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Contemporary Orthodox Theology' in Ian A. McFarland (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011b, p. 145.

23 Moilanen and Räihä, 'Merkitysrakenteiden tulkinta'. Unlike the oft-used qualitative research tradition in which subcategories are organised into larger units and hierarchical levels, I decided to apply a more linear approach in which certain themes appear and disappear in different interview data, and their relationships form the structures that enable answering the research questions. This approach is not unrelated to phenomenography and its outcome spaces but can be seen as a free modification of that qualitative approach. See Jari Metsämuuronen, *Tutkimuksen tekemisen perusteet ihmistieteissä: tutkijalaitos*, Helsinki: International Methelp, 2011, pp. 240–42.

24 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021.

25 Interview 5. X. X. 24 May 2021 – email interview.

26 Interview 4. X. X. 21 May 2021.

27 Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.

28 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

29 Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

30 Interview 1. X. X. 28 April 2021; Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021; Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021; Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.

31 Regional State Administrative Agencies, 23 January 2022, https://avi.fi/en/regional-state-administrative-agencies; När hände vad under pandemin?, 18 April 2022, https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittskydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/folkhalsomyndighetens-arbete-med-covid-19/nar-hande-vad-under-pandemin/.

32 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

33 Daniejel Cvjetković, 'Short Overview of the Situation at the Time of the Pandemic (Covid-19) in Serbian Orthodox Chruch' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, p. 651. And later the passing away of the Serbian Patriarch Irinej, see COVID-19: Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Irinej dies, *BBC News*, 20 November 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55013132.

34 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021. See also, Second Senior Bishop Dies of Covid-19, *Ekatherimini*, 29 December 2020, https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/260699/second-senior-bishop-dies-of-covid-19/.

35 Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021.

36 Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.

37 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021 This was relevant in Finland, as the local Catholic community was compared to the Finnish Orthodox Church. However, when these opinions are compared to the local Catholic webpage '"Uutisia seurakunnasta"', starting from the statement and instructions by Vicar Jean Claude Kabeza 21 March 2020, it is evident that Catholic parish members were meticulously instructed to remain at home during lockdown, and churches were open only for private prayer. Screened masses could be followed at home. Later in the springtime of 2020, the lockdown was seized, and controlled participation in masses was again possible. See Uutisia seurakunnasta, 20 April 2022, https://henrik.katolinen.fi/uutisia-seurakunnasta/category/koronavirus. However, it is common knowledge that in certain parishes, masses were celebrated all the time in small groups. In Sweden, similar comparisons between different churches were found especially in Interview 8.

38 Interview 1. X. X. 28 April 2021; Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021; Interview 4. X. X. 21 May 2021; Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021; Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.

39 See: Confession [the Mystery of Repentance], 20 April 2022, *Orthodoxwiki*. https://orthodoxwiki.org/Confession#General_Confession.
‘Frequency of confession varies by jurisdiction, parish, priest, and penitent. Some follow the ancient practice of confessing during the fasting periods. Others confess monthly or even before every time they wish to receive communion’. On the contemporary Finnish realisation of the mystery, see Kirkon sakramentit eli mysteeriot, 21 February 2019, http://kehitys.ort.fi/kirkkotutuksi/kirkon-sakramentit-eli-mysteeriot.
40 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
41 Ibid.
42 See: Poikkeusjärjestelyjä koronaviruksen varalta 11.03.2020, 20 April 2022, *Webpages of the Finnish Orthodox Chruch*, https://ort.fi/uutishuone/2020-03-11/poikkeusjarjestelyja-koronaviruksen-varalta ‘In all parishes a practice in which the Eucharist is dispensed with spoons made of wooden fibers is to be realized. These spoons are then burned [after the Eucharist]’ (transl. JB).
43 Cyrillus Hierosolymitanus, ‘Tou en Hagiois Patros Hēmōn Kyrillou Hierosolymōn Archiepiskopou ta heuriskomena panta’, Jacques-Paul Migne & Antoine Augustin Touttée (eds.), *S. P. N. Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Hierosolymitani opera quæ exstant omnia*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1984, p. 1125; B. Taft, ‘Byzantine Communion Spoons: A Review of the Evidence’ *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1996–01–01, Vol. 50, esp. 238. According to Taft, lay communion with the participants’ own hands started to fade away in the seventh century and, finally, in the middle of the eleventh century, spoon communion was commonly adopted to the Byzantine Eucharistic worship. On the Finnish tradition of the Liturgy of St. James, see: Romanos Pyrrö, *Papin käsikirja, Pyhän apostoli Jaakobin liturgia*, 2008, https://www.ortodoksi.net/images/8/86/Jaakobin_liturgia_slaaviksi.pdf.
44 Yet, they were anonymously pointed out in Interview 8.
45 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021.
46 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021 and esp. Interview 7. X. X. 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.
47 Kimmo Ketola, ‘Religion och kulturomvandling’ in Hanna Salomäki, Maarit Hytönen, Kimmo Ketola, Veli-Matti Salminen, & Jussi Sohlberg (eds.), *Religion till vardags och fest*, kyrkans forskningscentrals publikationer 135 / Evangelisk-lutherska kyrkan i Finland 2016–2019, 2020, pp. 12–44.
48 Tamara Grdzelidze, ‘Church – Orthodox Ecclesiology’ in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 128–29, the Eucharist understood as the core of being the Church and as the prime continuous vehicle in being constantly integrated to this koinonia, or community.
49 Esp. Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
50 The Spiritual Communion, Prayer, *The Vatican News*, April 20 2022, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/prayers/the-spiritual-communion.html; Hengellinen kommuunio, 20 April 2022, *Katolinen kirkko Suomessa*, https://katolinen.fi/rukouksia/hengellinen-kommuunio/.
51 Home Eucharist or virtual Eucharist was realised during the pandemic by certain Protestant denominations. See the discussion in Frida Mannerfelt, Nattvard online? Här är fyra teologiska nej tack och fyra ja. *Kyrkans tidning* 7 April 2020, https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/teologi/nattvard-online-har-ar-fyra-teologiska-nej-tack-och-fyra-ja.
52 ‘även en längtan efter eukaristin är en delaktighet i Kristus’. Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
53 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021; Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021.
54 This feeling or uncomfortableness of communing with the divine through digital means somehow echoes both the age-old Orthodox emphasis of corporeality in worship and, interestingly, the distinction that Metso figured out regarding ‘iconic symbols’ and the all-important sacramental ‘true presence’ in Nicolas Cabasilas’ theology. Iconic

presentation is, for the Orthodox, significant, but it cannot replace or be substitute to the true presence. See Pekka Metso, *Divine Presence in the Eucharistic Theology of Nicholas Cabasilas*, Joensuu: Itä-Suomen yliopisto, Diss., 2010, pp. 63, 70, 98, 189–190.

55 On the all-important Orthodox notion of the Incarnation, God assuming humanity and joining it into the Divinity, see John A. McGuckin, 'Incarnation (of the logos)' in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 338–340.

56 Interview 7, the Coptic interview data (Interview 8) featured a very strong emphasis on the need to communicate the meaning of the Eucharist to the laity.

57 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

58 On the influence of Schmemann, see Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann, in the webpages of *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary*, 22 April 2022, https://www.svots.edu/content/protopresbyter-alexander-schmemann.

59 Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, Paul Kachus transl., Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988, p. 83. 'The Great Litany bestows on us, reveals the prayer of the Church, or, still better, *the Church as prayer*, as precisely the "common task", in its full cosmic and universal extent'. Concerning his ideas on understanding liturgical theology, see Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, Translated from Russian by Ashleigh E. Moorehouse, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003, pp. 16–19, 22.

60 Interview 1. X. X. 28 April 2021; Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021; Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021; Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

61 Esp. Int. Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.

62 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021; Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021.

63 See: Angela McFarlane, *Authentic Learning for the Digital Generation: Realising the Potential of Technology in the Classroom*, Oxfordshire, UK, New York, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 1, 'The generation born since 2000 has experienced childhood in a very different world from that of their parents and teachers. This 'digital generation' are growing up, live and will work in a world where digital technologies are truly ubiquitous. … These technologies are changing the way we communicate, create and share knowledge, consume information, present ourselves to our immediate circle and the wider world, shop and play'.

64 Heidi Campbell, 'Introduction, Studying Jewish Engagement with Digital Media and Culture' in Heidi Campbell (ed.), *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–15.

65 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021.

66 Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021.

67 Esp. Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021.

68 On the concept of tradition and its different dimensions, see John A. McGuckin, 'Tradition' in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011c, pp. 599–602.

69 Johan Bastubacka, 'Ortodoksien pyhät tekstit' in J. Jokiranta & N. Nikki (eds.), *Kirjakääröistä digiraamattuun: Pyhän tekstin idea, muoto ja käyttö*, Helsinki: Suomen Eksegeettinen seura, 2021, pp. 299–300, 307–9.

70 Nancy Ammerman, 'Rethinking Religion: Toward a Practice Approach' *American Journal of Sociology* 126, no. 1, July 2020, pp. 6–51, esp. p. 13.

71 Int. 2. Concerning the Finnish practice on Eucharistic spoons, see Poikkeusjärjestelyjä koronaviruksen varalta 11.03.2020, 20 April 2022, Webpages of the Finnish Orthodox Chruch, https://ort.fi/uutishuone/2020-03-11/poikkeusjarjestelyja-koronaviruksen-varalta.

72 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021.

73 Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 – 2 interviewees.
74 Kirkon sakramentit eli mysteeriot, 21 February 2019, http://kehitys.ort.fi/kirkkotutuksi/kirkon-sakramentit-eli-mysteeriot, '"After the Eucharist and the prosphora those who communed congratulate each other by [the three traditional] kisses saying "'for the health of the soul and of the body"'. The greeting is answered with words for the glory of God'."'. Transl. JB.
75 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
76 Similar questions feature, e.g., in the article by Haslwanter. See Elias Haslwanter, 'Arznei der Unsterblichkeit? Gottesdienst und Kommunion in Griechenland zwischen Kirche, Politik, und Pandemie' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 603–632; 'Wenn gesagt wird, durch die Kommunion könne keine Krankheit übertragen werden, dann werde dadurch die materielle Seite von Brot und Wein ignoriert oder vom Wirken der Gottheit vollständig absorbiert'. p. 630.
77 The only bishop who took part in the interviews emphasised the continuity of the tradition in the difficult situation: 'People come and patiently wait outside the churches and stay to serve their spiritual needs. However, the positive thing in all this difficult situation is that we remained open and quenched the spiritual thirst of the people in our areas of responsibility, while the Holy Sacraments were also performed normally'. Interview 5. X. X. 24 May 2021 – email interview.
78 Elias Haslwanter, 'Arznei der Unsterblichkeit? Gottesdienst und Kommunion in Griechenland zwischen Kirche, Politik, und Pandemie' in Hans-Jürgen Feulner (ed.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr?: Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2020, pp. 603–632, esp. p. 630.
79 Interview 2. X. X. 30 April 2021.
80 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021.
81 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 On the Orthodox understanding of the sacrament of priesthood, see George E. Demacopoulos, 'Priesthood' John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 456–458.
85 Roger Friedland and Diane-Laure Arjaliès, 'Putting Things in Place: Institutional Objects and Institutional Logics' Forthcoming in M. Lounsbury M and M. Smets *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, ed. 2020, p. 10.
86 Ibid., pp. 26–27.
87 Esp. Interview 6. X. X. 27 May 2021; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
88 'The purpose of the church is to restore the fallen humanity and thereby reconcile the whole creation to God. …The divine economy of salvation is the foundational principle of the church. The mystery of human salvation leads to the mystery of the salvation of the whole creation which is God's ultimate goal'. Tamara Grdzelidze, 'Church – Orthodox Ecclesiology' in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 124–125.
89 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
90 Hengellinen kommuunio, 20 April 2022, Katolinen kirkko Suomessa, https://katolinen.fi/rukouksia/hengellinen-kommuunio/, transl. JB.
91 Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
92 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021.
93 All interviews, and esp. Interview 7. X. X 7 June 2021 concerning the Finnish church–state relationship.
94 Interview 4. X. X. 21 May 2021.

95 Ibid. See also Anders Åkerstöm, Vad ska vi tro om coronaviruset, vaccin och 'vilddjurets märke'? in Ortodoxt kyrkoliv. Utgiven med välsignelse från H.E. Metropoliten Kyprianos av Oropos och Fili. Årgång 33, 2020, pp. 32–38.
96 On the selection of different conspiracy theories and their right-wing connections in the United States, see Julia R. DeCook, 'COVID-19 and the Radical Right: Conspiracy, Disinformation and Xenophobia' in Tamir Bar-On & Bàrbara Molas (eds.), *Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic by the Radical Right: Scapegoating, Conspiracy Theories and New Narratives*, Stuttgart, Germany: Ibidem Verlag, 2020, pp. 119–122. These aspects seem also relevant in the circulation of these ideas in the Nordic countries.
97 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021.
98 Interview 3. X. X. 7 May 2021; Interview 8. X. X. 10 June 2021.
99 Nancy Ammerman, 'Rethinking Religion: Toward a Practice Approach' *American Journal of Sociology* 126, no. 1, July 2020, pp. 6–51, esp. p. 15.
100 Penny Edgell, 'A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38, 2012, pp. 247–65, esp. p. 258.
101 Roger Friedland and Diane-Laure Arjaliès, 'Putting Things in Place: Institutional Objects and Institutional Logics' Forthcoming in M. Lounsbury M and M. Smets *Research in the Sociology of Organizations,* ed. 2020, p. 30.
102 Ibid., p. 45.
Institutional Objects and Institutional Logics' Forthcoming in M. Lounsbury M and M. Smets Research in the Sociology of Organizations, ed. 2020, p. 45
103 Interview 1. X. X. 28 April 2021.

Appendix 1. Example of one invitation letter crafted for emails to Orthodox priests

Kristus är uppstånden!

Ärade Fader,

Jag deltar i ett internationellt projekt i ledningen av doktor Tornike Metreveli i Lund. Projektet utforskar Covid-19 epidemins olika effekter på det ortodoxa gudstjänstlivet. Just för tillfället håller jag på att skriva en vetenskaplig artikel om epidemin i Finland och Sverige och intervjua präster som has åskådat de problem, utmaningar och sorger som sjudomen har fört med sig.

In de korta (30–60 minuters) intervjuer som jag förverkligar, har jag enbart några få frågor som jag ville ställa till några utvalda ortodoxa präster i båda länderna: 1) Vad som hände i församlingarna speciellt med tanke på liturgi när epidemin började? 2) Hurdana problem som uppkom i församlingarna? 3) Vilka diskussioner har varit relevanta?

Artikeln kommer att publiceras i en internationell vetenskaplig volym. Vill man delta anonymt, är det också möjligt. Och man kan alltid i vilket skede som helst dra sig bort från forskningen.

Jag frågar vänligen om du ville delta i en intervju via Zoom på någon tid som passar dig?

Med vänliga påskhälsningar,

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