

Editorial

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The churches faced an unprecedented situation under the coronavirus crisis: a demonstrable increase in demand for religious participation and increasingly restrictive state regulations concerning public hygiene. How did they respond? What effects did those restrictions have on religious practice? This Euxeinos joint special issue with Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West is dedicated to understanding these perplexing dynamics from multidisciplinary perspectives. First, the contributions address the nature of epistemological conflicts between religious institutions and state authorities about covid protocols. Second, the chapters examine teleological underpinnings justifying religious behavior and ritualistic practice. Thirdly, the contributions take a closer look at certain eschatological questions caused by the global pandemic and underlying theological interests influencing institutional responses.

Against this background, the contributions focus on dimensions of institutional and religious practices. For example, Cyril Hovorun shows how at the earlier stage of the pandemic, the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod responded to the global pandemic mainly in compliance with the Kremlin's policies. However, both the rhetoric and the behavior of the church varied on the level of individual bishops. When the Russian state authorities abstained from strong public defiance of violations of Covid protocols, various bishops openly criticized restrictive measures.

Tymofii Brik's contribution shows how inter-denominational divergencies and teleological differences between the Orthodox churches in Ukraine shaped contradictory religious responses to the state-imposed regulations. Most church leaders from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) were eager to keep worship going, while the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) leadership took a more restrained position and advocated – in line with the state – following regulations. Thus, as Brik's argument goes, power struggles for the status in the state policy shaped how churches responded to the coronavirus pandemic. In contrast, original data from the Gradus app survey demonstrates that urban Ukraine primarily objected to highly contagious religious practices (e.g., communion from the same spoon, kissing the priest's hands).

Milan Vukomanovic focuses on Serbia and its extraordinary constellation manifesting itself with an initial denial of coronavirus on behalf of Serbian Orthodox Church's clerical elites and a consequential and gradual acceptance of the deadly character of coronavirus only after the loss of the three bishops, including Patriarch

Irinej, to the fatal disease. Examining closely the link between the political interests of Serbia's ruling elites in obtaining religious support for political decisions, Vukomanovic's article asks whether the government-church inconsistencies caused the spread of the virus at a high pace. Similar observations are provided in Metreveli's article on Georgian Orthodox Church. Metreveli explains the strong influence of the GOC on corona regulations by its hegemonic status on the religious market. Evidence presented in Metreveli's article shows how churches objected to the scientific epistemologies at various phases of the covid-19 outbreaks in Georgia and how they continued highly contested religious services in defiance of sanitary regulations. As Metreveli's article shows, the Georgian government took an accommodative approach to the increasingly demanding church assertions to hold Easter liturgy despite the risky character of those services.

Moving away from the Orthodox Christian realm but still focussing on the role of the church as a protector of the national heritage, Grzegorz Ignatowski deals with Poland and the Catholic Church's response to the corona crisis. The state-church relations were not oppositional, and the Catholic Church acted as a religious hegemon in a monopoly situation. However, while one might expect an alignment with the government's coronavirus responses, similar to the Georgian or Serbian churches, Ignatowski shows that scientific epistemologies and religious practices result in various situational contradictions (if not conflicts) in the Catholic hierarchy. Moreover, Ignatowski asserts that state-church relations and religious pluralism play a crucial role in shaping how religious organizations respond to crises. Lastly, the contribution by Thomas Schlag examines the impacts of coronavirus on religious practices in the German-speaking world. Based on the survey sample of 6500 pastors, predominantly from Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, Schlag's article shows how clergy perceived a move to online practices. Unlike Orthodox churches in Russia, Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, for example, the churches practiced online sacraments (such as digital communion) and accepted this medium as optimal for the circumstances.

Schlag's contribution further brings up teleological questions about the importance of digital literacy as applied to worship and religious practice. Schlag's research raises questions about the future of religious practices after the coronavirus crisis. For example, can we consider the innovative or self-serving interpretation of anti-covid regulations as a new religious practice? Can we envision a more liberalized interpretation of the holy sacraments becoming new recurring practices in the Catholic and Protestant world or beyond it – in the Orthodox Christian realm? Further research shall observe whether the churches might apply online practices temporarily and then abandon them or not.

An adapted German version of the texts is available at <https://g2w.eu/zeitschrift/aktuelle-ausgabe/1781-rgow-3-2021-corona-und-die-kirchen> or in print RGOW 3 / 2021, 49.