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Impacts of the pandemic on the churches

Guest Editor: Tornike Metreveli



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Editorial

by Tornike Metreveli

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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.

Digitalization of Ecclesiastical Practice in the Pandemic

by Thomas Schlag

The paper investigates which digital church formats were developed during the first wave of the Corona pandemic in spring and early summer 2020 in the German-speaking world during, and how pastors experience and assess the accelerated digitalization of church activities. First results of the international CONTOC study indicate a strengthening of participatory structures through the digital worship practice, but also a “top down” staging can also be observed.

Key words: pandemic; coronavirus crisis; digital literacy; religious practices.

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Churches Online in Times of Corona

These questions will be examined in more detail on the basis of the initial results of the so-called CONTOC study (Churches Online in Times of Corona - www.contoc.org) for the contexts of Switzerland and Germany, and here more specifically for the Protestant churches. The CONTOC study is an international ecumenical survey, especially of digital church formats under the conditions of pandemic-related contact and meeting restrictions, related to the first wave in the spring and early summer of 2020. The study was conducted by the chairs of practical theology at the Universities of Zurich, Würzburg and St. Georgen, the Zurich Centre for Church Development (ZKE), the Swiss Pastoral Theological Institute St. Gallen (SPI) and the Social Science Institute of the EKD (SI) and was carried out together with academic and church colleagues from a total of 22 countries.

In the survey period from the end of May to mid-July 2020, a total of just under 6,500 pastors took part in the predominantly quantitative survey consisting of around 50 quantitative questions and an additional five open questions that will enable a qualitative evaluation. Around 5,000 of the pastors were from the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

Looking back at the period from Easter to Pentecost 2020, the participants provided information about their experiences and insights into the fields of worship, pastoral care, education, diaconia and church communication. In addition, they were able to make assessments with regard to their own pastoral role as well as the possible long-term consequences of digital church activities. The responses from these three countries and the associated statistical processing allow us to speak of a representative study, at least for the German-speaking contexts (i.e. excluding French-speaking Switzerland, which also participated, at least on the

Catholic side).

One of the main aims of the study is to ask, on the basis of the results collected, whether and, if so, in what way these will influence both the digital design of church practice and pastoral self-understanding in the longer term. This is linked to the broader question of what possible effects this will have on the structures of church formats, both in the area of congregational work and in the area of church training and continuing education.

In the following, first insights concerning the Protestant churches in Switzerland and Germany, especially on the question of church services, are presented and at the same time connected with practical-theological reflections. Already during the conceptualization of the study, we were aware that the focus on the pastors would only be able to represent a part of the actors of the actually carried out digital activities in the mentioned period. Nevertheless, the quantitative results provide important insights into this practice. Detailed results and interpretations of the CONTOC study will be discussed and published in various conference formats in the course of early 2022.

New Digital Presence: Pros and Cons

From the answers of the participating pastors it becomes clear that before the assembly ban almost 95% of the participants had not offered own digital worship formats. This means that many pastors in Germany and Switzerland have embraced this technical option for their worship activities for the first time during the pandemic – in this sense, one can undoubtedly speak of a kind of “technical” digitalization push. However, whether this will also lead to a quasi “ecclesiastical-cultural” digitalization thrust in the medium and long term will have to be closely observed.

It is clear from the results that around 50% of those who have organized worship services since the beginning of the pandemic have conducted one service per week. Among the various forms, a “service of the word / celebration of the word / sermon service” was carried out by 57% of Swiss and 47% of German pastors, “devotion / spiritual impulse / alternative form” by 59% of Swiss and 65% of German pastors. This already indicates that offering the “classic form” of the Sunday service was not the only, indeed probably not even the prioritized format for many of them. Digital communion services in the period in question were reported by 13% of Swiss pastors, but only 5% of German pastors.

With regard to the concrete experiences with this digital practice, their assessments as well as the possible consequences, the response behaviour shows, on the one hand, a positive perception. On the other hand, some aspects are also met with reservation and scepticism: thus, about 70% of the pastors in both countries are “satisfied or very satisfied with my online forms of worship and their effect”.

Around two thirds of respondents in both countries agree that online forms of worship reach people with whom “we would otherwise have no contact”.

Over half agree with the statement that “online services reach more people than local services”. 67% of the Reformed Swiss and 58% of the German pastors note that through these formats “people with mobile impairments are better reached”. However, it is surprising that only about one third of the pastors agree with the statement “I have adapted my online worship services based on feedback”. In Switzerland 35% and in Germany 45% agree with the statement that they want to “offer more alternative forms of worship for communal celebration and prayer in the future”. It is also interesting to note that for around 60% of those surveyed, the digital services were “developed together with a team”.

A certain sceptical attitude towards digital worship services is reflected in the fact that a two-thirds majority affirm that online forms of worship exclude people “to whom digital media are foreign”. Over 80% agree with the statement that they have “missed the resonance with the congregation (e.g., singing)” in regard to worship. That online forms of worship can “replace communal celebration” is denied by around 90% in both countries. At the same time, more than 80% of all pastors surveyed understand online forms of worship only as a supplementary offer.

With regard to the question of how the understanding of worship has changed in times of Corona (the whole variety of liturgical and worship forms, devotions and impulses was deliberately asked for here), almost 50% in both countries say that traditional worship “has gained in importance for me”, but at the same time 60% each say: “I have discovered new forms of digital presence for worship”. On the other hand, 42% in Switzerland and 52% in Germany are in favour of promoting “digital forms of church community”.

The assessments differ regarding whether new forms of digital presence have been found and whether an authentic expression of one’s own role in digital worship has taken place. 75% of pastors in Switzerland and 70% in Germany agree with the statement: “My role has not changed, only the form of presence. It is interesting that in Switzerland 57% and in Germany 50% report that they have succeeded in “authentically expressing my role in digital worship.” Whether and to what extent one is “very much at the centre of online worship as a person” and thus “the role gains in importance” is answered even less clearly: only about one fifth of the respondents are in favour of such an increase in the importance of the role.

Sustainable Changes of the Classical Formats?

Following these quantitative results, some conclusions can be drawn as to how pastors assess the digitalization processes within the church for their own practice and for the church as a whole:

Among the (interviewed) pastoral staff – in connection with the respective

conditions on site, but also depending on the personal affinity to digital media – a varying degree of digital testing practice occurred, which at the same time clearly went beyond the classical formats of the Sunday service.

An increased problem perception of current church communication (e.g. with regard to the assessment of traditional church services) increasingly led to a turn towards digital formats. Those respondents who have relied on teamwork and the integration of volunteers in the development of digital formats, and who at the same time claim particularly positive experiences, also rely heavily on participatory structures in other areas of community action. Among those (interviewed) pastoral staff who have embraced digital possibilities and assess their effects positively, there is at the same time a high level of interest in future theological reflection and exploration of criteria as well as an increased interest in training and further education offers for the acquisition of digital competences.

Many of the pastors interviewed in the CONTOC study assume that the reach of their digital worship formats is greater than that of the analog formats. Other studies on church practice in the first Corona phase also assume such an increase in reach with regard to the number of clicks. In fact, digital worship services and other proclamation formats are generally accessible to everyone and can reach a potentially larger audience. Such a transformative practice not only opens up wide creative space, but can also unleash creativity and potential for local worship among all those involved in it. Whether this will become a permanent fact, however, cannot be clearly determined at present. In any case, the increase in reach and access numbers does not necessarily result in a change of the classical formats, which actually use the digital media in their innovative possibilities. After all, during the Corona crisis many digital formats have themselves remained more or less “classical”, for example by offering an online format of an offline worship format.

It is also questionable whether digital media favour participatory communities and network-like structures, and thus whether the priesthood of all believers can be realised in a new way. In fact, it can be assumed that digital forms of proclamation by their very character are not to be thought in a linear and frontal way, but in a responsive and participatory way. Whether this has actually occurred through the formats during the first wave of the pandemic cannot be clearly substantiated for the time being against the background of the results of the CONTOC study.

On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that only pastors were integrated into the study, and thus the possible perceptions and participatory activities of other congregational leaders and committed persons as well as the worship participants were not surveyed. At the same time, the data obtained do not allow a precise conclusion as to whether the development dynamics during the first wave really promoted a participatory community character and even network-like structures throughout. For in many services accessible online it could be

observed that communicative interpretative power was not (only) shared, but also often staged “top down” in a digital way. At least in the beginning, the diversity of congregational life was often not represented. Could it be then that through certain pastoral-worship digital forms of communication the mutual congregational exchange about interpretations of reality has even been impaired or stopped? And has the worship orchestration and event dimension thus just not been given adequate space? Behind this is, on the one hand, the much more far-reaching question whether such a common, bodily experienceable overall space can be orchestrated and experienced at all via digital media and, on the other hand, with a view to pastoral self-understanding, what role-presence is claimed and assumed in these cases by pastoral personnel.

It would therefore be necessary to examine which participants were able to experience fellowship during the pandemic in online worship services according to their own assessment and which were not: The hypothesis that these are primarily people who have also frequently participated in offline worship services is obvious. New forms of worship that work with explicitly participatory, interactive elements of communication could indeed gain new reach here. But it is precisely these contexts that need to be analysed in more detail in the future. The analyses and interpretations of the extensive qualitative data material are scheduled for early 2022.

Potentials of Digital Pastoral Innovation

Whether with regard to worship and its pastoral actors a comprehensive digitalization of proclaiming and liturgical action and even a kind of pastoral “digital literacy” has come about or will come about in the future must remain open for the time being in view of the results of the CONTOC study so far.

Without question, these results are highly stimulating, on the one hand, in order to visualize the broadly existing potential for innovation with regard to new forms of worship practice. Among those surveyed, a predominantly positive attitude towards the online forms of communication tried out in Corona times is evident, and thus a high creative potential, which is a good prerequisite for further digitalization of church practice. On the other hand, creative theological reflection and pastoral “digital literacy” are to be promoted much more strongly in the future with regard to worship and professional self-image.

Ultimately, all digital formats raise crucial ecclesiological questions about the meaning of the content of proclaiming and celebrating worship, which are by no means settled even with the highly professional use of technical possibilities. In any case, theologically speaking, the priority goal cannot be to merely increase the reach of worship activities through digital forms of communication.

In addition, the reasons of those respondents who expressed rather skeptical

or distanced opinions about digital worship formats must be intensively explored: Is such skepticism primarily based on a lack of digital literacy, or is it precisely a certain basic theological convictions and “habitual” attitudes that may prevent digital innovation? It will therefore be extremely exciting to explore the relationship between theological and technical competence in the pastoral profession.

Whether the character of the communication of the gospel can be promoted by digital forms and formats in such a way that bodily resonance spaces are opened, in which people can meet each other in an appreciative way, is a central question of theological-professional self-critical reflection that arises. Only under the prerequisite of an intensive process of reflection within the churches can the future designs of digital practice and the transformation processes that become possible with it attain a deep theological meaning.

About the author.

Thomas Schlag, Prof. Dr., Professor of Practical Theology with a focus on Religious Education, Church Theory and Pastoral Theology at the University of Zurich, Chairman of the Board of the Center for Church Development (ZKE) and Director of the Zurich University Research Priority Program (URPP) “Digital Religion(s). Communication, Interaction and Transformation in the Digital Society” (www.digitalreligions.uzh.ch). He has authored numerous books and articles, among which Schlag, Thomas. *Öffentliche Kirche: Grunddimensionen einer praktisch-theologischen Kirchentheorie*. Vol. 5. Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012 is the most cited.

Impacts of the Pandemic on the Georgian Orthodox Church

by Tornike Metreveli

The goal of this article is to examine the nature of interaction between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the state during the pandemic. The article shows how the church's gradual acknowledgement of the deadly character of the virus coincided with a strict adherence to certain highly risky religious practices (such as communion from the same spoon), while the Georgian government's stance in defence of public health was unsystematic and accommodative to the church's pressure.

Key words: Georgian Orthodox Church, coronavirus pandemic, church-state relations

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Codified Hegemony and Public Trust

To understand the Georgian Orthodox Church's responses to the coronavirus (Covid-19), one has to give a quick recap of this organization's status in the Georgian polity and situate that status within the broader context of the interaction between religion and political power. The church's hegemonic status is codified through a legal and even constitutional agreement with the Georgian state.¹ The organization enjoys state funding and uncontested hegemonic status on the religious market, with the overwhelming majority of Georgians adhering to the Orthodox Christian faith. The declared adherence to this religious denomination is reflected in the high authority status and public trust towards its head – Patriarch Ilia Shiolashvili, who rules the GOC since 1979, and who, unlike any politician in the country's history, enjoys a 92% trust rate among the Georgian people.² However, along with various scandals, the trust in the church organization is on the decline. Caucasus Barometer (CB) data showed that among the Orthodox Christians, 70% reported full trust towards the GOC in 2008. This number significantly dropped in 2020³, with 40% stating full trust towards the church.⁴

An important feature of Orthodox Christianity in Georgia is perhaps at first glance theologically counterintuitive but characteristically representative of Eastern Orthodoxy - a certain fusion of religious and national identities. For example, recent surveys showed that 71% of Georgians considered being a parishioner of the GOC "fairly important" or "very important" for being "truly Georgian".⁵ However, the church services of the GOC were weekly attended only by 14% of the total population of Orthodox parishioners. People either visited the

church on special religious holidays (28%), at least once a month (17%), less often (31%), or never (10%) (Ibid).

Georgian Orthodox Church and the Virus

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 Georgian soil following the news on the detection of the Covid-19 in the Chinese Wuhan province (e.g., ban on flights from China was among the first steps, planning, and organization of repatriation process from China). Church's rhetoric evolved from denial of the threat of the coronavirus to skepticism 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 infected with coronavirus himself) 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".⁶ 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".⁷

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 2020, a couple of days after the first confirmed case of the infection on the Georgian territory, the Patriarchate of the GOC 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 as if the Romanian Church, to protect itself from the virus, had permitted to use disposable spoons for communion, which was verified and, as expected, did not turn out to be true. The practice of using a shared spoon for communion has a millennial history. Throughout this time, there have been many cases of spreading various life-threatening infections. In such periods, Orthodox believers were not afraid to partake of the sacrament with a shared spoon; on the contrary, they approached this sanctity even more often because, as we all know, during the sacrament, man receives the holy blood and flesh of Christ, the purifier and healer of soul and flesh. At the same time, for the public worship, the clergy would bring forth ecclesiastical relics: the Gospel, crosses, icons, sacred parts, and conduct liturgies.⁸

Less than a month after this official statement, the Holy Synod of the GOC issued a decree that acknowledged the public health threats caused by the coronavirus but attributed it "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 to its parishioners. Those recommendations covered various themes such as installing audio equipment in churches to conduct outdoor services, respecting healthcare workers' efforts, using disposable cups for an after-communion drink, executing private [at-home] communions for those belonging to risk groups, self-isolating or quarantined individuals, and urged for daily prayers. However, the GOC urged its parishioners not to alter what the Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church considered as a fundamental, foundational, and existential (and highly politicized and publicly debated) - communion from the same spoon. "It is totally unacceptable for church members," stated the decree,

*to doubt the essence of the sacrament of communion by expressing these doubts in refusal to share a common good from the same spoon as a source of transmission of infection.*⁹

Five days after the synodal decree, the GOC made yet another official statement, recommending its parishioners "to maintain 2-meter distance inside the church" and called for priests "to conduct the services, if possible, in the open air." However, the same statement voiced the synod's bewilderment with the ongoing critical public debate about the communion from the same spoon and not "for example, on the possibility of the spread of the virus via public transport (bus, subway), pharmacy or grocery stores."¹⁰ In the Holy Synod's logic, its flock's spiritual needs are equated with society's medical and gastronomical necessities. As the argument goes, for some, medications and public transport are vital means, for others communion and religious needs. Given that people increasingly encountered death and anxiety amidst the pandemic, the demand for religious services increased. Hence, the church considered itself obliged to supply the parishioners' spiritual needs. The same statement categorically denounced those who opposed the millennial practice of sacrament "most of those people in such a position [opposing the shared spoon communion] do not have 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 one another, and whoever denies it denies the Savior!" – stated the Synod of the GOC.¹¹ In searching for theological roots for the GOC's adherence to shared spoon communion, one finds that the Orthodox Churches adopted this practice by the eleventh century. Various forms of communion were practiced by the holy fathers of Orthodox Christianity before eleventh century without a shared spoon. Those practices are still canonically accepted today.¹²

The Georgian government enacted a state of emergency, closed borders and education institutions, and suspended public transportation, leaving only grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, post offices, and banks open.

While the rest of the country was under curfew with all entrances to the five

major cities blocked and the movement of cars prohibited throughout Georgia, the GOC carried out services and moved freely without any obstacles from the law-enforcement.¹³

The rhetoric of the most senior bishops of the GOC echoed earlier sentiments. For example, despite full quarantine being announced in Marneuli, Bolnisi, and Lentekhi municipalities due to confirmed internal coronavirus transmission cases, religious services did not stop. Moreover, most senior bishops continued to downplay the threats of the coronavirus, as the Metropolitan (high-ranking bishop) of Tsageri and Lentekhi Stéphane Kalajishvili stated, “There is always a chance of non-believers getting infected, but when a true believer comes to God to receive communion, nothing bad will happen.” As his argument went,

just because quarantine was announced does not mean that God is abolished because of it. Quarantine is for people, and we are performing liturgy for people because no man can do anything or protect anyone without help from God. Today is the day of Lazare’s resurrection, who was dead for four days before being resurrected. A person died, he reeked of the smell of the dead, and he got resurrected by God. If you do not accept this with faith, it’s your problem because you will have problems later when meeting God. Time will come, and everything you say now will come back to you, and you will wish it was not too late.¹⁴

The Easter celebration and numerous services preceding it coincided with the state of emergency, but the GOC and the Georgian government managed to reach a somewhat paradoxical agreement. On the one hand, the church agreed to follow the recommendations of the Ministry of Health considering maintaining the 2-meter distance inside the building of the church during the service. Moreover, the GOC offered that some churches perform the liturgy in the morning hours to avoid overcrowding in the evening services and move some rituals to weekdays. Other churches initiated wiping the icons with dry tissue (while still allowing parishioners to kiss icons after each other). In the church-state agreement framework, the government spokesperson, Irakli Chikovani, stated that the police would be deployed near churches to ensure curfew and physical distancing rules were followed. The statement of Mr. Chikovani is in sharp contrast to an initial imperative tone of the Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Gakharia, who not long before the church-state agreement stated that the “ban on public gatherings would be enforced universally affecting everything and everyone” (Gakharia in his official Facebook video conference, 09:06min, 2020) – thus responding to journalist’s question whether activities of the GOC could be affected by the state ordinance limiting the gathering of more than ten people.

However, the GOC took responsibility to ensure that worshipers in the church during the late-night service could not leave the building between the curfew hours from 9:00pm to 6:00am. According to the GOC’s spokesperson’s statement, the two sides “agreed that parishioners would come to churches before the

start of the service and leave church premises at 6 am.” Hence, “given the tough situation,” according to the GOC’s speaker, “this is a good deal”.¹⁵ Therefore, the GOC figuratively followed the Covid-19 protocol by maintaining social distancing inside the church building. However, at the same time, paradoxically, it enforced that parishioners remained inside the church building for 9 hours of night service while taking communion from the same spoon. The government figuratively maintained the function of law enforcer yet, allowing unsafe practices in terms of public health.

Public Response

The pandemic situation emerged as a litmus test for the Georgian state’s secular identity, which did not surpass elementary standards. In addition to numerous compromises with the GOC, the government initiated a legal change that would allow the GOC to own 20 hectares of forest surrounding the churches and monasteries, a practice which various local non-governmental organizations interpreted as “discriminatory” to other religions.¹⁶

With growing covid experience and high infection rate per capita, Christmas 2021 (which was celebrated in Georgia on 7 January) was somewhat different in form but similar in content to Easter. The notable difference was that the number of church attendees demonstrably decreased, but the religious practices remained intact: parishioners still kiss icons (which are wiped in some instances), they take communion from the same spoon, and after the sacrament they receive the sweetness (wine dissolved in water) from the shared glass. At the end of the service, the parishioners kiss the cross held in the hand of a priest, in some instances, accept anointing with shared oil and brush, followed by the kissing of the priest’s hand and cross.¹⁷

Various polls showed that the majority of Georgians (60%) deemed the shared-spoon communion risky for contamination of the coronavirus¹⁸. Other polls showed that only 4% of Orthodox Christians in Georgia attended Easter liturgy in 2020 (as opposed to 44% in 2019). 43% of Orthodox Christians disapproved of the GOC’s continued usage of the shared spoon in communion despite the COVID-19 restrictions (33% agreed to the shared spoon practice, while 21% remained undecided).¹⁹

In the proximity of nine months, Georgia moved from “one of the world’s least affected by coronavirus countries”²⁰ to one of the worst in the world per capita²¹, exceeding 263,601 total cases in the time of writing this article. Various clerics were infected and died of coronavirus. Opinions of the clergy will matter, and the implications of the church’s stance on vaccination will determine the scope and scale of the long-term consequences of coronavirus on the church’s status in society and Georgian society’s standing at large. At the moment of writing this article, the GOC’s official stance on vaccination is based on two premises: vaccination should

be voluntary and the GOC shall not campaign/or advocate for it.²²

Despite numerous attempts of individual clerics, especially urban and younger priests, the official statement of the patriarchate of the GOC did not change. The church remained abstained on the vaccination front by neither officially calling the religious population to vaccinate nor rejecting the positive effects of vaccination in the mitigation of virus. Suffice it to state that the Georgian government's vaccination campaign has been inconsistent and unsystematic with several senior state officials and top medical experts sending mixed signals to the population about vaccination. It remains to be seen whether the GOC changes its position depending on the political climate (forthcoming election results) or more importantly the evidential increase in covid-related fatalities. Going beyond preliminary patterns of church-state relations during the pandemic which this article sought to report, the impact of coronavirus on the GOC shall be further measured across time and various institutional and grassroots contexts.

About the author

Tornike Metreveli is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Christianity, Nationalism, and Populism at Lund University. Tornike's most recent publication on how churches were involved in and influenced political transition in Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia. See his new book published with Routledge: *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition*. On the geopolitical reasoning of the Georgian Orthodox Church, see a co-authored article in *Political Geography*, *Spiritual geopolitics of Georgia's territorial integrity*; On the counterintuitive angle of church-state relations in the post-revolutionary Georgia, see *Nationalities Papers* article, *An undisclosed story of roses: church, state, and nation in contemporary Georgia*.

Endnotes

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Church Competition During the Pandemic: the Case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

by Tymofii Brik

The collapse of the USSR resulted in religious revivals in all former republics, including Ukraine. Religion provided security and emotional support. It legitimized political elites, while some churches also offered public goods, substituting the state. With time, religion became a crucial component of the national identities. Despite many similarities to other primely Orthodox countries, Ukraine has been unique in its religious landscape. Several Orthodox jurisdictions have competed for the status of the national church, which allowed religious fragmentation in all regions of Ukraine. This paper shows the importance of religious pluralism in Ukraine during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

Key words: Ukraine, pandemic, religious pluralism, religious supply, church competition

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Introduction

In February 2020, two major and competing Ukrainian Orthodox Churches issued remarkably similar statements regarding the pandemic calling for peace and love of neighbor.¹ Religious leaders of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Ukraine-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) were equally concerned with the process of evacuation of Ukrainians from the Wuhan province, China. The government organized the evacuation and arranged a transfer of the evacuees to healthcare facilities in the small city of Novy Sangary. However, local protestors rioted against hosting 254 Ukrainians who just arrived from China. Witnessing high levels of hostility and clashes with the riot police, leaders of two major Orthodox churches called for peace. They made strong public statements condemning hostilities and calling for mutual aid and support.

Despite this similar response, soon after, their rhetoric would diverge significantly, also polarizing citizens of Ukraine. While the OCU quickly adopted social distancing policies and publicly complied with the government's regulations, the UOC-MP pushed anti-lockdown narratives challenging the government. When did this divergence happen, and what are the consequences of this divergence for religious behavior among Ukrainian believers? These questions are addressed in the article.

Religious Pluralism and Orthodox Competition in Ukraine

Many scholars who studied religion in the post-Soviet region have consistently argued that the Ukrainian religious landscape is exceptionally pluralistic.² Religious pluralism in Ukraine goes beyond denominations and features a competition within the Orthodox church. Several Orthodox jurisdictions have competed for the status of the historically canonical and rightful church of Ukraine while also competing for parishes and political influence. Moreover, statistical models based on datasets from the 1990s to 2010s showed that religious identities and church attendance of Ukrainians were higher in regions with higher Orthodox competition.³

In Ukraine, a country where religion has become a significant part of public political discourses, religious pluralism became a significant part of politics.⁴ It shaped the electoral behavior of Ukrainians and how political elites carefully constructed and updated their narratives.⁵ Therefore, not surprisingly, religious pluralism and the competition between the Orthodox jurisdictions have become one of the most crucial variables which influenced how Ukrainian churches reacted to the pandemic.

To comply or not to comply? That is the Question.

Although the religious landscape of Ukraine is both versatile and dynamic, unfortunately, this paper cannot cover all significant religious groups, including Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, various Protestant churches, and Jewish and Muslim minorities. The two largest Orthodox churches will be compared, namely the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Ukraine-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). These were the largest and most potent Orthodox churches in Ukraine in 2020 – a period when the pandemic unfolded.

The OCU emerged in January 2019 when the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople signed the Tomos (decree of autocephaly), officially recognizing the OCU as a canonical autocephalous Orthodox Church within the territory of Ukraine. This church did not emerge out of nowhere. It amalgamated from two other Orthodox groups that existed in Ukraine since the 1990s and were not in communion with the rest of global Orthodoxy. In contrast, the UOC-MP has long existed in Ukraine with the status of a self-governing church under the Russian Orthodox church's jurisdiction. This status provided international legitimacy and communion with the rest of global Orthodoxy. Moreover, the UOC-MP has been superior in terms of the number of officially registered parishes. When the new OCU emerged, the UOC-MP felt threatened by a forceful merger with the new church. Although a small number of parishes did change the registration, this was relatively marginal. The UOC-MP resisted the idea of the UOC-MP and was engaged in numerous protests and public events mobilizing its members against this perceived threat.

The pandemic crisis hit Ukraine at a moment of religious transformation: the

UOC-MP emerged and thrived for power while the UOC-MP held to its ground and mobilized its adherences for resistance. A balance between these two and between them and the state has influenced how Orthodox churches reacted to the pandemic. In 2020, the OCU was in better shape: (i) polls showed greater support among Ukrainians when compared to other Orthodox churches (ii) the state has recently acknowledged the OCU as the canonical church (even though the presidential administration already had changed in 2020). Therefore, not surprisingly (as demonstrated in what follows), the OCU complied with the governmental regulations of social distancing and stay at home policies. In sharp contrast, the UOC-MP was facing a (largely perceived and exaggerated) threat of extinction. As shown in what follows, the UOC-MP insisted on church attendance and maintaining worship despite the lockdown policies. This observation is consistent with the “club models” of religious behavior⁶. These models show that religious groups use strict regulations to enforce loyalty and promote ties within the group. In simple terms, the UOC-MP double-downed on its strict religious narratives and practices to sustain its congregation.

The differences between the narratives of the OCU and the UOC-MP were particularly salient in March and April 2020 during the preparations to Easter. This celebration is quite special for the Orthodox tradition which demands a necessary presence of people during masses. Therefore, the timing of the pandemic and social distancing could not have been worse for the Orthodox groups. While the OCU largely acted in the spirit of quarantine policies, the UOC-MP has challenged them significantly. On the surface, both churches proposed significant restrictions. They both suggested that icons should not be kissed or touched, that no more than 10 people should visit a church at once, that praying at home is good enough, and that people with symptoms should stay at home. Nevertheless, it was only the OCU that consistently promoted a message that the church should collaborate with the governmental isolation policies. In March and April 2020, the OCU issued various messages suggesting that people should make special prayer corners at their own homes with icons, scriptures, and candles; calling their congregation to stay home; and arguing that staying at home is a great virtue of altruism and spiritual asceticism. In contrast, the UCO-MP was not so consistent. Their officials stated that “they cannot prevent people from visiting churches”, they had systematically refused to acknowledge that some of their monasteries were affected by the Covid-19 eventually closing them for public, and the head of the church Onufryi suggested that only sick people should stay at home arguing that others could attend churches but stay outside and pray outdoors. Moreover, the UCO-MP organized mass cross processions announcing 7,000 participants.

What was the reaction of faithful Ukrainians? To address this question, three polls were executed asking respondents about their religious affiliation and attitudes towards religious practices as well as willingness to attend masses. These

surveys are described below.

Research Design

At first, 1,176 respondents were surveyed on April 8-10 (2020) before Easter. Then 1,831 respondents were surveyed on December 24-28 (2020) before Christmas. Finally, a third poll was conducted among 1,001 respondents on April 24 before Easter in 2021. All surveys were conducted using Gradus, which is the smartphone application designed for quick polling and panel data collection in Ukraine.

Only urban Ukrainians participate in the panel. The results cannot be generalized to rural Ukraine (which is the caveat of this method). Nevertheless, research of religiosity in urban Ukraine is especially valuable in the context of the pandemic. Many offices and factories that were shut down were located in urban places. Furthermore, the UCO-MP organized a series of marches in the large cities Odesa and Dnipro, while other cities as Ternopil or Kyiv witnessed a lockdown of two major temples (Lavra). Religious motives were salient in urban Ukrainian places in all parts of the country. Therefore, urban Ukrainians were exposed to many events and debates around religion.

Respondents were asked whether they approve online liturgies, whether they believe that praying cures the coronavirus, and whether they believe that certain practices should be banned during the pandemic (e.g., church attendance during the religious masses, cross processes, and holy communion from the same spoon). In the first wave (April 8, 2020), only 598 respondents answered the questions about banning some practices. This wave was designed as a survey experiment with randomized exposure to this question. Regarding the other waves, there were no splits of the data.

Results

In what follows, only major Orthodox groups are discussed (the OCU, the UOC-MP, and those respondents who identify with Orthodox Christianity with no partition by patriarchates). Unfortunately, this paper cannot address other religious groups even though they are included in the original sample.

According to Table 1, most Ukrainians in all waves tend to ban practices which are directly associated with body and hygiene practices (kiss priest hand, use shared spoons), then a considerable number of Ukrainians agreed to ban physical attending of rituals (walks, church attendance). However, most Ukrainians remain tolerant to some generic rituals (baptizing a child, attending a memorial service) which has a significant cultural meaning but does not necessarily pose a threat from the virus. Another interesting observation from Table 1 is that at the early stages of the pandemic (wave 1), very few people tolerated religious practices. However, after 6 months (wave 2), and then after 6 more months (wave 3) the

context changed dramatically. A significant share of urban Ukrainians began to tolerate religion.

	2020 April (before Orthodox Easter)	2020 December (Before Orthodox Christmas)	2021 April (Before Orthodox Easter)
Kiss priest hand	88.3%	74.5%	75.0%
Shared spoon	86.4%	71.8%	73.9%
Walk with a cross	80.2%	49.9%	53.3%
Attend church masses	77.6%	48.0%	48.9%
Attend church celebrations	76.2%	46.8%	45.4%
Celebrate church festivities at home with large groups	68.9%	31.9%	36.0%
Gather for memorial service	67.1%	30.6%	34.4%
Baptise children	65.2%	18.7%	22.1%

Table 1. Percentage of respondents who agree that certain practices should be banned during the pandemic

Figures 1 to 3 describe attitudes towards the most controversial practices such as the same spoon communion, church attendance, and cross processions. These data show that the adherents of the UOC-MP displayed a stronger attachment to religious rituals. In contrast, members of the OCU were more likely to disprove these rituals. Only the first two waves are presented since they capture the trend of increased religious tolerance over time. Many more respondents were critical towards religious practices in wave one than in wave two. However, members of the OCU remained more critical than members of the UOC-MP.

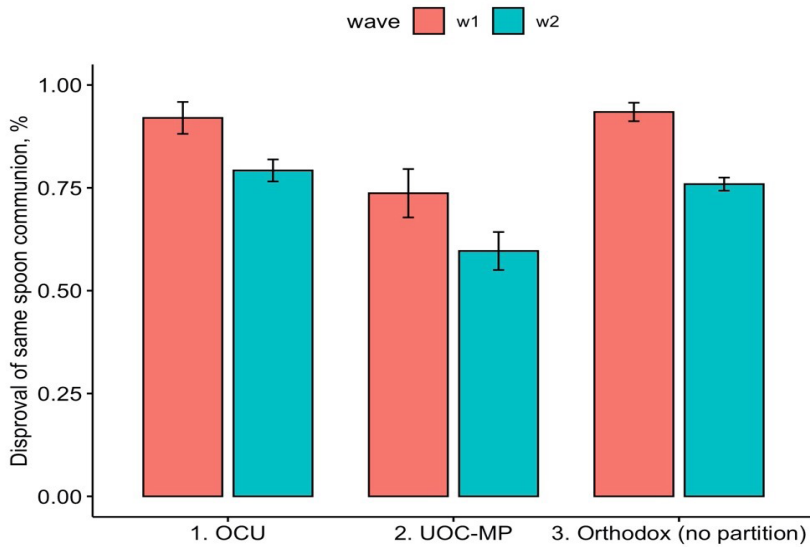


Figure 1. Disproval of the same spoon communion by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).

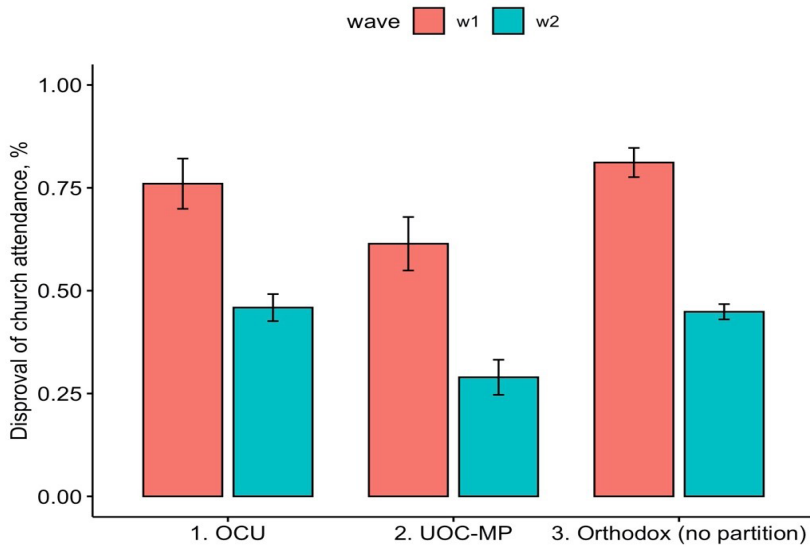


Figure 2. Disproval of church attendance during religious celebrations by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).

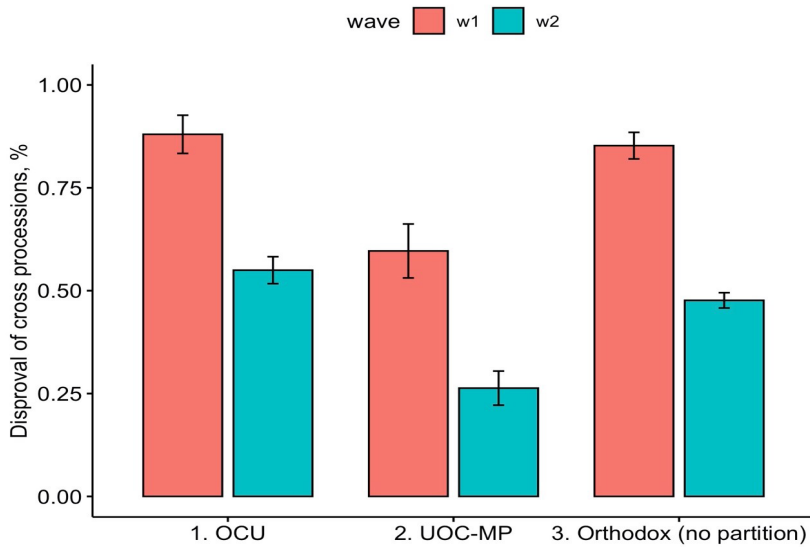


Figure 3. Disproval of cross processing by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).

Conclusions

The pandemic has been a major challenge to all religious groups in Ukraine. Although two major Orthodox churches shared the sentiment of peace, love to neighbors, and mutual aid, their narratives, and practices during the Easter preparations from March to April 2020 diverged significantly. According to the official statements published on the respective webpages, the OCU fully complied with the governmental social distancing policies. In sharp contrast, the UOC-MP provided narratives against the lockdown and demanded church attendance. This differences in narratives correlated with religious attitudes of respondents. Members of the UOC-MP were most supportive of religious rituals and traditional religious practices and they also were more likely to believe that praying cures the coronavirus. Whether churches shaped individual attitudes by promoting specific narratives or, in the other way around, churches reacted to the demand of perishers cannot be answered by the data now. Nevertheless, official statements and surveys show a clear trend of divergence between two major Ukrainian Orthodox groups.

About the author

Tymofii Brik received his PhD from the University of Carlos III in 2017. He is the director of the Center for sociological studies at the Kyiv School of Economics. Prior to this appointment he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at New York University (2019-2020), and a Visiting Vucinich Fellow at the Stanford Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (spring 2018). He is also an editor at *Vox Ukraine* and a board member of CEDOS. Tymofii's paper on religious supply and church competition in Ukraine, published in *Sociology of Religion*, won him an award for "Best young sociologist in Ukraine in 2018." His recent studies appeared as chapters in compilations published by Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge, and *Ibidem-Verlag*.

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COVID-19 and the Russian Orthodox Church

by Cyril Hovorun

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has affected in nuanced ways various religious niches and subcultures. This article explores some reactions to the pandemic as they have been developed and articulated in the Russian Orthodox Church. These reactions are diverse and often not public. On the upper level of the church's leadership, the official standpoint of the Russian hierarchy is usually coherent with the official policies of the Russian state. On the lower levels, lay persons, priests, and even bishops often disobey the official line and propagate opposition to the anti-COVID-19 measures.

Key words: Russian Orthodoxy; symphony; COVID-dissidents; conspiracy theories; fundamentalism

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Official Reactions

On the official level, both the rhetoric and policies of the Russian Church regarding the global pandemic were generally coherent with the relevant rhetoric and policies of the Russian state. This coherence reflects the kind of symphonic relationship between the church and state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill. For example, on 23 March 2020, Patriarch Kirill set up a "Patriarchal working group for coordinating the work of church institution in the situation of the spread of the coronavirus infection." On 25 August 2020, the Holy Synod adopted a "Message to the episcopate, clergy, monastics and laity on the invasion of a harmful infection this year." It particularly urged the faithful to take good care of themselves and others in preventing the spread of the COVID-19:

The pastors and faithful of our Church understood: one's careless attitude to one's health, which may seem to be a private affair of every person, in these days can turn out to be other people's suffering and death. Many Orthodox Christians have preferred responsibility for the life and health of their neighbors to imprudence and self-assurance. They have fearlessly fulfilled their duty ignoring their own wishes and habitual way of life and realizing that the precautions they take in no way belittle our faith in the effectiveness of Divine Providence and sacredness of the Church's sacraments, the most important of them being the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.¹

The Synod thus addressed one of the most painful issues related to pandemic—that of restricted access to worship. When the Russian state imposed such restrictions during the first wave of the pandemic, which was the period of Great

Lent and Easter 2020, the church's responses on different levels were confused and confusing. The central authority kept mostly silent, while many bishops openly rebuked or sabotaged the restrictive measures imposed by civil authorities. Such sabotage endangered the seemingly smooth relations between the Russian state and church. In the wake of this danger, the Russian Synod clarified its standpoint on the controversial issue:

The considerably limited participation of people in worship service was unprecedented for our episcopate, clergy and laity in their personal experience. Realizing that the new threat facing humanity could involve grave consequences that hardly could have been fully predicted and aware of her responsibility for the life and health of innumerable people, the Church shared people's burdens generated by the spread of the harmful infection and called upon her faithful to refrain for a while from their habitual way of participating in the liturgical life. However, this decision adopted as it was in an extraordinary historical situation cannot become a new norm. The freedom of conscience and freedom of faith, including the right of believers to participate in worship services even in exceptional situations should remain unshakable.²

“COVID-Dissidents”

The leadership of the Russian church also acknowledged that there is significant resistance to the official line. Patriarch Kirill, while opening the session of the Holy Synod on 8 December 2020, stated:

Unfortunately, a terrible infection has affected many clergymen. Many of our brethren, dozens of them I will not state a specific number now because some clarifications are still needed, but around one hundred people died of this disease. Therefore, when we are told, including by some people in sacred garments, that there is no epidemic, that it is a fabrication, that it is all brought into our lives specifically to restrict church attendance or the mobility of people the answer to that lie is the hard truth about our deceased fathers and brothers.³

The “people in sacred garments” mentioned by the patriarch, it appears, include even the members of the Synod, such as the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Onufriy Berezovsky. He is the second in the rank member of the Synod after the patriarch. He is also notorious for his publicly expressed doubts about the pandemic and mocking those who take it seriously. For example, in May 2020, he made the following comment in front of TV cameras when asked about what he thinks of COVID-19:

We are all sick-each one has his own sore. There are people whose temperature first rose and then dropped, and tomorrow, another person's temperature went up. This is life. It is the season of transition from winter to spring, and everyone gets sick. Whenever one feels ill, he immediately suspects the coronavirus: whether the leg or ear is in pain-he blames for everything coronavirus.⁴

Even the favorite priest of Patriarch Kirill, whom he often asked to preach during the patriarchal liturgies, Fr Andrey Tkachev, mocked those who care to protect themselves and others by wearing masks. He mocked them literally *ex cathedra* while preaching at a church in Moscow. He came to the ambo in a respirator causing the congregation to laugh and made sarcastic comments about those wearing masks: “I wish you laugh at this demonic muck all your life.”⁵ By the “demonic muck,” he meant the way media covered the pandemic and alerted people about its consequences.

No one of those who mocked and discouraged people from taking care of themselves and others ever took their words back or repented. Some of them suffered from the COVID-19, though. Metropolitan Onufriy was reportedly hospitalized with this disease in the elite medical complex nearby Kyiv, where he was treated in secret. Other clergymen and laypeople who followed his instructions and who caught the infection were less lucky. Most of them could not afford to be treated in elite complexes, and many died.

Figures such as Metropolitan Onufriy or Fr Tkachev became known as “COVID dissidents.” This sort of dissent is often driven by skepticism about the risks to health and life from the coronavirus. Such dissidents defiantly ignore hygiene standards and do not recognize scientific data on the COVID disease. They tend to explain it by various conspiracy theories. For example, the metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Luka Kovalenko, who by the way has been educated in medicine, claimed that the global pandemic was created artificially. He saw behind it such forces as George Soros, the Vatican, and even the Ecumenical Patriarchate:

We must also acknowledge and openly declare to the faithful children of the Church of Christ that the events now unfolding in the global community indicate that the world actively builds a global open society based on anti-Christian values. The “great masons” of this construction will not discard any, even most anti-human, methods to carry out their plans. For the first time in world history, they have used bacteriological weapons on such a scale that led to a planetary pandemic and the death of innocent people. This is the first step in a carefully thought-out, multi-pass combination aimed at rebuilding the entire human civilization. The network of one of them, Soros, together with his vast army of politicians, journalists, liberal secular and religious public figures, is actively destroying the old world order. It prepares the world for a new centralized system of governance and control over the entire human community. The Vatican heads the religious sector of this work. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, as well as non-Orthodox radical extremist groups, are its allies.⁶

Lack of responsibility of hierarchs regarding people who trust and depend on them has badly affected virtually all church groups. Among the most vulnerable groups are students in theological seminaries. The Radio Freedom in Ukraine investigated the following case of abuse.⁷ In March 2020, all higher education

institutions in Ukraine sent their students home and switched to education online. The Theological Academy and Seminary of Kyiv, under the responsibility of Metropolitan Onufriy, also sent home most of its students. However, some students were forced to stay in the Kyiv-Caves Lavra, where the school is located. They were kept because the bishops in charge of students wanted them to sing and serve them during the Easter period. Most of these students eventually became infected by a coronavirus. Fortunately, none of them died. At the same time, no one was held responsible for this abuse.

Reactions to Dissent

There were, nevertheless, bishops who experienced some administrative consequences for their carelessness. For example, the metropolitan of Saratov Longin Korchagin was an outspoken COVID dissident during the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020. As a result, at the same session of the Holy Synod that adopted a statement regarding the pandemic, on 25 August, Longin was moved to another diocese. This was regarded as a punishment for him. However, it is not clear whether this was a punishment for his stubbornness on hygienic measures or because he had a conflict with the local authorities.

There were also conflicts between church hierarchs and local governors that remained unpunished. One of them happened in July 2021. Every year a procession dedicated to the murder of the last Russian Tsar Nicholas Romanov and his family in 1918 takes place in the city of Yekaterinburg. In 2021, local governor Yevgeny Kuyvashev wrote in his Instagram that he disapproves of this procession, because its participants do not observe hygienic measures. The local bishop, Metropolitan Yevgeny Kulberg, also through social media, rebuked the governor and insisted that the procession must take place regardless. This was an outright public confrontation between local civil and ecclesial authorities.

Some hierarchs rebuked the vaccination campaign even more strongly. For example, the abbot of the Solovetsky monastery in northern Russia, Bishop Porphyry Shutov, stated in his sermon delivered in July 2021 that the vaccines against COVID-19 modify the very human nature and make human beings susceptible to external control:

The vaccine is a genetically engineered, high-tech product. It contains cells, proteins of either RNA or DNA matrices. These agents integrate into the human genome, change it, modify it, edit it. At this point, any Christian responsible for their salvation must stop... What is a genetically modified person? Or, if you like, a person with a genetically edited genome? To what extent does the image of God remain intact in him? And who can guarantee that this intervention does not damage our image of God?... Does the person who has experienced these interventions really remain an autonomous and sovereign personality? Or has the control center of our behavior moved somewhere outside?⁸

Official speakers of the Moscow Patriarchate denounced the sermon, but the bishop did not suffer any consequences. While the punishment for hierarchs who undermine hygienic measures and vaccination is virtual or non-existent, sometimes the punishment for those who criticize this undermining standpoint could be severe. For example, on 21 April 2020, the rector of the Patriarchal Cathedral of Moscow, Fr Alexander Ageikin, died of coronavirus. He was a close collaborator of Patriarch Kirill. At the same time, he publicly criticized some quarantine measures. He can be characterized as a mild COVID dissident. Deacon Andrey Kuraev, who is an outspoken clergyman known for his criticism of the patriarch, criticized on social media Fr Ageikin's hypocrisy. Soon, on April 29, Kuraev was suspended in his clerical capacity by a decree signed by the patriarch. He was tried by the church court and sentenced to defrocking. Patriarch Kirill can enact this sentence any moment. Although Kuraev's criticism of Ageikin was not the reason but an excuse for this verdict, this excuse is telling as such: he was suspended for criticizing another clergyman who had been critical of anti-COVID measures.

The Role of Fundamentalism

There are various reasons for such double standards that the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate applies. One is the fear of fundamentalistic setback. Fundamentalist groups had been marginal in the Russian Orthodox Church. During the last decade, however, they piecemeal moved from the margins to the church mainstream. The church's leadership tried to instrumentalize this movement in promoting its own agenda, such as ideological conservatism under the guise of so-called "traditional values." However, it seems that various fundamentalistic groups instead exploited the leadership of the church for their purposes. The inconsistent church reactions to the pandemic, on the one hand, and the consistency which various fundamentalistic groups demonstrate through their media, on the other, corroborate this thesis.

For example, the fundamentalistic outlet Antimodern.ru consistently criticizes those who care about anti-COVID measures. For example, two relevant articles on this website are titled "The dawn of consciousness in the era of coronavirus"⁹ and "The birth of pathological consciousness"¹⁰. Their author criticizes the alertness about pandemics as pathological consciousness. Bishops and clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church do care a lot to avoid landing on the list of assumed modernists denounced by this site. Everyone who pushes the anti-COVID measures too far is in danger of being accused of modernism by fundamentalists.

Flirtation with fundamentalistic groups inside the Russian Orthodox Church

became a part of the major campaign that its leadership launched approximately ten years ago. This was a campaign against so-called “liberals.” Many of those who initiated or backed it originally had come from the liberal camp, including Patriarch Kirill. The rationale of this anti-liberal campaign is political-the church has aligned with the Kremlin’s turn towards ideological conservatism.¹¹ This alignment has caused a deep polarization within the Russian Orthodox Church, which resembles the ongoing culture wars between Democrats and Republicans in the United States.

COVID-19 and the Russian Culture Wars

The ideological polarization within the church, backed by its leadership, has created confusion regarding pandemic-related policies. Many of those who associate themselves with “conservatism” believe that the dangers of the pandemic have been exaggerated by “liberals.” This belief makes them distrusting preventive anti-COVID measures and policies. Metropolitan Luka, for example, accused the “liberals” of lies in the context of his reflection on the coronavirus pandemic:

If we look closely at the modern world, we will see that it is already soaked in lies. Commercials lie about the usefulness and naturalness of certain products. Historians lie to us, distorting and perverting the events of past years. Sociologists lie to us, overestimating the ratings of parties and their candidates. Liberals lie to us, calling perversions a struggle for gender equality. Politicians, deputies, mass media, etc., lie to us. There is no place left in the world for the truth.¹²

The Russian Orthodox hierarchy implies that the “liberal” warnings about COVID-19 are also lies and cannot be trusted. Such presumably “liberal” voices are also heard in the Russian Orthodox Church. One of them is the web portal “Pravoslavie i mir” (Orthodoxy and the World), which has published many helpful materials on COVID-19.¹³ Another “liberal” web-portal, Bogoslov.ru, has offered substantial theological reflections on the pandemic. These and other “liberal” media are systematically criticized by “conservative” media in the framework of the Russian Orthodox culture war. Many examples of such criticism can be observed in the publications of the outlet of the Orthodox ideological conservatism, “The Russian People’s Line” (<https://ruskline.ru>).

The exchange of fire between these media over ideological issues is not helpful for the coherent policies of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding COVID-19. Those members of the church who align themselves with ideological conservatism mistrust the publications in what they deem “liberal” media. In turn, these media are often the most detailed source of information on the dangers of coronavirus.

Thus, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church set a trap for themselves by creating polarization between “liberals” and “conservatives,” as well as by endorsing fundamentalism. On the one hand, they try to implement restrictive measures and convince their flock to take COVID-19 seriously. On the other hand,

they realize that the flock may take these measures with ideological bias and accuse the church's leadership of liberalism.

Unfortunately, this bias has been cultivated by the church's leaders themselves, and now it fires back.

About the author

Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun is a Professor in Ecclesiology, International Relations and Ecumenism at the University College Stockholm (Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm). A graduate of the Theological Academy in Kyiv and National University in Athens, he completed his doctoral studies at Durham University. He was a chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, first deputy chairman of the Educational Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church, and later research fellow at Yale and Columbia Universities, visiting professor at the University of Münster in Germany, international fellow at Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life at the University of Alberta in Canada, director of the Huffington Ecumenical Institute at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and Assistant Professor at the same university.

He has published several books in different languages, including *Sacred Architecture in East and West* (edited, Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2019), *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018; Ukrainian translation published in 2018); *Ukrainian Public Theology* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2017, in Ukrainian), *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017; Ukrainian translation published in 2018); *Wonders of the Panorthodox Council*, (Moscow: Christian Book Club, 2016, in Russian); *Meta-Ecclesiology, Chronicles on Church Awareness*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Ukrainian translation published in 2017); *From Antioch to Xi'an: an Evolution of 'Nestorianism'* (Hong Kong: Chinese Orthodox Press, 2014, in Chinese); *Will, Action and Freedom. Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

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The Serbian Orthodox Church in the Face of the Covid-19 Pandemic

by Milan Vukomanović

The goal of this article is to highlight the religious dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic in Serbia through sociological interpretation of the institutional role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), including the process of the adjustment of clergy and believers to pandemic circumstances. Such an adjustment involves religious discourse, ritual practice, community and institution. A greater attention is thus dedicated to the uniqueness of the church institution in its relation to a broader social community, especially with regard to the discrepancies between the church practices and official state measures and restrictions. This also implies the necessity to mitigate tensions and prevent potential rifts between the religious and secular communities, or church and state.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, Serbian Orthodox Church, higher clergy, (de)secularization, church and state

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It goes without saying that pandemics are sources of instability, societal uncertainty and crises that affect various aspects of human behavior, including religious life. The novel reality of a pandemic situation becomes an immediate threat to the social structure and strongly influences the scope, timeliness and forms of the social, economic and political response in a number of other domains conditioned by the pandemic. The response of churches and other religious institutions is of national and international importance, because during pandemics, societies are faced with extraordinary circumstances that seem, at least at first glance, as if they are beyond anyone's direct control. This, of course, is an aspect in which churches and religious communities find appropriate space for additional action. Furthermore, given the constitutional distinction between the state and faith organizations in many countries, including Serbia, the contrast between measures of adaptation to pandemics undertaken by state- and religious-institutions deserves special attention.

Adapting religious discourse, practice, community and institution to the circumstances of the pandemic is another relevant issue in this context. Firstly, it is important to note that there is no single response to a pandemic even within the same religion or church. It is thus important to highlight not only the adjustment to extraordinary circumstances of central church rituals (liturgy, mass), but also ritual practices within the family (e.g. *krsna slava* or patron saint celebration

among the Serbs). It is well known that Eastern Orthodox rites imply a high degree of physical contact between clergy and its congregation, including kissing of hands, icons, as well as hugging and kissing between the community members. During the performance of liturgy, the faithful normally receive communion from the same teaspoon, an act that significantly increases the probability of infection during epidemic conditions. In that respect, Eastern Orthodox spirituality could be regarded as very physical in its various forms of manifestation. Finally, one should also be alert to deviations in the practices of a church or religious community from official, secular state restrictions and measures.

Easter Celebration

During the “COVID-year” of 2020, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) had to face at least two major challenges: the celebration of Easter under the unprecedented circumstances, and the loss of three members of its highest clergy, including Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) himself, due to coronavirus disease. According to President Vučić, the late patriarch achieved an unusual degree of partnership with the state¹, while the Holy Synod assumed a significant level of centralized power due to the fact that the Holy Council of Bishops was not convoked since May 2019. In turn, this has been reflected on the de-secularization process in Serbia and the position of the clergy that has been critical towards the political and public health decisions of the Serbian government.

Last year the celebration of several major religious festivals took place globally under very odd circumstances. In Serbia, one could observe clear differences within the narrative strategies and public messages of various religious leaders and church prelates. In contrast to the decisions made by the majority of other religious communities, the SOC opted against the cessation of regular liturgies, although elderly citizens were asked, due to health concerns, not to visit the churches during the pandemic. However, the church practice was not standardized in all of the eparchies (parishes). Some of them completely ceased the celebration of liturgies, while others continued with their usual practice. As an act of “concession” to public health measures, the faithful attending liturgies would stay in front of church entrances, stepping inside one by one in order to take communion. On some occasions, parish priests would administer communion outside their churches. Discrepancies also occurred between the homeland and the diaspora eparchies, whereas the latter demonstrated a higher degree of responsibility in these matters. This was probably another, though unusual, indicator of the most recent cleavage within the SOC’s higher clergy that has affected several other political and ecclesiastical issues.² One should therefore not be surprised by the lack of a unison policy within the SOC regarding the Easter 2020 celebration.

Very soon after the pandemic outbreak, on 15 March 2020, the Serbian government declared a state of emergency. The state of emergency was not

lifted until 6th May, so that the curfews and other movement restrictions were administered throughout the Easter season.

As a result, the Serbian Patriarch and Holy Synod asked for a temporary cessation of curfew for the period of duration of the Easter liturgies (The curfew implied weekend restrictions of movement from Friday 5 pm to Monday morning). Several public petitions were signed by citizens and public figures demanding a short-term cessation of curfew, so that congregations would be able to attend the Easter service. The arguments of this group emphasized that Easter has been the greatest Christian festival and one of the major religious rituals. Some secular arguments were also heard in public, referring to the freedom of religion and violation of human rights of church-going citizens. It should be noted, however, that the right to life and health also pertain to fundamental human rights and that these rights cannot be abrogated by invoking other freedoms. The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health was first articulated in the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO). In line with the current Covid-19 pandemic, the WHO issued an interim guidance entitled "Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19" in April 2020.³ Furthermore, the SOC itself very precisely defined its liturgical practices and measures during epidemics (e.g. disinfection of teaspoons, etc.) in its regulations dating back to 1929.

Special attention in this context should be paid to the disagreements between the SOC position on the pandemic and the policies of the Crisis Committee, a governmental body in charge of public health during the Covid-19 crisis. The expert members of this Committee, predominantly doctors, supported the weekend curfews during Easter; while the SOC representatives insisted on (religious) exceptions from the rule. These tensions were mitigated by a phone conversation between President Vučić and late Patriarch Irinej shortly before the Easter celebration. They issued their joint statement in which they declined the possibility of curfew suspension during the Easter holiday. They also appealed to citizens to adhere to regular epidemiological measures. The Patriarch remarked that some church officials gave inappropriate statements and that the SOC should keep its unity, sabornost, and health of all citizens of Serbia. However, despite all those appeals and protective public measures, Easter of 2020 was celebrated in some churches with the presence of faithful, although without any mass gatherings. The general public was divided on this matter: some were critical towards the government, while others were disappointed by the SOC's determination to organize liturgies during the pandemic crisis.

It is worth noting that religious communities in Serbia, including the SOC, have not been consulted in creating governmental recommendations and strategies against Covid-19. Accordingly, the direct impact of religious leaders on the behavior

of the faithful was crucial for conveying health-related messages during religious holidays. Due to dissonant voices coming from different SOC prelates, a significant level of confusion was raised among the Orthodox believers. Some bizarre cases have also been documented in this period. A controversial Orthodox abbot from a monastery near Serbian town of Valjevo issued himself a certificate against wearing a protective mask, because it violated “human dignity”.⁴ In that context the abbot even referred to the Constitution of Serbia and the Law on Churches and Religious Communities. Concerning the issue of human dignity. He identified it with God’s image, omitting the fact that God was not mentioned in the Serbian Constitution, and that human dignity, as a constitutional category, is not related to any particular religious organization. Finally, article 11 of the Constitution stipulates that churches and religious communities are separate from the State. As a citizen of Serbia, this Orthodox priest has not been exempted from the Law on the Protection of Population from Infectious Diseases either.

The Deaths of Higher Clergy

As coronavirus cases surged globally, the Covid-19 deaths of the two highest SOC prelates have additionally raised questions about whether the SOC has done enough to slow down the spread of the virus or, perhaps, contributed to exacerbating the disease. The SOC has, unfortunately, paid a heavy price for either neglecting or mitigating restrictions imposed by the state. Thousands of people attended the funeral of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije (Radović), spreading thus the epidemic further around Serbia. Amfilohije died on 30 October 2020 due to health complications caused by Covid-19. The faithful from Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina paid their respects to him by occasionally kissing his body.

The Serbian Patriarch Irinej caught the virus at the same funeral and was hospitalized soon after. His condition worsened and he died on 20 November 2020. During the funeral ceremony, as a matter of precaution, an open casket with the Patriarch’s body was covered with plexiglass shield in order to minimize contact. However, many mourners who attended the funeral ignored precautions by taking wine from the same communion spoon or by kissing the glass shield and thus maximizing the risk of spreading the infection. Because of this lack of discipline, Bishop David, who led the funeral liturgy, also tested positive for coronavirus and was hospitalized. Other senior members of the church - Bishop Milutin (Knežević), the deposed Bishop Artemije (Radisavljević) and hieromonk Prohor Josifov—also died of the coronavirus. Many others tested positive, including Metropolitan Hrizostom (Jević), acting head of the Synod, Bishop Joanikije (Mićović) from Montenegro, and vicar bishop Stefan (Šarić)—the right hand of the Serbian Patriarch. In that context, Dr. Predrag Kon, a leading member of the Crisis Committee and a senior Serbian epidemiologist, stunned the public by his statement, broadcast on the

national television, that despite “the great risk posed by the funeral of Patriarch Irinej” and the fact that such gathering is “epidemiologically unacceptable, no one can forbid it”.⁵The military hospital care and funeral of the late Serbian Patriarch not only took on a conspicuous “state character” (with the presence of the highest state officials and President’s speech at the funeral), it also demonstrated that the Serbian government, during the coronavirus crisis, was not able to protect the rule of law for all of its citizens and that church officials were largely exempted from most of the epidemiological measures. Perhaps this is an indicator of the process of advanced de-secularization of the Serbian society and politicization of the SOC by state officials (especially President Vučić), eager to obtain the church support for the forthcoming governmental decisions regarding the status of Kosovo. One should also mention in this context that generous state funds have been allocated to the SOC on three separate occasions during 2020, while underpaid doctors and nurses in hospitals worked under extremely difficult material conditions, not to mention the layoffs in other professions due to the pandemic.

New Patriarch

The election of the new Serbian Patriarch was also organized in the midst of the pandemic. The election session of the Holy Council of Bishops was scheduled for 18 February 2021, in accordance with the deadlines stipulated by the SOC Constitution and notwithstanding the pandemic. Altogether, 34 bishops and metropolitans were eligible for this highest office.

By the mid-1990s, there were rumors within the SOC about the existence of two different factions: the zealots and the moderates, or “hawks and doves”.⁶ Their differences were expressed in some dogmatic issues, as well as on questions concerning the SOC’s view of national identity, political engagement, priesthood, religious education, ecumenism, etc. In the SOC, the distinction between a liberal and a conservative wing has traditionally been tackled in relation to the election of a new patriarch, or concerning the possible visit of the Pope to Serbia, whereby the bishops who are committed to ecumenism have usually been labeled as liberal. For example, when Patriarch Pavle was surprisingly elected in 1990, most of the commentators did not view him as a member of either of the two church currents. However, his successor, the late Patriarch Irinej, was perceived, at least in some circles, as a moderate bishop. However, one should bear in mind that conservatism is the predominant feature in the SOC Sabor.

Today, the divisions within the highest church ranks are predominantly personal and, to some extent, political. It seems, however, that the outset of the 21st century Serbia saw the emergence of a small liberal wing within the SOC, which was more open to modern secular influences. From time to time, their liberal proclivities surface in public speeches and media interviews more than in the official church gatherings and ecclesiastical bodies. This group, in my view, includes the following

bishops: Grigorije (Durić), Maksim (Vasiljević), Teodosije (Šibalić), Joanikije (Mićović), Andrej (Čilerdžić), Irinej (Dobrijević). Most of these high-ranking prelates serve today as bishops in the western diaspora — in the USA, Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. It is also important to note that the liberal attitude of these bishops varies depending on the theme under consideration and does not automatically refer to all the issues in a public debate. For example, most (if not all) of these bishops have a rather unison ecclesiastical-political view of Kosovo, but they express a much more flexible attitude towards science, education, human rights, and ecumenical dialogue. One candidate from this rank, bishop Grigorije, was actually proposed by his peers at the Holy Council for the new patriarch.

In the second group, there is a strong current of prelates loyal to the authoritarian President Vučić. This group is concentrated around Bishop Irinej Bulović and the Synod under his control. In present-day Serbia Vučić's support means a lot, and Bulović's spiritual son and the state-media favorite is Metropolitan Porfirije (Perić). Not surprisingly, in February 2021 he became the new Serbian patriarch. After a long period of time, during which the patriarchal position was occupied by a senior prelate, a relatively young bishop (born 1961) sat on St. Sava's throne. One of his most important roles, at the present moment, is to resolve at least some aspects of a serious organizational rift within the SOC that came as a result of the recent governmental (presidential) interference in the ecclesiastical matters. At any rate, the future role of the head of the SOC will be related not only to alleviating the consequences of the current pandemic, but also to taking responsibility for upcoming church activities, including the fall 2021 session of the Holy Council of Bishops. Various challenges will emerge on an almost daily basis, as exemplified in 2020 by a great number of sick and deceased clergy, including the late patriarch Irinej himself. Already during his first liturgy as a patriarch, Porfirije invited the faithful to respect anti-epidemiological measures, take care of themselves and their neighbors and follow their church in these hard times.⁷ It is still uncertain how much such an appeal will reverberate in the practical, everyday behavior of Orthodox believers in the period before their patron saint celebrations and Christmas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us note that church leaders normally belong to the most trustworthy part of a society, especially during the times of social crises and historical challenges or tragedies. Therefore, they are important potential sources of reliable information during a pandemic. In turn, this kind of trust implies a greater responsibility and commitment for church representatives. Their messages could have very positive effects for the entire population if they are in harmony with the statements of the secular decision makers in the area of public policy and healthcare. Such an effect is amplified in the less accessible,

rural environments or among marginalized social groups. Their responsibility extends to refuting disinformation and rumors that can spread fast and have very serious consequences. That kind of individual as well as institutional credibility of clerics and religious organizations could save lives and mitigate afflictions during the pandemic period. Apart from healthcare and social institutions, the churches and other religious organizations are bearers of support and comfort for their communities. They are often more available than other institutions, especially in times of crisis. Their pastoral and social care is particularly important for the more vulnerable segments of population.

Unfortunately, the collective experience of life with Covid-19 in Serbia indicates that neither the state nor the church responded adequately in terms of the aforementioned concerns. State representatives, including the members of the Crisis Committee, gradually lost their initial credibility due to contradictory information and lack of transparency in their reports regarding the number of infected and deceased citizens in Serbia. The SOC high-ranking prelates, with few exceptions mainly from the diaspora eparchies, have left an impression of utter disorganization and arbitrariness under the new, dramatic circumstances. In fact, they even contributed to the severe negative effects of the pandemic, instead of participating in their elimination. This is probably best exemplified by a number of Covid-19 related deaths of the SOC highest clergy in late 2020, whereby a great number of other bishops and priests were infected or life-threatened by the disease. Therefore, both the church and state proved inadequate in their novel, rarely assumed role that demanded much higher level of dedicated leadership. The Serbian population, including the believing citizens, stayed extremely confused in terms of various pressing issues: whether they would physically participate in church rituals and ceremonies or not; whether they ought to be vaccinated or not, etc. The number of obtained dosages of vaccines in early 2021 has been very disproportionate to the number of immunized citizens of Serbia. If one adds the doctored numbers of infected and deceased inhabitants, the political misuse of the pandemic crisis, lack of self-criticism and accompanying manipulation of public opinion—the picture of religious, social and political implications of the pandemic obtains even dimmer tones. As a result of that, the political, spiritual and material recovery from the crisis, which has already acquired global historical proportions, will probably be as dramatic as its painstaking survival.

About the Author

Milan Vukomanović, born in Belgrade in 1960, is a full professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. He earned his doctorate in 1993 at the University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A, where he taught religious studies courses until 1995. He was also a visiting professor of this University (program Semester at Sea) and a guest lecturer at NTNU, Norway and University of Sarajevo. Vukomanović has received several academic fellowships and grants from the University of Pittsburgh, University of Oslo, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Catholic Relief Services and other international institutions. The area of Prof. Vukomanović's academic interest ranges from sociology of religion and history of religions to studies of Early Christianity and Islam. He has published and edited several books, including *Homo viator: Religion and New Age* (*Homo viator: religija i novo doba*, 2008), *Religious Dialogue in the Balkans: The Drama of Understanding* (2005), *The Sacred and the Multitude: Challenges of Religious Pluralism* (*Sveto i mnoštvo: izazovi religijskog pluralizma*, 2001). His bibliography includes about 300 journal articles, chapters in books and other works in Serbian and international publications.

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The Ambivalent Attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland Towards the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Grzegorz Ignatowski

This paper discusses restrictions enforced by the Polish authorities following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Catholic Church's position on it. The article addresses attitudes to vaccination held by the believers and the hierarchy. Subsequently, it assesses the church's decline, which in Poland dates back to the times before the pandemic. Finally, it addresses the common practice of receiving the holy communion in the hand as well as ecumenical engagement during the pandemic. While the former is a serious obstacle to combating the spread of the virus, the latter seems insignificant for a sizable group of traditional Catholics.

Key words: Catholic Church, COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination, decline in support for religious life

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Introduction

The extremely difficult situation in which the Catholic Church in Poland and other churches and religious associations found themselves in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the legal restrictions introduced during the pandemic is unprecedented in recent history.¹ Such an opinion is justified even if we take into account the fact that Christians in Poland, regardless of their religious affiliation, had to live through the post-war period of restrictions and ideological indoctrination. Never before was the participation of the faithful in religious ceremonies so decisively restricted, regardless of whether they took place inside church buildings or in the open air. We can therefore speak of a unique period in the life of the Church², even during the smallpox epidemic, which broke out suddenly in Wrocław in July 1963. For a short period of time, one of the largest cities in Poland in terms of population was cut off from the rest of the country.³ At that time, vaccination was made mandatory for all residents, and 98% of people were vaccinated. Those who were not vaccinated were banned from entering the city. Meanwhile, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions applied to both Sunday liturgical services as well as ceremonies, such as funerals, which are mostly held in the open. As far as the restrictions themselves are concerned, it should be remembered that they were changing, depending on how the SARS-Cov-2 virus spread. The issue of restrictions in religious life is not the only problem faced by the clergy and laity of the Catholic Church as well as all religious denominations in

Poland. The Church's approach to vaccination is also noteworthy. On the one hand, there is no lack of strong support for vaccination as an effective tool in the fight against pandemics. On the other hand, there were isolated cases of disapproval. Not only the limitations, but also the progressive decline in participation of the faithful in religious life presents another challenge, especially at a time when direct contact is difficult. This phenomenon, however, did not begin during the pandemic, but has a much broader context. These include declining support for the actions of church leaders, accusations of covering up sex offenders, and undoubtedly the slow process of secularization of society as a whole. Finally, one cannot forget about the pastoral activities carried out, where traditional beliefs and practices (which do not help in the fight against the pandemic) clash with the opposite - modern initiatives testifying to the openness of the Church to contemporary challenges.

The Position of the Church on the Restrictions in the Access to Religious Life of the Faithful

The World Health Organization declared a pandemic of the infectious disease COVID 19 caused by the coronavirus SARS-Cov-2 on 11 March 2020. With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth noting that the Church authorities have generally cooperated with state institutions in this regard from the very beginning. The situation did not change in 2021, when the Metropolitan of Poznań and President of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, strongly distanced himself from the introduced restrictions and asked whether their introduction without consultation with the Church is not a breach of the provisions contained in the Concordat ratified by the Holy See and the Republic of Poland in February 1998. Let us give some examples of the restrictions being put in place and the clergy support for them.⁴ On 13 March 2020, the Minister of Health issued a decree on the declaration of an epidemic emergency state on the territory of the Republic of Poland. This document banned all gatherings, including religious gatherings, that would exceed 50 people, including organizers and those acting on their behalf. Another regulation of the Minister of Health was issued on 24 March 2020. According to this document, between 25 March and 11 April only 5 people could participate in the ceremony, with the exception of those conducting the religious ceremony. Subsequent documents were also strict. Thus, in the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 19 June 2020, participants in assemblies were required to maintain a two-meter distance between each other. The Council of Ministers Ordinance of 16 October allowed the holding of worship services, but under the condition that in buildings and other objects of religious worship, the spacing between worshippers is a minimum of 1.5 meters. A division into yellow and red zones was introduced. In the yellow area, four square meters per person were designated in buildings where religious gatherings were held, and in the

red area 7 square meters. The number of attendees of communion and wedding receptions and consolations was drastically restricted. Further restrictions came into effect on 1 December 2020 and lasted until 27 December 2020, thus covering the significant Christmas season for Christians. The distance between worshippers had to be at least 1.5 meters, but no more than one person per 15 square meters could participate in the service. Religious worshippers and, in the case of a funeral, attendants were not included. Before entering a religious facility, it was ordered that information about the required limit of people be posted and that measures be taken to ensure that the provisions were implemented. Persons performing religious worship were not included in the total number of participants in religious ceremonies. Let us add that another restriction was issued on 21 December, effective in the period from 27 December 2020 to 17 January 2021. During this time, one and a half meter spacing was in effect, and the number of worshippers was determined by the volume of the building. There were 15 square meters per person, excluding those in religious worship. As before, information about the number of people was to be posted at the entrance to religious buildings. At the end of June, the number of worshippers allowed to attend religious services was increased, and worshippers were still required to cover their mouths and noses with masks inside buildings. Outside, there was an obligation to keep at least 1.5 meters distance between the participants of the services. In all of these documents, participants in religious assemblies were obligated to wear masks, even outdoors. The only people exempted from this obligation were those who performed religious cult.

In view of the restrictions, it should be noted that no religious buildings were ever closed, as was the case in Orthodox Greece.⁵ In the Catholic Church in Poland, there were no such spectacular actions. It should be added, however, that the bishops generally promoted and recommended the observance of appropriate restrictions. Thus, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, the President of the Polish Episcopate, had already asked the bishops and the faithful to comply with the regulations of 13 March 2020, limiting the number of participants in gatherings to 50 people due to the introduction of an epidemic emergency in Poland. He also urged diocesan bishops to issue decisions limiting the number of faithful to 50 people. Grzegorz Ryś, the Archbishop of Łódź, wrote to the faithful that they are going through a time of trial. He asked that they comply with the rules set by the authorities. He asked, especially the elderly, to remain in their homes. Homes were to be the most important and active sanctuaries during the pandemic. The ministry of the clergy and the administration of the sacraments should be carried out with all personal hygiene measures. According to the archbishop, clergy should place containers of disinfectant liquid at the doors of churches and be the first to set the example of using it. On 7 August 2020 Archbishop Gądecki appealed not only to the faithful, but also to priests. The latter were to remind participants in religious gatherings

of the need to observe the restrictions and to create the possibility of receiving communion by hand, according to specific diocesan regulations.

*The epidemic is not over and therefore - out of concern for the health of all, especially the more vulnerable - he asked for prudence and the consistent application of sanitary recommendations.*⁶

Similar appeals were made by all the archbishops and bishops in their dioceses. This was especially true of Easter, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. There were only a few cases in which the rules were broken and state decisions were deviated from. Such situations were encountered during the first period of the pandemic, and other Christian denominations were not free from them. In studies conducted in the first period of the pandemic, many clergymen indicated the possibility of cooperation with the secular authorities in maintaining the rules governing social life, and even permitted the closing of churches.⁷ The bishops also pointed out the need for moderation and distance in other liturgical activities. Dispensations were systematically issued from the obligation to attend Sunday and holy masses. This was also the case during the major Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas.⁸

In view of the above restrictions and appeals of the clergy, an article published by the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference is worth recalling. It should be noted that we are not dealing with an official position but with an article published first by Catholic News Agency and then on the website of the Archdiocese of Poznań. In the article, "Pastoral Care after the Pandemic," the President speaks of the unprecedented treatment of the Church by the state. The archbishop wrote that services have essentially become inaccessible to the faithful. He stressed that a similar situation had not occurred in the previous history of the Church in Poland. He asked whether such radical decisions are not contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the Concordat. The article reads that the sovereignty of the Church has been violated. It adds that

*priests and believers have, after all, the right to defend themselves against interference in religious life, and churches, - as sacred places - should enjoy autonomy according to the law.*⁹

He points out that the restrictions were imposed unilaterally, without consultation. Moreover, the Church was treated worse than commercial enterprises, as an insignificant institution in people's lives. Finally, a conciliatory tone follows. The President writes that the Church is submitting to these unilateral decisions as it does not want to undermine the decisions of the state authorities in an extremely difficult situation. However, the restrictions require analysis and drawing the right conclusions. In fact, it is about the good of democracy and the need to preserve religious freedom.

The Question of Vaccination Against COVID-19

The pandemic caused by SARS-Cov2 virus affects the religious life and ethical choices of people not only in social life but also in religious life.¹⁰ Vaccination also has an important place in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ Therefore, the position of the Church and its most important institutions is not indifferent in this regard, as a significant number of the faithful continue to follow its advice. The Catholic Church in Poland, in the persons of the most important hierarchs, has supported, not always decisively, the pro-vaccination activities of state institutions. It is worth noting that the example of Pope Francis I was often invoked. Specifically, on 9 January 2021, Pope Francis I gave an interview to Italian TV Channel 5, during which he strongly advocated vaccination against SARS-Cov-2. The Pope said he had reserved a place to receive the vaccine as part of a vaccination drive at the Vatican. He urged everyone to take the vaccine in order to protect not only their own health but also other people. He stressed that, ethically, everyone should accept the vaccine. We cannot ignore the fact that, despite their declared fidelity to the Holy See, a certain group did not necessarily notice this statement. We cannot exclude the fact that there are also such believers who will trivialize the Pope's words. They will say, after all, this is not the opinion of a medical specialist. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that a large group of Catholics in Poland, especially since the times of John Paul II, often follow the advice of popes. As far as the vaccination against SARS-Cov-2 is concerned, also Polish bishops and priests have expressed their readiness to accept the vaccine. This includes, for example, the Polish Primate, Bishop Wojciech Polak, who saw vaccination as an expression of concern for the weakest, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Warsaw, Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz, and the Auxiliary Bishop of the Warsaw-Praga Diocese, Jacek Grzybowski. The team of experts on bioethics of the Polish Episcopal Conference took a similar stance. Also worth noting is a statement made by the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference on 8 July 2021. Of course, Gądecki mentioned Pope Francis.

The Archbishop of Poznań reminded the audience that the COVID-19 vaccination is an important tool to help fight the spread of infections, and many people see it as a hope for a return to normal society. He expressed support for all those who have accepted the vaccination. He pointed out that "vaccination should not lead to the neglect of other elements important in limiting the spread of SARS-Cov-2 infection". Two things are important to note in this context. First, a large percentage of unvaccinated people live in the south of Poland, the most religious areas of the country, and therefore the most committed to the Holy See. This fact leads to questions about the relationship between Catholic teaching and the ethical choices of the faithful. Second, the strong support for vaccination does not mean that so-called "covid passports" will be introduced in connection with the fourth wave of the pandemic. This was clearly emphasized by Archbishop Wojciech Polak, who noted that religious communities follow rules, and these include the obligation to

wear masks and disinfect hands. Churches will be open to the faithful regardless of whether they have a “covid passport” or are recovered.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Decline in Religious Participation

As is known, in the case of COVID-19, a significant transmission of the virus occurs during close contact between people, forcing countries to take drastic restrictions on personal relationships.¹² No doubt religious practices will be affected, if only because religious life is largely based on interpersonal relationships and gestures. From a Catholic perspective, almost all religious practices have a communal dimension. Meanwhile, studies show that in European countries we still encounter a decreasing participation of the faithful in church religious life. The number of consecrated persons is also decreasing every year.¹³ These processes also concern Poland, considered as a country with a high involvement of the faithful in religious life. Of course, the decline in support for the Church is not only due to the situation with the pandemic, but rather to the rather open cooperation of the superiors with the government and covering up cases of sexual abuse of minors. Not without significance are the cases of cooperation of some hierarchs with the former communist regime, which have been made public. One should also not forget that the process of secularization, independent from the pandemic, has a significant impact on the life of European and world religious communities. However, it would be a mistake to think that a clear decline in support will take place in the short term.

In this context, the statements of writers, celebrities and singers, who publicly declare apostasy, that is, leaving the Church and abandoning Catholicism, become important. The reasons given most often include the Church’s attitude towards women, same-sex relations or non-believers. It is worth noting that these arguments are not always supported by previous analyses of documents and the official teaching of the Church. Nor are these declarations always understood by the hierarchy. For example, in a letter addressed to the faithful on the occasion of the beginning of Lent in 2021, Archbishop Stanislaw Gądecki stated that there is always a way back for apostates. Since it leads through conversion, therefore “I am requesting prayer and fasting for such intentions”.¹⁴

Let us recall that just before and during the pandemic, numerous research centers conducted studies on religious life in Poland. According to a 2019 study conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies, the Catholic Church in Poland was not highly trusted among young people, who increasingly consider themselves less religious. The survey included 16 to 34 year-olds living in major metropolitan areas. Slightly more than 70 percent of respondents indicated that they are Catholics, and about 20 percent declared that they do not follow any religion.¹⁵ However, one should not forget that there is a belief among a large group of young people that a strong faith can protect them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perhaps this is related to the traditional “the image of God as a good and merciful father who will be able to save us from all evil and suffering”.¹⁶

Regardless of all this, the Catholic Church is still the largest community of believers in Poland. According to data released in 2018 by the Central Statistical Office, more than thirty-two million people were baptized in this Church. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2018, almost 40% of the faithful attended Sunday mass, with a much higher rate in the southern part of the country. In large cities such as Warsaw or Łódź, the statistics in this regard are much lower. They do not exceed 20%. These data are much more meaningful when we recall that the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church has over 150 thousand members, the Evangelical-Augsburg Church over 61 thousand, and the Evangelical-Reformed Church less than five thousand.

In conclusion to this subsection, let us say that, given the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to judge what percentage of the faithful will return to regular religious practices after the pandemic restrictions are revoked. However, we can expect that some percentage of the faithful will “wean” themselves from regular attendance at Sunday gatherings. It should also be noted that leaving the Church is not an abrupt process, at least in the group dimension.

Between Tradition and Modernity - Selected Aspects of Religious Life

The Catholic Church in Poland still has to face the tension that exists between the traditional approach of its faithful and the challenges that were outlined after the Second Vatican Council. This applies to all aspects of life, including changes in the liturgy and attitudes towards other faiths and religions. These tensions have been made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ These include the virtual participation of the faithful in liturgical gatherings and the problem of the physical possibility of receiving communion.¹⁸ Examples of other difficulties and tensions include the manner in which communion is received and inter-religious dialogue. Thus, it should be recalled that a significant group of the faithful, apart from small communities in Poland, continue to receive communion in the mouth. This issue takes on particular importance in the context of a pandemic, where the possibility of infection and spread of the virus increases.¹⁹ The bishops encouraged the reception of communion by hand, keeping in mind the health of both the faithful and the clergy. The Archbishop of Łódź wrote that the virus is transmitted airborne by respiratory droplets, so care should be taken not to put others at risk. Once the pandemic subsides, it will be possible to return to previous practices. The position of many bishops was related to the actions of the Father Piotr Skarga Society for Christian Culture, which sent letters to many parishes urging both the faithful and clergy to maintain the traditional way of distributing and receiving communion. On 3 October even Bishop Adam Bałabuch, Chairman of the Commission for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of the Polish Episcopal Conference,

intervened. He pointed out that both ways of receiving the Eucharist are worthy.

On the other hand, the Commission for Dialogue of the Polish Episcopal Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council, which cooperates in the field of doctrinal dialogue and in the organization of joint services also functions during the pandemic.²⁰ The cooperation of the Churches during the pandemic should be particularly visible in joint actions at the local level. In Poland, the importance of ecumenical dialogue and mutual cooperation is emphasized during traditional ecumenical services, which are held from 18 to 25 January each year. In 2021, many of the services were abandoned. Instead, a central service was held on 23 January 2021 in the archdiocese of Łódź. The sermon was given by the President of the Polish Ecumenical Council, the head of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church, Bishop Jerzy Samiec. He emphasized that all actions and words which are full of hatred, hostility, aggression, exclusion, xenophobia, and fanaticism, even when they are uttered allegedly in the name of Jesus, do not come from Him. On the following day, a service was held at St. Matthew's Evangelical Church. The Lutheran pastor, Michał Makula, asked about the meaning of ecumenism and stressed that it cannot concentrate on facade gestures. Ecumenism is needed because mixed religious couples have to struggle with divisions. Everyone, including clergy, should learn ecumenism from mixed marriages. It should not be forgotten that ecumenical prayers of Christians were held in Kalisz, Żychlin, Strzyżew, Cracow, Lublin, Janów Lubelski, Opole, Kamiień Śląski, Poznań, Szczecin, Katowice and Częstochowa, Kielce, Gdańsk, Warsaw and Wrocław.²¹ Let us add that the Way of the Cross on Good Friday and the Way of Light on the first Sunday after Easter are also broadcast on social media.

Undoubtedly, interreligious dialogue plays an important role during the pandemic. Followers of different religions should

*come together in promoting the life and dignity of the human person, a sense of community and participation, respecting the rights and responsibilities of each person.*²²

On 17 January every year the Catholic Church in Poland organizes the Day of Judaism. In 2021 it was held for the twenty-sixth time. Both Jews and Catholics participate in prayers organized in churches and synagogues. They are accompanied by concerts, lectures, symposia and recollections of places where Jewish religious life was vibrant before the war. This year's celebrations were preceded by a press conference with the participation of Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, Bishop Romuald Kamiński, Ordinary of the Warsaw-Praga Diocese, and Bishop Rafał Markowski. Moreover, on the day following the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the 21st Day of Islam in the Catholic Church was held. Similarly to the Day of Judaism, the celebrations were broadcast on social media. The Day of Islam is a pioneering Church initiative on a global scale. In 2021, celebrations were also

organized in Lublin and Cracow.

We can say that the COVID-19 pandemic has not prompted a certain group of believers in the traditional approach to receiving communion. However, the superiors tried to maintain a certain restraint in encouraging the faithful to change their attitude. This moderation did not make itself known in ecumenical events.

Concluding Remarks

During the pandemic the Catholic Church uses public television and private broadcasters in reaching out to the faithful to transmit its services. It increasingly uses social media, where sermons, services and numerous publications are posted. During the pandemic, it had to abandon, as did other religious associations, many traditional forms of pastoral care, such as visiting Catholic homes just after Christmas. It is also important to remember that clergy are falling ill and dying from coronavirus. The Church continues to support hospices and health care. Yet it should not be forgotten that moral scandals of the clergy are constantly being revealed. The Church does not have the best reputation due to the revealed cases of collaboration of the hierarchy with the communists. The negative opinions of Poles about the political engagement of their superiors are alarming. This does not change the fact that the Church is the most numerous and still has significant social support. Of course, there are individual public dissents from the Church. However, these phenomena are not widely known, if only due to the involvement of society in the fight against the pandemic.

About the author

Grzegorz Ignatowski is a professor at the University of Social Sciences. In his academic work he mainly deals with ethics, corporate social responsibility, family businesses, and issues related to the importance of religion in professional life. His most recent co-authored publications: *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland*, *Religions* 11, no 5 (5 May 2020): 254, *The Perception of Organisational Nepotism Depending on the Membership in Selected Christian Churches*, *Religions* 11, no 1 (18 January 2020): 47, *Brand Management of Catholic Church in Poland*, *“Religions”* 11, no 11 (November 14, 2020), *Risk of Increased Acceptance for Organizational Nepotism and Cronyism during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, *Risk in Contemporary Management*, *Risk* 9, no 4, (March 24, 2021):59. At the University of Social Sciences, he serves as Dean of the Faculty of Management and Chair of the University’s Ethics Committee. He is a reviewer of numerous papers in the field of professional and social ethics.

Endnotes

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Contact

Center for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE-HSG)
University of St.Gallen
Müller-Friedberg-Str. 6/8
CH-9000 St.Gallen
Switzerland
Phone: +41 (0) 71 224 25 61
Email: euxeinos@unisg.ch
URL: www.euxeinos.ch

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