

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.

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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 Stephane Kalaijishvili 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*.

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