

Editorial

The Pandemic and the Paradox of Orthodoxy

by Tornike Metreveli

The COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, profoundly affecting religious practices and challenging age-old traditions within Orthodox Christian communities. This special issue¹ examines how faith among the ordinary parishioners, religious traditions of the institution of church and political interests of the ruling elites intersected with major public health crisis. It draws on ethnographic research conducted throughout the pandemic, from the emergence of the first COVID-19 cases to the development of vaccines and the eventual lifting of restrictions. The data gathering included narrative analysis, representative surveys, and interviews with clergy and believers.²

The pandemic demonstrated the pervasiveness of fideistic epistemology among influential clergy and theologians, which informed churches' approach to the implementation of sanitary measures designed to combat the spread of the coronavirus.³ In the context of the pandemic, fideistic beliefs were predicated on three key assumptions: that faith is more powerful than physical reality; that robust belief provides immunity to viruses; and that the implementation of sanitary measures in churches is indicative of weak faith.⁴

In those churches where fideistic worldviews were prevalent, we observed profound institutional resistance against health measures, higher engagement in contagious religious rituals and practices and broader COVID vaccine resistance.⁵ Decentralized character of Orthodox Christianity was a factor here. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church with its centralized authority in the Pope, Orthodox Christianity lacks a single unifying figure; each autocephalous church operates independently under local patriarchs and political influences.⁶ This structure led to diverse interpretations and implementations of public health measures, reflecting each region's socio-political context. Interactions between religious and secular authorities, shaped by historical and cultural factors, further complicated these responses. Some ecclesiastical leaders aligned with government directives, prioritizing public health and cooperation. Others resisted restrictions, emphasizing religious freedom and autonomy—often justified by fideistic reasoning and local political pressures.⁷ The pandemic thus tested the adaptability and, to an extent, political instincts of Orthodox churches.

The advent of the global pandemic of 2020 acted as a catalyst, amplifying and intensifying pre-existing tendencies within Orthodox communities to embrace conspiracy theories. These theories, frequently advanced by right-wing politicians and grounded in long-standing concerns about modernity, globalization, and the

perceived decline of Orthodox identity, flourished in the context of the uncertainty and fear generated by the pandemic. The virus, its origins, and the public health measures implemented to combat it were frequently situated within a narrative of malevolent global conspiracies aimed at undermining traditional values and controlling populations. This conspiratorial mindset was further fueled by misinformation and distrust towards both secular authorities and scientific expertise, leading some to reject public health guidelines and embrace alternative, often unproven, remedies. This phenomenon not only hindered efforts to control the pandemic in the Orthodox world, but also deepened existing divisions within the church and society at large, as different groups interpreted the crisis through vastly different lenses.

Ukraine: A Mosaic of Responses

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) proactively adopted social distancing and complied with state regulations. In contrast, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was more hesitant, emphasizing communal gatherings. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) fully complied with state guidelines, promoting vaccination and socially distanced services. Communication breakdowns and unclear guidance from hierarchs amplified these issues. Tetiana Kalenychenko argues in her article that the UOC-MP’s resistance stemmed from a desire to preserve traditions and avoid alienating its conservative followers. The pandemic also worsened existing trends of declining church attendance, making it harder to maintain community connections during restrictions. Tensions escalated, leading to disagreements among parishioners and even clergy within the same church.

Despite recognizing the threat, all three churches aimed to keep their doors open. The UGCC provided structured instructions to its clergy, while the UOC-MP faced public scandals due to its initial denial of the pandemic, leading to accusations of being “anti-vaxxers.” The OCU saw decreased attendance and struggled with internal communication but also noticed an influx of younger members seeking answers to existential questions. Each church grappled with the meaning of rituals, the use of technology, and how to adapt ancient practices in a modern crisis. Kalenychenko’s article shows how the pandemic spurred innovative responses and a reevaluation of the church’s role.

Romania and Bulgaria: Ambivalence and Contradictions

In Romania, the Orthodox Church generally aligned with government health measures. However, many prominent figures, especially in monastic circles, openly opposed vaccination and spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. This internal conflict, as Lucian Leustean shows, intensified by the rise of the right-wing Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, led to increased polarization and

decreased trust in science. Disputes arose over traditional practices like using a shared spoon for communion versus adopting safer methods. Emphasizing spiritual solutions, such as prayer and relic processions, often overshadowed scientific approaches. These challenges contributed to Romania's low vaccination rate and high COVID-19 mortality. Despite this, the church highlighted its charitable work during the pandemic, emphasizing its social role. In Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church initially resisted restrictions and maintained close ties with the government under Prime Minister Borisov, who used religious rhetoric for political purposes. The church's reluctance to endorse vaccination and lack of transparency about infected clergy led to declining public confidence. When a new government critical of the church's pandemic response took office, relations strained further. Leustean argues that the churches' hesitance to promote vaccination likely contributed to the high mortality rates in both countries.

Greece and Cyprus: Tradition vs. Adaptation

In Greece and Cyprus, the pandemic heightened tensions between those holding firmly to traditional practices and those open to change. Conspiracy theories blaming international organizations and even figures like Bill Gates for orchestrating a "new world order" gained some traction. Initially, disbelief and labeling the pandemic as "fake news" were common, especially among those who saw restrictions on religious gatherings as attacks on Orthodox faith and measures like vaccination as threats to Orthodox identity and freedom. Strict lockdowns, including closing places of worship, met resistance against restrictions and skepticism toward science. Some clergy even held secret services in defiance of the rules, justified by a belief in the church's exceptionalism and fideistic rationale.

The disruption of regular rituals led - to what Vasilios Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou called - "ritual arrhythmia," causing anxiety, fear, and a sense of loss among believers. Yet, it also sparked innovation. Parishioners, often led by women, established "domestic churches," and virtual worship became a new avenue for practicing faith. The debate over continuing the traditional shared spoon for communion highlighted the challenge of reconciling deep-seated beliefs with scientific knowledge. Vaccine hesitancy, fueled by misinformation and skepticism, underscored the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility. While some embraced increased religiosity through prayer and online services, others questioned the authenticity of virtual worship.

Serbia: Diverse Practices and Theological Debates

Within the Serbian Orthodox Church, opinions on liturgical adaptations and communion varied widely among bishops, clergy, and laity. As Stefan Radojkovic explains, the key issue was how to administer the Holy Communion safely. This sparked extensive discussions, with various theological and practical arguments

leading to a range of religious practices. The Holy Synod issued guidelines that were often vague, resulting in different responses—from strict adherence to open defiance of restrictions, though most chose to stay home. Some priests altered the traditional shared spoon practice by using multiple spoons or pouring wine directly into communicants' mouths to ensure greater safety. Similar to other case studies in this special issue, adaptations led to theological debates between those firmly upholding tradition and those prioritizing public health. Despite the differences, communion remained essential for Orthodox believers in Serbia. The pandemic significantly affected Easter celebrations both in Belgrade and in the regions, with some churches conducting services without congregants while others facing criticism for allowing gatherings. Due to the isolation of the Serbian community in Kosovo-Metohija eparchy, for example, these adaptations, such as limiting attendance at services and using alternative spaces (e.g., outside the church), were driven by both epidemiological considerations and the need to avoid confrontation with local authorities. The Church served not only as a religious institution, but as a support system, particularly in Serbian enclaves, where it was often the only reliable institution helping the local population. This contrasted with the more structured and diverse responses observed in urban areas like Belgrade.

Faith in the Face of Fear

Amid the devastating loss and grief caused by COVID-19, the faithful longed for the comfort and solidarity of communal religious practices which manifested in a significant increase in religiosity worldwide as the pandemic unfolded. However, the extent of this resurgence varied; more secular societies experienced smaller increases in religious activity compared to those with strong religious foundations.⁸

For Orthodox Christians, the pandemic posed profound challenges. Centuries-old traditions—such as shared spoon communion, kissing icons, and gathering for large services—were suddenly at odds with public health necessities. Difficult decisions had to be made about modifying these sacred rituals, balancing religious freedom with social responsibility, and rethinking the role of technology in worship. Some churches introduced individual spoons for communion or sanitized icons between veneration, while others resisted any changes, viewing them as a compromise of their faith.

The decentralized nature of Orthodox Christianity was both a vulnerability and an asset. Without a unified response, variations in compliance and resistance to government restrictions emerged among clergy and laity. Diverse theological interpretations led to internal disagreements and public disputes, affecting the church's perceived unity. For example, while some churches embraced livestreamed services and encouraged safety protocols, other jurisdictions were slower to adapt, leading to confusion and frustration among the faithful. Yet, decentralization allowed for adaptability too. Our special issue shows how clergy and believers

found innovative ways to practice their faith, sometimes at the expense of negating the state-imposed health protocols. For example, online services became prevalent, outdoor liturgies allowed congregations with relative safety.

The pandemic also brought profound theological questions to the forefront and forced the churches to address these questions anew. Confronted with mortality, suffering, and disrupted rituals, many revisited the age-old question of theodicy—how to reconcile a benevolent, all-powerful God with the existence of evil and suffering. As we showed in the edited book through diverse case studies, some churches saw the pandemic as divine punishment or a test of faith, emphasizing repentance and spiritual renewal. Others focused on compassion and active efforts to alleviate suffering, embracing scientific measures to prevent further loss⁹. This diversity of views highlighted ongoing theological debates¹⁰ in Orthodox Christian theology about God’s providence, the meaning of suffering, and human responsibility.¹¹

The special issue demonstrates how pandemic exposed a deep divide within the Orthodox Church between those clinging to tradition and those advocating for adaptation. This tension manifested in concerns over individual agency versus communal responsibility and the church’s role in a rapidly modernizing world. Fears about societal change led to a rise in conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy among some believers, challenging both clergy and laity. The response to these issues had implications not only for internal unity but, as surveys showed, also for the church’s public role and influence.¹²

This ongoing tension between tradition and modernity raises critical questions for Orthodoxy’s future. Can the church reconcile these opposing forces without compromising its core values? Does the pandemic signal a turning point for Orthodox churches and communities, pushing them toward a more engaged reflection on their theological stances on science, health, and social responsibility? Addressing these questions will require to find a balance between faith and reason, tradition and innovation, individual freedom and communal responsibility. The special issue highlighted the extent to which the pandemic prompted a broader reflection on the role of religious institutions in promoting public health while staying true to their spiritual mission. The global health crisis has served as a catalyst for reflection and discussion within the Orthodox Church. It remains to be seen whether this will prompt a profound reconsideration of the manner in which the Church can engage with the challenges of a rapidly advancing world without compromising its rich heritage and traditions.

About the author

Tornike Metreveli is Associate Senior Lecturer in European Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology of Religions at Lund University, Sweden. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology, University of Bern. Prior to joining Lund University, Metreveli had scholarships at Harvard University (in Ukraine Research Institute and Davis Center), University of St. Gallen and London School of Economics. A scholar of nationalism with an MSc in Nationalism Studies from the University of Edinburgh, Tornike's research focuses on the intersection of nationalism and Christianity. His first book, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia* (Routledge, 2021), examines the role of Orthodox Christianity in the post-communist political transitions in Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia. Metreveli has led several research projects, including *Coronavirus: A New Test(ament) of Orthodox Christianity*, which explored the responses of Orthodox churches to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a second edited book, *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Routledge 2023). Tornike also led the Religion and the Wars of the 21st Century project, creating ReWars21 open data repository on the role of religion in recent conflicts. His project *Territoriality of the Georgian Orthodox Church* won him the EU Prize for Journalism in 2022.

Endnotes

- 1 The articles are condensed versions of chapters from Tornike Metreveli's edited volume, *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (London: Routledge 2023) resulting from the GCE-funded "Coronavirus: A New Test(ament) of Orthodox Christianity A comparative analysis of 12 European countries" project led by Tornike Metreveli. For earlier results of the COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity project, please also consult "Impacts of the Pandemic on the Georgian Orthodox Church." *Euxeinos: Governance & Culture in the Black Sea Region* (2) 33, 2022.
- 2 In light of the sensitive subject matter and the inherent challenges of conducting research during the pandemic, some articles in this special issue diverge from traditional academic formats. These articles incorporate raw field notes, personal observations, and unfiltered narratives alongside rigorous analysis. This unconventional approach permitted researchers a multi-layered comprehension of the pandemic's impact on Orthodox communities. It illuminates not only the intellectual debates, policy concessions, and institutional logic of church-state relations but also the emotional struggles and adaptations that occurred in real time.
- 3 Kalenychenko, Tetiana; Hovorun, Cyril; and Brik Tymofii. "Church Fragmentation and the Pandemic: Analysis of Four Eastern Christian Groups in Ukraine." In Metreveli, Tornike (eds.) *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, pp. 14-35. Routledge, 2023.
- 4 Milbank, John. *Theology and social theory: Beyond secular reason*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- 5 Metreveli, Tornike. "Impacts of the Pandemic on the Georgian Orthodox Church." *Euxeinos: Governance & Culture in the Black Sea Region* 11, no. 33, 2022.
- 6 Hovorun, Cyril. *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2018.
- 7 See Kalenychenko, Hovorun, Brik on divergent responses of Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate).
- 8 Bentzen, Jeanet Sinding. "In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 192: 541–583, 2021.
- 9 See Metreveli (eds.) 2023.
- 10 Papanikolaou, Aristotle, George E. Demacopoulos, Ashley M. Purpura, and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds. *Faith, Reason, and Theosis*. Fordham University Press, 2023.
- 11 Makrides, Vasilios N. "Orthodox Christianity, modernity and postmodernity: Overview, analysis and assessment." *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 3-4 (2012): 248-285.
- 12 Brik, Tymofii, and Tornike Metreveli. "Shots of Faith: The Influence of Christian Nationalism on Vaccination Behaviour in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro during the COVID-19 Pandemic." In *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, pp. 170-185. Routledge, 2023.