

Ritual Arrhythmia and Religious Dissonance: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Greek and Cypriot Orthodoxies

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This article analyzes the discussion and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic within the Orthodox Churches of Greece and Cyprus. First, we investigate the attitudes, responses, and reactions of these churches towards the various facets of the pandemic. Second, our research also covers the area of “lived religion” by exploring the religious practices of active believers and their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits and towards official church policies. Using Lefebvre’s “rhythmanalysis,” we concentrate on the phenomenon of “ritual arrhythmia” that resulted not only in the disruption of ritual life, but also in ritual transformation and innovation. By combining these two different strands of research, we aim to provide a more holistic picture of what “pandemic Orthodoxy” looked like in our specific contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Orthodox Church, Greece, Cyprus, church/state, rigorism/fundamentalism, conspiracy theories, lived Orthodoxy, ritual arrhythmia

Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic created numerous unprecedented challenges for all religions around the globe, including the Orthodox Christian Churches and cultures. Historically speaking, the Orthodox Churches were not against protection measures during such acute health emergencies in the past and also supported the use of scientific medicine in overcoming them. However, the recent pandemic often revealed a different face – one in which many Orthodox actors questioned medical authorities and refused hygienic and other measures (including vaccination) while relying exclusively on the powers of God and the supernatural to combat the pandemic. In this article, we focus our gaze on the impact of the pandemic within the Orthodox Churches of Greece and Cyprus (with some references to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople) in an attempt to locate common patterns of Orthodox responses and reactions towards it. We shall consider the main problems resulting from the pandemic and how they were addressed in both official and unofficial Orthodox discourses. In addition, we shall also cast a view on the area of “lived Orthodoxy” by examining the practices of active believers and

their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits.

The Pandemic in Various Orthodox Discourses: The Issues at Stake

What were the specific aspects of the pandemic that were touched upon in Orthodox discourses, official and unofficial alike? In most cases, they were interrelated and fell under the following categories:

A first issue that characterized almost all the debates surrounding the pandemic from the very beginning was its constant contextualization on a broader conspiracy canvas, to which an “Orthodox twist” was usually given. Orthodox cultures in general have a particular penchant towards constructing conspiracy scenarios in a religious framework; for example, due to their problem-ridden relations to Western Christianity and the West in general. Hence, both Greece and Cyprus very quickly became prime locations of such phenomena.¹ The pandemic in its individual aspects was accordingly portrayed, usually in a diffused way, as part of an internationalist plan aimed at creating a global government and religion, connected to the curtailment of national sovereignty, personal freedom, and Orthodox identity. Such imagined scenarios became widespread especially within the broader current of Orthodox rigorism/fundamentalism. In Cyprus, a bishop that made headlines in this context was Neophytos, Metropolitan of Morphou, whose influence could also be observed among many believers in Greece as well. According to him, the pandemic was part of such a “new world order” aimed at eliminating large numbers of people globally in order to create a new elitist and obedient generation of humans.

In connection to the above point, a further reaction to the pandemic in the first months after its eruption was its full negation, combined with an underestimation of the dangers posed by it (e.g., coronavirus downgraded to a mere flu). The whole issue was presented by many Orthodox believers as “fake news” obfuscating ulterior hidden motives, such as disorienting people by making them susceptible to central control and manipulation. The early strict measures taken by the Greek and Cypriot governments regarding Orthodox worship, which especially affected the Holy Week and Easter services, were deemed as a camouflaged attempt to alter the Orthodox character of the respective countries. In addition, the fact that the Orthodox Churches finally complied with the state measures was often interpreted as a betrayal of their prophetic mission in society and their authentic identity.

Moreover, even greater reactions were provoked within the church hierarchy and among numerous believers by the state decisions about an obligatory confinement and restriction rules in the spring of 2020 including shutdowns, lockdowns, exit strategies, isolation, and social distancing, which were also applied to church buildings and services. Such restrictions were not only assumed to impinge upon religious freedom and basic human rights, but also seen as exhibiting a clear anti-Orthodox spirit. Church services experienced dramatic changes during Lent,

Holy Week and Easter and took place solely with the presence of a few clergy and personnel. Instead, the faithful could celebrate them at home, either by following the services digitally or performing rituals symbolically (e.g., on the balconies and the yards of their homes holding candles during the Easter service). Popular pilgrimage places were also affected by these measures.² Officially, despite initial reservations, the churches kept an attitude of compromise, supporting the state measures and legitimizing such alternative modes of worship (e.g., through the concept of “domestic church”). However, simultaneously, several bishops, priests and monks disobeyed state and church prescriptions and kept performing “secret liturgies” linking them symbolically in the Orthodox mind to the persecutions experienced by the early Christians in the Roman Empire. As the pandemic lingered on, additional disruptions and restructurings of Orthodox ritual life continued well into the spring of 2021 (e.g., celebrating Easter at 21.00 instead of the traditional 24.00 o’clock). Given the importance of every detail in the Orthodox ritual tradition, such measures were deemed by many believers as grave deviations from the sacred tradition. Interestingly enough, reactions to such state measures also came from the medical side. In Cyprus, there was a petition signed by 152 doctors and nursing personnel addressed to the Cypriot President taking a stance against lockdown measures and supporting the Orthodox tradition, which were, in the end however, dismissed as populist interventions into church affairs by Archbishop Chrysostomos II.

An immediate consequence of such social distancing measures was the enhanced digitalization of the entire spectrum of human life and work including the Orthodox ritual domain. This change triggered widespread fears about a fully virtual church life, a development that would have multiple repercussions for the self-conceptualization of Orthodox Christianity as an “embodied religion,” as Orthodox worship strongly feeds on a sense of community and interpersonal relations. For example, a virtual community of believers could never amount to the experiential advantages and the emotional significance of celebrating Easter in presence in a church building with all the ritual richness and festivities. In other words, the pandemic brought about an era of “ritual arrhythmia,” by which we refer to an overall disruption of habitual ritual life, which will be taken under scrutiny in the next section. Officially, however, the enforced digitalization of ecclesiastical life was regarded as a temporary measure that was justifiable according to the principle of “church economy” (i.e., the lenient application of church rules). In any event, this did not pertain to the sacrament of the Eucharist, a very sensitive issue during the pandemic.

What is also striking is that in this context even the state-imposed hygienic and other protection measures were met with an ambiguous stance by numerous Orthodox actors. These measures included: the obligatory use of facemasks, antiseptics for hand disinfection, controlled waiting of worshippers at the entrance

of church buildings, safety distances, and a limit on the maximum number of people allowed inside a church building, as well as insuring for their good ventilation, refraining from shaking hands, frequent and meticulous cleaning of icons, other religious objects and surfaces, and the distribution of the consecrated bread with rubber gloves. In general, both Orthodox Churches officially supported these new rules, and there is also evidence that many believers seemed to comply with them too. Markedly – especially in light of the hygienic anxiety brought about by the pandemic –, the Holy Communion and the traditional way of its distribution were not touched upon by the state in the framework of these obligatory measures, which was a development that generally pleased the respective church leaderships. However, in reality, various parish priests professing dissident views allowed parishioners to bypass these measures or not to apply them at all. Following a “logic of transcendence,” they believed that under the protection of God sanitary measures in a church building, the abode of God, were trivial and totally unnecessary. Be that as it may, the growing neglect of such measures led to a rising number of infections in church buildings resulting in many deaths of priests and even bishops.

One of the measures that was especially targeted was the obligatory use of facemasks. The main pro-mask argument on the side of the church referenced the protection of oneself and the others – a central action of Christian responsibility based on the love of one’s neighbor. Yet, opinions did vary on this matter considerably. Many Orthodox believers interpreted facemasks as a means to curtail the very characteristics of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, as they could hide and constrain emotions, sentiments, individuality, and freedom. The latter are considered indispensable in the context of the multisensory Orthodox worship (e.g., for the visual and physical interaction between icons and believers). Such masks could thus lead to a non-physical, artificial disruption of the divine-human communion. Wearing masks especially in the holy place of a church building was also regarded as a symbol of a distorted and deficient view of Orthodox faith, as where there is faith, there should be no fear, which the mask had become emblematic of. Hence, there have been incidents of priests interrupting religious services and asking individual participants to take off their facemasks.

Turning our attention now to the sacrament of the Holy Communion, this was a very sensitive issue because of the way it is traditionally transmitted to the faithful, namely by using a common chalice and a shared spoon.³ This practice had triggered some suspicions or fears in the past about the potential transmission of viruses due to the unavoidable mixing of human saliva. Yet, in practical terms, this has never been an issue, and no measures were ever taken due to a potential epidemiological problem. This sacrament was always considered to prove the “supernatural” and “miraculous” character of Orthodox worship, given that it has never been associated with a pandemic eruption or the spread of diseases in

the past. As already mentioned, during the recent pandemic, its suspension was never part of the protection measures imposed by the state. For the Greek and Cypriot Churches, the whole matter was *a priori* non-negotiable. The same stance was initially kept by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, yet it came to finally adopt a more lenient policy in June 2020, especially because of its numerous dioceses around the globe, which had to obey to local state prescriptions.⁴ This gave the leeway for various policies in each different country. For example, in Germany the Greek Orthodox Metropolis had to completely suspend this ritual for believers. Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, on the other hand, approved the use of separate disposable spoons for the Holy Communion.

Interestingly enough, some prominent medical experts (e.g., the epidemiologists Eleni Giamarellou and Athina Linou) in Greece publicly claimed that the Holy Communion does not pose a public health threat, because it is a mystery and a miracle performed by God. Similar opinions were formulated by other medical experts.⁵ Yet, such judgements were deemed to be at odds with the medical profession as such, hence causing the outrage of their more secular colleagues. In any event, there are no reliable epidemiological data about the potential transmission of diseases through Holy Communion. There is solely one serious study of the US Centers for Control and Prevention of Diseases (CDC), which did not provide any specific data that this ritual transmits infectious diseases.⁶ Theoretically, there is a risk of contamination of healthy people through a common communion cup and related germ exposure,⁷ but no outbreaks of diseases were linked to this practice. In Cyprus, the same issue was raised in the aforementioned petition of doctors and nursing personnel, who fully supported the dominant Orthodox account about the miraculous sacrament of the Holy Communion. The entire discussion revealed once more the constant blurring of boundaries between religion and science as well as the sheer ambiguity surrounding this sacrament and its understanding.

A final aspect of the pandemic that was very controversially discussed throughout 2021 until the spring of 2022 involved the issue of vaccination. The whole issue concerned a multifaceted anti-vaccine movement of global proportions including members of the medical profession and far beyond the religious domain. Numerous Orthodox actors became quite vocal in objecting vaccination (especially vaccines with an RNA technique) within a conspiracy framework. There was a large array of theological or pseudo-scientific anti-vaccine arguments, while the state-imposed obligatory vaccination was discarded as a new form of totalitarianism restricting human freedom. Empirical surveys have shown that the percentage of unvaccinated persons was considerably high in church milieus, monasteries, ecclesiastical academies, and university schools of theology.⁸ In Greece, the church issued an official encyclical aimed at offering persuasive answers to all queries and doubts about vaccines,⁹ but this was not effective in curbing the anti-vaccine opposition among the clergy. It is thus not accidental that numerous unvaccinated bishops,

priests, and monks died as a result of their disapproval. The most prominent case in the public eye concerned the Metropolitan of Aitolia and Akarnania Kosmas, who even refused medical help and hospitalization. Nevertheless, the majority of the Greek clergy were in favor of vaccination. In Cyprus, the previously mentioned Metropolitan Neophytos continued his conspiracy-driven anti-vaccine rhetoric. Characteristically, the Church of Greece officially called on its Cypriot counterpart to ask the outspoken Metropolitan to tone down his rhetoric due to its wider detrimental influence among the faithful in Greece as well. Officially, the Cypriot Archbishop Chrysostomos II issued strong guidelines for priests and theologians to receive vaccination and backed the government's related campaign from the very start.

Pandemic Implications on “Lived Orthodoxy”

Drawing on interviews and fieldwork mainly in Greece, our research also covered the area of “lived religion” during the pandemic, which was characterized by an emergence of new forms of ritual behavior. Using Lefebvre’s “rhythmanalysis,”¹⁰ we categorized the consequences of the pandemic as “ritual arrhythmia,” especially because churchgoers were deprived from the possibility of being present in important Orthodox services and rituals including the Holy Week and Easter. This meant a breakdown of the usual time-space structures of religious experience with dramatic effects on the lives of believers. Despite criticism and opposition, most of our interlocutors could understand the logic behind the state-imposed protection measures. This was also because the stance of the church at the beginning was particularly criticized on social and other media by various secular actors as lacking the necessary flexibility in the view of the enormous challenges posed by the pandemic.¹¹ On the other hand, some of our interlocutors interpreted the measures taken (e.g., the silencing of church bells) not only as unnecessary, but also as part of a war against the church and Orthodoxy. Such criticisms reflected the need to reclaim the rhythm of ritual life, thereby resisting the silence that might have resulted through the complete annihilation of Orthodox identity. In general, “ritual arrhythmia” produced, on the one hand, a crisis of the collective Orthodox identity exemplified in fears, violent reactions, and discord within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and between the clergy, the laity, and the state. On the other hand, it also allowed for creative strategies of adaptation and innovation in Orthodox rituals, beliefs, and practices. The final result was not so much a coherent scheme of action, but rather a multitude of religious responses and practices, both on the part of the official church and of the laity.

While the closure of churches and the prohibitions on religious practices were opposed by our interlocutors, they usually found new ways to observe their rituals, either through livestreaming liturgical services on their computer or television screens or creating a “domestic church” in their homes. One female interlocutor

even turned her dining table into a “Holy Altar,” covered with a white lace cloth and adorned with icons, an oil lamp, and big candlesticks. This was a means to compensate for the lost “liveness” of the church, both as a space filled with sacred objects that produce specific embodied experiences of the divine and as a space for the congregation of the faithful. It was a symbolic relocation of the church in the domestic sphere, manifesting more private and informal religious experiences and practices centered on individual and familial needs and concerns – especially on part of women who have always been the virtuosi of everyday Orthodox practices. The sensuous character and the important role, which materiality plays in shaping the religious experience of the laity¹² in Orthodox Churches, were clearly visible in the creation of homemade *Epitaphioi* for the commemoration of Christ’s Passion and death on Good Friday in both Greece and Cyprus. Some of them were later even donated to the respective parish churches, expanding their ritual life and “sacralising” them even further, thus adding meaning to them beyond just being a mere substitution for an original and official sacral object.¹³

Furthermore, some of our interlocutors realized that in using the “comments” section underneath livestreams of religious services they could relate to other Greek Orthodox Christians all over the globe. Hence, social distancing had not only transferred the building of community into the digital domain, but also resulted in the collapse of the inside/outside boundary and extended the physical spaces in which communal worship of the sacred could take place. During the Easter service, balconies, gardens, and yards as in-between spaces unofficially became “spaces of religion” where individual bodies could keep safe and “alive,” while at the same time allowing for the “liveness” of communal worship, yet from a safe distance. It is obvious that “ritual arrhythmia” during the pandemic facilitated the creation of new temporal and spatial frames by blurring the boundaries between secular and sacred, public and private, physical and virtual, as well as clergy and laity. In this way, new opportunities were generated for the maintenance of Orthodox identity, yet all the while there was also contestation and refusal to adopt new ways of “being Orthodox.”

Conclusion

The stances of the Orthodox Churches in Greece and Cyprus during the pandemic have both been praised and criticized, using different criteria and perspectives. In our view, the pandemic once more brought to the fore a deep cleavage between a reactionary, radical, conspiracy-driven and fundamentalist-oriented Orthodoxy and another one, which is more moderate, pragmatic, reasonable and even liberal to a considerable degree. These trends and the concomitant polarizations between them can be observed both at the grassroots level and within the church hierarchy. What ensued was an “Orthodox polyphony” that was further accentuated by the constant blurring of boundaries between scientific medical and religious

discourses. The same ambiguity can also be observed at another level, namely in the relations between fidelity to tradition and changes and adaptations in perspectives and practices. The pandemic did act as a catalyst for changes within Orthodoxy, although some spoke of a “missed chance” for the church to introduce important changes without jeopardizing the “essence” of the Orthodox faith.¹⁴

At the level of “lived religion,” the pandemic brought about many changes in the ways that Orthodoxy was enacted, performed, and embodied. The pandemic disturbed the “habitual rhythm” of religious life and produced a pathology of uncertainty, anxiety, and skepticism. But this “ritual arrhythmia” brought about new forms of “sacral individuality,” since it promoted individual rather than communitarian worship for the sake of keeping the congregational “body” healthy. At the same time, it also created new forms of “sacral communitarianism” by generating new “spaces of religion,” both in the digital and in the physical domain and in the interplay of both, where community worship could take place. In some cases, it also bred disunity and contestation since it went against the traditional way of doing things. Finally, during the pandemic the locus of religious worship largely shifted to the “domestic church,” formally acknowledging the religious expertise of women, a fact that somewhat upset old hierarchies. Which of these changes will endure in the post-pandemic era remains to be seen.

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