

# Analogia



## COVID-19, SCIENCE & RELIGION

and the Public square  
in Greece, Serbia,  
Romania, and Bulgaria

*Science has a place in eternity, as it forms a necessary part of God's language*

*N. Loudovikos*

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Guest Editors

*Dr Sotiris Mitralaxis & Revd Dr Milan Đorđević*

## NOTE FROM THE SENIOR EDITOR

This volume is dedicated mainly to the crisis created by the Covid pandemic. This crisis caused a shaking of the spiritual and social foundations of almost all the traditional societies. The articles focus upon the interactions between society, religion, and science, in an effort to understand what precisely happened, and what the meaning of what happened is. Authors expressed their own views on the above subjects and the final result is that we thus have an all encompassing picture of the spiritual scenery that was created by the pandemic. I thank the two guest editors for their great job.

– *Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos*, Senior Editor

## EDITORIAL

The years 2020 and 2021 will linger in memory as the *anni horribiles* of the COVID-19 pandemic—with 2022 passing the baton to global security concerns of war and peace while the pandemic is still ongoing. The predicament of the pandemic poses considerable challenges to our societies: from our everyday life and our collective interaction with and understanding of science, to our ecclesial life and our theology. This special issue of *Analogia* is dedicated to the study of the relationship between the pandemic and the church, science and religion, in the predominantly Orthodox countries of Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and Greece during 2020 & 2021, yet it also addresses a wider aspect relating to the representations of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in the public square of these countries and beyond.

On Saturday 9 April 2022, we convened a virtual workshop on ‘*Representations of science and religion in the public square of predominantly Orthodox countries during COVID-19*’, jointly hosted by IOCS Cambridge and the Faculty of Theology ‘St Clement of Ohrid’ in Skopje, which formed the basis for the present issue.

In the first paper, Dr Sotiris Mitralaxis provides insights from **Greece**, with a paper titled ‘Religion as Science, Science as Religion, and an Unwelcome Reformation: Science and Religion in the Public Square during COVID-19—a Greek Orthodox Case Study’. Dr Vladimir Cvetković from the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, offers an overview of developments in **Serbia** in his paper ‘Creationism, Communion and Vaccines: Science and Religion in the Serbian Orthodox Church’. The third paper, on **Romania** and by Dr Alexandru Racu (Hyperion University, Bucharest), studies ‘the Romanian Orthodox Church and its Attitude towards the Public Health Measures Imposed during the COVID-19 Pandemic’. Two papers on **Bulgaria** follow: Professor Smilen Markov’s (University of Veliko Tarnovo & Regent’s Park College, Oxford) ‘COVID-19 and Orthodoxy: Uncertainty, Vulnerability and the Hermeneutics of Divine Economy’, and Professor Georgi Kapriev’s (St Kliment Ohridski University, Sofia) ‘COVID-19 Crisis, Social Panic, Religious and Academic Life in Bulgaria’. Revd Prof. Nikolaos Loudovikos (University Ecclesiastical Academy of Thessaloniki, IOCS Cambridge & University

of Winchester), the senior editor of *Analogia*, offers the epilogue to this special issue on the pandemic.

Both for the workshop preceding it and for the present publication, we gratefully acknowledge the support provided by a subgrant from the John Templeton Foundation in the context of project #61549, '*New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*' at the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion (IRC), University of Oxford—the subgrant itself having been jointly hosted at the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Cambridge and at IOCS Cambridge. It goes without saying that the opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the John Templeton Foundation. During the latter stages of this publication's completion, Sotiris Mitralaxis was supported by the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, Grant Ref. MR/S031669/1: 'Orthodox Christian Material Ecology and the Sociopolitics of Religion', which he gratefully acknowledges.

– *Dr Sotiris Mitralaxis* &  
*Rev. Dr Milan Đorđević*, Guest Editors

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# RELIGION AS SCIENCE, SCIENCE AS RELIGION, AND AN UNWELCOME REFORMATION: SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE DURING COVID-19 – A GREEK ORTHODOX CASE STUDY

SOTIRIS MITRALEXIS

*University of Cambridge, UCL & IOCS Cambridge*

The present paper comments upon certain (mis)understandings concerning science and religion *in Greece's public discourse* during 2020 and 2021. The *first* half consists of a theoretical commentary on what transpired in Greece, focusing on 'science' and 'religion' morphing into one another in the public square apropos the pandemic—with religion presenting itself as science, science presenting itself as religion, and an unwelcome 'Reformation' in science emerging out of dissent. The *second* half of the paper provides a report on Greece's public square during the pandemic, on the basis of which the theoretical part was formed.

The years 2020 and 2021 will linger in memory as the *anni horribiles* of the COVID-19 pandemic—with 2022 passing the baton to global security concerns of war and peace while the pandemic is still ongoing. During those years, the meaning, power, method, efficacy, independence and politicisation, and capacities and limitations of 'science' as a generic term dominated global public discourse, both directly and indirectly—in discussions not only about the virus itself or the vaccines and medicines developed to counter its spread and effects, but also about social distancing, various restrictions and policies, lockdowns, 'green passes', vaccinations/testing certificates, and so on. 'Religion' featured heavily in the public square as well—less as a promise and a hope in times of collective distress, and more as a question concerning the safety of collective worship and of certain worship practices, as well as in the context of the unavoidable 'perennial battle between science and religion' trope.

### *Part I: Commentary*

The present paper comments upon certain (mis)understandings concerning science and religion *in public discourse* during 2020 and 2021, apropos Greece as a case study in particular and in the context of a wider collaborative project studying the experience of the pandemic in a number of predominantly Orthodox Christian countries, and taking into account the peculiarities and particularities of those countries: their largely distinct historical trajectories, as well as how the relationship between science and religion has been historically (mis)understood and (mis)conceived in those countries.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the article concerns itself primarily with the *public (mis)representations* of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ rather than with the *realities* of science and religion per se. Pondering how to weave together a report of the developments in the field from what could be described as a mainly discourse-analytic and ethnographic perspective and a theoretical analysis and commentary thereof, I ended up with a slightly uncommon structure for this paper: the *first* half consists of an analysis of—and commentary on—what transpired in Greece, which is detailed in the *second* half of the paper, with the analysis preceding the report analysed, lest the reader be burdened with a pages-long detailed description of events, voices, and developments at the very start of the paper. However, elements of analysis have been included into the report and elements of reporting in the analysis, together with certain purposeful repetitions of central points in my argument.

In attempting the approach highlighted above, a large part of my theoretical framework derives from a wave of scholarship revisiting the category of ‘religion’ as a problematic and anachronistic category when applied to pre-modern or non-Western societies,<sup>2</sup> but particularly from

<sup>1</sup> This publication was initially made possible through the support of a subgrant from the John Templeton Foundation and its ‘New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe’ project. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the John Templeton Foundation. During the latter stages of this publication’s completion, the author was funded by the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, Grant Ref: MR/S031669/1, titled ‘Orthodox Christian Material Ecology and the Sociopolitics of Religion’.

<sup>2</sup> Indicatively, see Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2017); Nathan J. Ristuccia, *Christianization and Commonwealth in Early Medieval Europe: A Ritual Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University

Peter Harrison's 2011 Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh, revised, reworked and published as *The Territories of Science and Religion*.<sup>3</sup> In this book about the history of science and religion in the West, Harrison diligently traces how the current conceptualisation of science and religion as two distinct spheres and domains of knowledge (i) is a decisively modern one that (ii) cannot be projected onto the pre-modern past, where *religio* and *scientia* represented *moral values of the individual*, whereas (iii) any attempt to trace the development of science as a domain that would ideally be hermetically sealed from religion runs counter to the very development of science within history, given how, for example, modern physics stems from 'natural philosophy'. In Harrison's words, his work consists in

a consideration of the fortunes of the Latin terms *scientia* and *religio*. These two notions both begin as inner qualities of the individual —'virtues', if you will— before becoming concrete and abstract entities that are understood primarily in terms of doctrines and practices. This process of objectification is the precondition for a relationship between science and religion. In addition to a consideration of the Latin terms from which our modern English words 'science' and 'religion' derive, [this work also traces] changing constellations of other conceptions that are genealogically related to our modern ideas of science and religion. They include 'philosophy', 'natural philosophy', 'theology', 'belief', and 'doctrine', all of which had meanings for past historical actors that are quite unfamiliar to us today. One

Press, 2018); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Nathan J. Ristuccia, 'Eastern Religions and the West: The Making of an Image', *History of Religions* 53, no. 2 (2013): 170–204, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673185>. On earlier approaches to this, see John Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *Past and Present* 95, no. 1 (1982): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/95.1.3>; Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1963). On certain nuances in questions of secularism and disenchantment, see Todd H. Weir, 'Germany and the New Global History of Secularism: Questioning the Postcolonial Genealogy', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 6–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2014.986431>; Hans Joas, *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

of my suggestions will be that there is a danger of systematically misconstruing past activities if we mistakenly assume the stability of meaning of these expressions.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the book explores (iv) how the modern conceptualisation of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ tends to function as an antithetical pair, in contrast to earlier realities, and (v) how speaking of ‘science’ in the singular, or of *the* ‘scientific methodology’ in the singular, is problematic when carefully taking historical, intellectual, and epistemological developments into account—an observation that is quite dominant in the work of contemporary historians and philosophers of science.

Given that my task here concerns the representations of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in public discourse,<sup>5</sup> particularly during the pandemic and in predominantly Orthodox countries such as Greece, what is particularly germane here is the constructed nature of the prevalent ‘perennial battle between science and religion’ narrative. As an indicative example of the more irenic versions thereof, allow me to point to Ian Barbour’s schema<sup>6</sup> of four possible science-religion relations (conflict – independence – dialogue – integration), which asserts the mutually exclusive nature of ‘religion’ and ‘science’, irrespective of the options for their encounter ranging all the way from hostile, open confrontation to peaceful, mutual accommodation.

I have attempted to elaborate on how Peter Harrison’s insights help us better understand the problems, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in a pre-pandemic paper titled ‘An Unfortunate *Communicatio Idiomatum*: On the Curious Spectacle of Two Modern Inventions Morphing into One Another in the Public Square.’<sup>7</sup> Therein the reader may find an analysis on how the prop-

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, x.

<sup>5</sup> For brevity, in this paper I shall henceforth envelop ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in inverted commas when referring to their representations in public discourse rather than to actual scientific practices or the life and identity of religious communities.

<sup>6</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘An Unfortunate *Communicatio Idiomatum*: On the Curious Spectacle of Two Modern Inventions Morphing into One Another in the Public Square’, in *New Directions in Theology and Science: Beyond Dialogue*, ed. Peter Harrison and Paul Tyson, Routledge Science and Religion Series (London & New York: Routledge, 2022), 96–114, 10.4324/9781003240334-6. This paper was authored in the context of the ‘After Science and Religion: Rethinking the Foundations of Science-Religion Discourse’ project.

erties usually thought of as belonging to religion are projected onto science, and vice versa, in public discourse — and how we witness the emergence of messianic and eschatological secular techno-religions in the name of science and technology. This is e.g. the case in the writings of the immensely influential public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari. The remarks therein form a background to the present paper, which is written in the perpetual astonishment of the chasm between the realities of science and religion and the problems of their public representations. In order to underscore how scientific practice and the religious life, communal or otherwise, are of a very different nature than their representations in the social imaginary, allow me to point to Alister McGrath's *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*,<sup>8</sup> detailing the different *modes* of reason and rationality applicable to domains such as the sciences and theological enquiry, a deeper understanding of which further enables a meaningful dialogue. The book constitutes an in-depth exploration of the very nature of reason in its plurality. Perhaps the first impression of a reader concerned with the representation(s) of science and religion in the public square and the social imaginary is how hermetically sealed and averse to opening up to the concerns of philosophy of science and philosophical theology these representations are; distorted idols of the realities they profess to represent—and thus how difficult it is to avoid the 'simplistic reductions to allegedly "essential" or "universal" characterisations of either "science" or "religion"'.<sup>9</sup> McGrath strives to counter on the level of the public discourse at large, rather than only on the level of scholarly discussion between experts, where it often seems to still be feasible.

Examining all this together, one can see the deeper roots of a phenomenon that was particularly pronounced in Greece's case: the 'scientification' of religion and the 'religionization' of science, a phenomenon I examine *not* in conjunction with an assessment of objective and/or medical realities of COVID-19, the pandemic, vaccines, public health policies *per se*, and so on. In what follows—which is a commentary

<sup>8</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*, Ian Ramsey Centre Studies in Science and Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> McGrath, 14.

on what transpired in Greece, which I detail in the second half of this paper—I touch on four mutations in Greece’s public discourse during the pandemic: (a) the mutation of ‘religion’ into ‘science’; (b) the mutation of ‘science’ into ‘religion’; (c) the reception of COVID-19 as a peculiar form of religion, and (d) dissent as a form of (a rather unwelcome) Reformation. A new entry building upon the wave of scholarship revisiting the category of ‘religion’ and applying these insights on contemporary developments is Tara Isabella Burton’s *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, which examines ‘America’s new spirituality: the cults, practices, high priests and prophets of our supposedly post-religion age’.<sup>10</sup> From New Age to wellness culture, from sexual utopias to fandom in popular culture and culture wars/identity politics, Burton traces novel *de facto* religious communities in realities that would normally be thought of to be beyond the scope of religion as it is usually understood, or even irreligious in the ‘spiritual but not religious’ variety. In doing this, Burton sums up what makes a social reality identifiable as ‘religious’ (with all the problems that this terminology carries, even when said reality is not packaged as a ‘religion’) in four elements, or pillars: meaning, purpose, community, and ritual.<sup>11</sup> This identification of the religious as that which is characterised by—and conjoins—meaning, purpose, community, and ritual will be employed throughout my analysis.

There is already some literature on the question of science and religion during Greece’s encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic, as was to be expected: two edited volumes in Greek, examining the topic from a mainly critical theological perspective,<sup>12</sup> a book-length sociological essay approaching the matter from the familiar and anticipated perspective of organised religion as an agent of anti-scientific obscu-

<sup>10</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Burton, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Nikos Asproulis and Nathaniel Wood, eds., *Καὶρός Τον Ποιῆσαι: Ἡ Ὁρθοδοξία Ἐνώπιον Τῆς Πανδημίας Τῶν Κορωνοϊού* [*Time to Act: Orthodoxy Encounters the COVID-19 Pandemic*], Volos Academy for Theological Studies (Volos: Ekdotiki Dimitriadis, 2020); Petros Vassiliadis, ed., *The Church in a Period of Pandemic: Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in Our Churches?*, CEMES 25 (Thessaloniki: CEMES, 2020).



rantism,<sup>13</sup> a number of long reads,<sup>14</sup> and so on. A thorough analysis of Greece's public discourse on these matters, however, has not been properly attempted yet.

### *Religion as Science*

The partial mutation of 'religion' into 'science' is arguably the easiest of the phenomena in question to discern. For example, towards the beginning of the pandemic there were certain arguments on the fringe of ecclesiastical discourse to the effect that the church building *itself*, by virtue of it being sacred, is akin to a sanitised space, in which infection with COVID-19 is impossible. (The late Metropolitan bishop Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania was among the few church figures that voiced such opinions, as will be detailed in Part II of this paper.) As Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko note, and as has been observed by myself as well, 'within the heterogenous public discourse concerning Orthodox life and practice, some individuals accepted that no one can become ill at all from anything in the Church—if they enter in faith; however, these voices were largely quieted as the months dragged on'.<sup>15</sup> Seeing that this is not a position having any basis in the theology, tradition, prior discourse, and historical experience of the Orthodox Church, i.e. that this is not a position in any way intrinsic to Orthodox Christianity as a religion or pre-existing in it in any discernible way, this novelty must be somehow interpreted. The novel element is precisely the scientification of religion in public discourse, i.e. the claim, otherwise quite alien to Orthodox Christianity, that the Church offers something *more scientific than science and more medical than medicine*, and indeed not in the extraordinary circumstance of a supernatural and unanticipated miracle, but regularly, by design and by definition—as implied by the

<sup>13</sup> Alexandros Sakellariou, *Θρησκεία Και Πανδημία Στην Ελληνική Κοινωνία: Σχέσεις Εξουσίας, Θρησκευτικός Λαϊκισμός Και η Μετέωρη Εκκοσμίκευση [Religion and the Pandemic in Greek Society: Power Relations, Religious Populism and the Pending Secularisation]* (Athens: iWrite, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Sotiris Mitralaxis, 'Eat the Christians: Για Τη Μολυσματική Παρουσία Των Χριστιανών Στο Δημόσιο Χώρο [Eat the Christians: On the Presence of Christians as Centres of Pestilence in the Public Square]', *ZHN* 35 (March 2020), <https://thepressproject.gr/eat-the-christians-gia-ti-molysmatiki-parousia-ton-christianon-sto-dimosio-choro>.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Carroll, Nicholas Lackenby, and Jenia Gorbanenko, 'Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance: Orthodox Christian Responses to the Global Pandemic', *Anthropology & Medicine*, 10 August 2022, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2022.2080180>.

fringe ‘sanitised Church building’ position equating being *sacred* with being medically *sanitised*. Essentially, the implicit claim here is that the Church and science and/or medicine are indeed ‘competing systems of knowledge’,<sup>16</sup> of applied knowledge in this case, rather than non-competing endeavours—and that the Church is *better* at being scientific or medical than science or medicine, as well as that it is so *automatically*; by virtue of it being sacred, a physical space cannot be the *locus* for the transmission of infections. Apart from this novel, non-traditional position turning out to be—to put it euphemistically—not empirically verified during the pandemic, the combination of the *nature* of this discourse with the fact that it remained on the fringes, encountering resistance in achieving a wider adoption among the faithful or their religious leaders, points us to a hypothesis. Instead of it being a position stemming from within the traditional reserve of the actually existing Orthodox Church, it is indeed a *reflection* of the modern *misconception* about ‘religion’—as a body of knowledge, practice, and truth-claims that competes with ‘science’ as another body of knowledge, practice, and truth-claims—that emerges *from within* religion. That is, it is as if a small part of the community of the faithful and of their religious leaders responds to the externally dictated modern identity of religion (as a reality that is by definition in juxtaposition to science) by *adopting* this identity, by playing the role reserved for it, resulting in an exercise in self-orientalisation. To formulate this with the help of another example, uttering something like ‘the only protection we need is Christ’<sup>17</sup> can be read in two distinct and deeply differing ways. The traditionally religious one would frame this along the lines of an awareness that diseases do exist, that Christians, however virtuous or faithful, can be infected by them and are often infected by them, leading even up to their death, *yet* this is to be approached in a context of providence and the divine will, while seeing that what is ultimately at stake is salvation or the lack thereof, and Christ can be the only hope. And the *second*, rather novel reading, is the *literal* one: that ‘the only

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> As Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko report, and as I have witnessed in similar situations, ‘in one exchange, as a group of parishioners sat down to dinner after an evening service, one woman pulled sanitising wipes out of her purse and handed them around. Another woman, rejected the wipe, saying “The only protection we need is Christ”, as she made the sign of the cross over herself’. Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko, ‘Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance’, 5.



protection we need is Christ', *over and against*, and *instead of*, sanitising wipes, masks, medicines, doctors, hospitals, ICUs — *if* one is faithful enough, or truly faithful. The latter position is, again, not to be found in the historical experience of the Church, in which Christians *do* get sick, *do* get infected, *do* resort to doctors without thinking that this is at the expense of their faith and its reality or of the providence of their creator, while at the same time being open to the extraordinary possibility of a miracle. It *is*, however, a position corresponding to a modern caricature of faith in the context of an assumed perennial juxtaposition of faith to science; this caricature of faith, so deeply embedded in the very fabric of our modern intellectual culture, may be at times adopted by some faithful and some of their leaders, appropriated and indeed perversely celebrated.

A slightly different iteration of the mutation of religion into science consists in what I call 'the Eucharist wars' in Part II of this paper, i.e. the question of whether the Eucharist itself may be a *locus* of contagion or not—either in contrast to the chalice and spoon which do not form part of 'the body and blood of Christ', or together with them. While this ignited fierce debates in Greece during 2020, the debate proved to be misplaced altogether, since COVID-19 is not foodborne and 'research has shown that the virus is inactivated in the acidic environment of the stomach, [it] is unlikely to reach the gastrointestinal tract and cause illness' and 'there remains no known cases of anyone contracting COVID-19 from food'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, irrespective of the holiness of the Eucharist and the real presence of Christ in it or lack thereof, infection via edibles of any nature—sacramentally transubstantiated or not—is either way ruled out, in contrast to waiting in the queue to receive communion, attending a crowded church or kissing icons. This, however, did not stop a months-long fierce debate from erupting

<sup>18</sup> Australian Government, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, 'Transmission of COVID-19 by Food and Food Packaging', September 2021, <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/Pages/Can-COVID-19-be-transmitted-by-food-or-food-packaging.aspx>, citing; Ruochen Zang et al., 'TMPRSS2 and TMPRSS4 Promote SARS-CoV-2 Infection of Human Small Intestinal Enterocytes', *Science Immunology* 5, no. 47 (19 May 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciimmunol.abc3582>; Lulin Zhou et al., 'SARS-CoV-2 Targets by the PscRNA Profiling of ACE2, TMPRSS2 and Furin Proteases', *IScience* 23, no. 11 (20 November 2020): 101744, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2020.101744>; see also World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 'COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for Food Businesses', Interim guidance, 7 April 2020, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses>.

concerning the Eucharist *in particular*, in what was essentially a culture wars arena between a misplaced religion and a misunderstood science.

*Science as Religion: The reception of science as a profession of faith by the public imagination*

As examined in Part II of this paper below ('the report'), from the very onset of the pandemic and well before the Greek lockdowns, Greece's public debate was inundated with the 'religion *versus* science' debate, according to which the alleged obscurantist disposition of organised religion will form (and, later, 'is forming' or 'has formed') a potent wave of resistance to the benevolent march of science and medicine. For example, the information that the scientist spearheading Greece's public health campaign at the time, Prof Sotiris Tsiodras, was privately a pious Orthodox Christian and a chanter in his local parish was immediately read by a large section of the commentariat as an 'unholy alliance' that would almost by definition undermine public health measures, igniting hefty amounts of irony: Tsiodras' private faith was seen as a much more potent indicator of his true allegiances than his scientific, medical, and professorial credentials. The discombobulating element in this lies in the fact that this COVID-related 'religion *versus* science' debate proliferated *well before* there was a chance to see whether reality would confirm its premises, and the actions and decisions of the institutional church, as we shall see later in this paper, did not confirm this ominous premonition. In this context, approaching Greece's COVID-related 'religion *versus* science' debate *prima facie*, i.e. as a 'religion *versus* science' debate indeed seems to lead to an impasse. Which alternative could share more light on this? Should we approach this as a public battle between science and religion? Or, rather, as a battle between *different* religions, as an attempt of a *new* religion to dethrone an *old* one — i.e., as an *interreligious* issue?

This and the following section will attempt to approach the version of 'science' and of the pandemic itself as a *religion*: i.e., as something granting meaning, purpose, community, and ritual, as defined above, in Greek public discourse— adding to it elements such as hierarchy/priesthood, faith/belief, and initiation. It is worth underscoring once again that our object of scrutiny in this quasi-sociological, ethnograph-

ic, and discourse-analytical exercise is ‘*science*’ in the public debate, not the actuality of scientific and medical practices, measures and advice during Greece’s encounter with the pandemic: the *reception* of science in the public’s imagination.

The emergence of science *as a religion, as a faith* in Greece’s public imagination was quite explicit from the start: the proliferation of phrases denoting ‘belief/faith in science’, either as a public profession of faith (‘I believe in Science!’ – «Πιστεύω στην Επιστήμη!») or as an injunction (‘Believe in Science!’) and an urgent appeal (‘We/you must believe in Science’) framed the issue as something one needs to *believe in*—rather than, e.g., acknowledge its efficacy or promote its application. In this context, and so far as the written word is concerned, science would more often than not appear as *Science*, with the first letter capitalised («Επιστήμη»), *reifying it as an exalted, quasi-sacred yet also* arcane object. Given that most Greeks demonstrably ‘believe in science’, medicine, and technology—they use electricity, smartphones, and the internet without ascribing these to miraculous causes, they drive cars, they visit doctors when needed, and they usually avoid falling from high balconies, acknowledging the force of gravity—the question remains: what is the *desideratum* that such an injunction and/or profession entails? In other words, one is to ‘believe in Science’ vis-à-vis *what*, in juxtaposition to *what*? It is precisely here that an invocation of ‘religion’ as an adverse force emerges, even in the face of the institutional church’s campaign promoting the state’s public health measures (cf. Part II, ‘report’). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic naturally entailed a lack of specialised knowledge on the matter on behalf of the general public—a knowledge that would either way gradually unfold, and is still in the process of unfolding, within the international medical community in the course of the pandemic, given the novelty of the virus.

In this context, ‘believing’ emerges as the antithesis to ‘knowing’: following the well-known faith versus knowledge *topos* in its particular iteration during modernity (as this was so aptly demonstrated by Peter Harrison in *The Territories of Science and Religion*), one now has to ‘believe in Science’ precisely because one cannot *know*, particularly during an early stage in which even expert knowledge on COVID-19 was far from comprehensive. In the coordinates of Greece’s public imag-

ination, this *believing* rather than *knowing* entailed a certain amount of mystification around a by now religionized science, which is to be approached in awe: we can only believe rather than know, yet we do know *by proxy*, since ‘the scientists’ (i.e. priests and initiates, disciples of Science, hierarchs and councils) do have a privileged access to this arcane knowledge that is inaccessible to laypersons without proper discipleship —and laypersons do ‘know’ as well and by proxy by remaining in communion with the body of experts, or initiates. Since we do not encounter this knowledge face to face, but through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12), the work of *exegesis* should be applied, so that we laypersons may hold steadfast in the correct faith. For there are also false prophets, which come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves (Matt. 7:15): credentialed yet minority scientists and medical doctors spewing heresies, just like Presbyter Arius or Patriarch Nestorius did in more traditionally religious contexts and in times long past. Following them would lead the people to their doom, yet there are international medical organisations and authoritative institutions such as renowned universities and government ministries that, like the ecumenical councils of old, would separate the wheat from the chaff (Luke 3:17), saving the unity of Science, and by extension of its flock, via urgently needed schisms. For religions entail schisms, and this theme shall be revisited below, in the section on ‘An unwelcome Reformation’. Yet before that, and although further details on the religionization of science in Greece’s public imagination during COVID-19 would demonstrate the argument more fully, examining the pandemic itself as religionized demands our attention.

### *COVID-19 as Religion*

While the religious texture of the public vocabulary on science is interesting in itself, the implicit religionization of COVID-19, or of the experience of the pandemic, during 2020–21 was even more pronounced in the public imagination. Of the four core elements of religion as defined above, i.e. meaning, purpose, community, and ritual, first came *meaning*. It is not only that the defence and preservation of biological life (not only of the individual, but also of the community via solidarity) now became a central priority and of paramount importance in

novel ways: this goal was now indeed an axis of *meaning* and a *purpose* to aspire to, both for the individual and for the community, however the latter is defined.

Being COVID-19 aware, and believing in science, now entailed participating in a *community* that guards the ‘sanctity’ of human life, a value above and beyond all inferior values. This *community* was also defined in juxtaposition to an external yet also internal *enemy* of this highest value, i.e. the preservation of life: this *enemy* was also *within* the national or local community and, as detailed in the report in Part II, it consisted of those that were ‘irresponsible’ by not (properly) following public health measures (and, later, by refusing to be vaccinated), of the ‘deniers’ (i.e. the unbelievers: the ‘atheists’) or ‘conspiracy theorists’ (i.e. the ‘heretics’) —and, of course, by the perennial arch-antagonist of ‘science’ since the beginning of days: ‘religion’.

The *purpose* consisted in collectively (and, at times, individually) surviving the pandemic relatively unscathed. Yet this *purpose* would also be updated from time to time. Initially, the *purpose* was to arrive relatively unscathed at that point in time when COVID-19 vaccines would be available: these vaccines would immediately stop the pandemic, as initially presented in Greece’s public discourse by public figures and state actors (yet, thankfully, not by authoritative medical professionals), and we would collectively return to a *prelapsarian* state. Greece’s time *before* the pandemic—i.e., a decade of crushing financial crisis—was often remembered as *prelapsarian* indeed: by comparison, it was seen as idyllic, devoid of problems and cares, *sans souci*. And the community had the capacity to arrive at this eschatological protology again by transforming its *values* and *meaning* into *purpose* and *action*.

In this context, the transformation of society during the pandemic in general and the lockdowns in particular, together with the individual observance of public health measures, became highly ritualised. Actions such as wearing a mask, using sanitiser and so on became imbued with meaning, rather than being boringly seen as necessary protective measures. They became a ritual, a tactile and externally visible profession of belonging to the community, of holding steadfast in the faith, of observing all prescribed rites. They became a visible object of *piety*, signalling the individual’s piety and allowing for the recognition of the pious by his fellows, much like baptismal or pectoral

crosses—and, considering that most Greeks wore their masks improperly, either by using single-use masks for a number of days or weeks in a row or leaving their nose uncovered, one could easily arrive at the conclusion that masks in particular were approached more like *talismans* than protective measures. In the public imagination, masks and sanitisers seemed to acquire an importance and symbolic *gravitas* that would go far beyond the scope of these items' utility as protective measures.

So did the virus itself. In a very mystical manner, it was often underscored by politicians (including the prime minister) and state authorities, journalists and professors, public intellectuals and the average person on social media that the virus is *invisible*—invisible to the naked eye, that is. This rather self-evident reality and otherwise axiologically neutral piece of information imbued the virus with an arcane, quasi-mystical aura; countering the virus's march acquired religious connotations, as 'we are at war with an invisible enemy',<sup>19</sup> yet the eschatological promise of final victory can be achieved. Several artists' depictions of this otherwise invisible virus particle, usually featured as a background in daily televised news broadcasts, functioned as the *icon* of the vengeful deity of COVID-19: as the depiction of a *mysterium* that is both *tremendum* and *fascinans*.

A final remark on this, before addressing an 'unwelcome Reformation in science', concerns the overtly religious connotations that the public imaginary afforded to its cardinal sacrament during the pandemic: COVID-19 vaccines. In tandem with the promise of the collective return to a prelapsarian state, the public profession of 'reclaiming freedom' on social media upon visiting the vaccination booth could quite easily be compared to a theological ransom theory of atonement—while the requirement of a 'green pass' in order to enter nominally 'COVID free' spaces could be seen as reminiscent, in the public imaginary, of the prohibitions in Leviticus 15 concerning those that are 'unclean'. Yet delving deeper into this would be beyond the scope of the present paper and its limited length.

<sup>19</sup> Hellenic Republic, The Prime Minister, 28 April 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/04/28/23850>.



*An unwelcome Reformation in 'science'? Examining dissent as a claim to individual authority*

Continuing with the argument on 'science' and 'religion' further morphing into one another in the public square apropos the pandemic, and especially on 'science' being received as a form of religion by the wider public, a different aspect should be examined—focusing on dissent taking the form of science-related conspiracy theories, COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, and so on. In order to do this, an oversimplifying historical parallel would perhaps be in order.

The correlation of the sixteenth-century ('Protestant' or 'European') Reformation with the earlier invention of the printing press, along with increased literacy, is a well-established historical phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Up until that point, the source of religious knowledge/truth, the Bible, was largely inaccessible, in spite of the liturgical use of biblical passages: the Bible was in a language other than the vernacular, and actual copies were scarce compared to the new developments and realities afforded by the invention of the printing press. Access to the textual source of knowledge and truth was theretofore exclusively mediated by (i) an institution, i.e. the church, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, and (ii) by a class, the clergy—a class of *initiates*, of persons with the *authority*, *training*, and *ability* to (study and) interpret the textual source, as well as a *professional* class, in a sense. Thus, not only the texts of knowledge/truth themselves, but also the *correct interpretation* of the texts containing knowledge and truth was a privilege of, and mediated by, an institution and a class of professionals and initiates; an institution and class having both the *means* to do this (copies of the Bible, for instance) and being trusted with having the necessary preparation, pedigree, education, and training to do this.

However, dissent was accumulating on how the institution and its professional class of initiates were professing the implications of the correct interpretation of the truth encapsulated in the textual source; the sale of indulgences would be a prime example. An integral part of the Reformation and its aftermath lies precisely in the assertion that the

<sup>20</sup> Purely indicatively, and for more sources on this, see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

individual, exercising her intellectual powers, is *at least as* well-positioned to study, understand, and correctly interpret the textual sources of religious truth as the institutional church of Rome and its corresponding professional class of initiates, i.e. the clergy. Equipped with an individual intellect illuminated by a God who does not by default withhold the possibility of illumination and truth from a layperson, anyone could study the Bible—a Bible both readily accessible and translated into the vernacular—and reach conclusions that were deemed to be more accurate than the falsified ones propagated by the institution and its representatives. Summing up, the *practical* means that made this Reformation possible were, *inter alia*, the printing press, i.e., the accessibility of the textual source to be interpreted, the linguistic aspect of the vernacular versus the Vulgate—although it goes without saying that all this is a crude oversimplification of much more nuanced developments.

My argument here is that a not too dissimilar development is taking place in our modern times concerning an unwelcome Reformation in ‘science’—and that the COVID-19 pandemic brought this out in the open to an unprecedented degree and has turned it into a *crisis*. However, in order for this argument to make sense, the observation that we are witnessing a religionization of science (and, to a lesser extent, a scientification of religion) ought to be taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> In modernity, the sciences—or, as they are presented in the social imaginary, science in the singular—are being taught, practiced and applied in universities, laboratories, dedicated institutions and/or companies, by properly trained and specialised persons. It is expected in the cultures and societies tracing their modern lineage back to the Enlightenment that the wider public *trusts* science and, by extension, scientists as representatives of both scientific knowledge and the correct application of the scientific method (in the singular),<sup>22</sup> while at the same time individual critical thinking is encouraged, if not considered a *sine qua non* and a value or ideal in itself. Meanwhile, the notion that correct scientific

<sup>21</sup> On a pre-pandemic reflection on this, see Mitralaxis, ‘An Unfortunate Communicatio Idiomatum’.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, the same applies to *other* societies as well, *mutatis mutandis*; yet in the cultures and societies tracing their modern lineage back to the Enlightenment it is often preferred to consider this arrangement as a particular prerogative of the Age of Reason and Rationality, and of its corresponding societies and cultures.



conclusions in complex matters may be reached *without* proper scientific training in the respective discipline is usually, and quite sensibly, considered as partly defeating the purpose of the edifice of scientific knowledge and progress.

The medium of the world wide web—the internet—affording an unprecedented and mass accessibility to sources, scientific papers, documents, facts or (mis)representations of facts, and so on, combined with increased literacy, has brought about the possibility of laypersons challenging this mediating function of scientists and scientific institutions to a novel degree. Of course, the phenomenon itself pre-exists both the internet and the pandemic and is, in part, a seemingly inevitable part of the fine balancing act between, on the one hand, defending the accessibility of the scientific method (in the, rather problematic, singular) and encouraging individual critical thinking, and, on the other hand, upholding the fact that scientific disciplines require specialised, rigorous training designed and taught by scientific peers. However, the sheer scale and mass accessibility of sources made possible by the internet—the equivalent of the printing press in our historical parallel—points to qualitative and not merely quantitative change.<sup>23</sup> During the pandemic, and in the wake of the shock to (Western) societies due to COVID-19 itself, social distancing and other measures, a speedy rollout of novel vaccines, and so on, this phenomenon skyrocketed.

To illustrate this by an example from the pandemic: dissenters labelled as conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers very seldom have science *per se* as the object of their critique or refutation (and the ones refuting science *in toto* in favour of a purely *religious* or even philosophical truth seem to form a tiny minority of dissenters). Rather, more often than not, dissenters speak *in the name of* science and scientific evidence, invoking what they consider as evidence or interpretations that are *more* accurate and as such *more* scientific than the (according to dissenters falsified, corroded, politicised, weaponised, or simply wrong) ‘official version’ as presented by ‘mainstream’ scientific institutions and individual scientists. In other words: (i) dissenters are on the receiving end of the

<sup>23</sup> After all, to quote a *dictum* often misattributed to a number of historical figures, from Napoleon to Joseph Stalin, ‘quantity has a quality of its own’...

provision and/or interpretation of scientific data, results, conclusions, and proposals by bodies and experts deemed as appropriate for providing and interpreting—i.e., having the institutional authority to provide and interpret—scientific evidence: a near consensus of the scientific, or in the pandemic's case medical, community, for instance. Additionally, this provision and interpretation is not direct, i.e. from the source to the individual, but is of course mediated by mass media and, particularly during the pandemic, governments as well. (ii) For whichever reason(s)—the variety and analysis of which is beyond the scope of our examination—dissenters mistrust this provision and interpretation and reject it, either in full or in part. As highlighted above, most usually *do not mistrust the ability of 'science in the singular', or of scientific methodology per se, to arrive at correct conclusions*. They mistrust either the *institutional mediation* from a source of knowledge to themselves—institutions such as universities, the medical establishment, governments, i.e. *the institutional church* in our parallel here, or they mistrust the objectivity of the media seen as serving said institutions—or particular scientists and experts having the authority to speak in the name of 'science in the singular', i.e. initiates, *the clergy*. (Of course, in the case of science there is no *magisterium*, not a singular 'teaching' on any given subject that divides orthodoxy from heresy, but questions such as repeatability and reproducibility, and so on. Yet this is not so much the case *on the public square*, particularly during crises in which scientific evidence are invoked.)

However, there is no Reformation up until this point in this itinerary. Next, (iii) dissenters deem it possible to reach data, interpretations, and conclusions that would be *correct*, or in any case 'more correct' than the erroneous/falsified/corroded version provided by the 'institutional church' and 'the clergy': to cut out the middleman that falsifies the source or fails to properly interpret it and reach the source directly, the source being scientific data and evidence—or at least better, non-falsified interpretations thereof. This is done either by directly dealing with sources *of choice*, yet without the institutional aegis and training usually deemed necessary in order to make sense of them, and depositories like *PubMed*,<sup>24</sup> for example, a Google of biomedical litera-

<sup>24</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

ture amassing oceans of scientific papers of vastly varying quality and peer-review rigour that are often available in open-access mode entails that the sky is the limit for such an undertaking—or by opting for non-standard (‘non-mainstream’ in the common tongue) interpreters of the sources, who may or may not have scientific training and credentials, but who are (presented as) *excommunicated* by the scientific community, or *heretics* vis-à-vis institutional orthodoxy. Be it via a direct claim to accessing and correctly interpreting the sources of what is taken as scientific knowledge and truth by the individual layperson, however, or via placing one’s trust on individuals professing a reading of scientific data over and against the authority of ‘the church’ and ‘its clergy’, the common denominator of all this is that it is being undertaken in the name of, precisely, ‘science’ rather than against it: *sola scientia*, a striving for scientific knowledge and truth that prioritises the individual intellect’s ability to correctly interpret the source of knowledge/truth over the institutions and initiatives vested with the authority of an accredited and correct interpretation, since the latter are seen as falsifying the truth and knowledge hidden in the source, i.e. scientific data, experiments, evidence.

And, if there is a kernel of truth in the description of science in the public square as having become a form of *religion* during modernity and especially late modernity, then this form of dissent marks this religion’s Reformation—a long-winded process that, however, was fuelled by the power of the world wide web and the accessibility it afforded and massively erupted during the pandemic. It is important to note that this ‘Reformation in science’ refers, once again, to science’s representation(s) in the public square—not to scientific practice *per se*. Dissenters do not counter-propose a different or revised way of doing science, differing methodological considerations, and so on. At best, their critique and their reclaiming of science is premised on an affirmation of science *qua* science, however (mis)understood, and is being voiced *in the name* of science—this reification of science in the singular being in itself a staple of science’s representation in the public square—, thus corresponding to how science is presented, used or mis-used, politicised or weaponised, cherry-picked or ‘objectively’ presented. This aspect reinforces rather than undermines the parallel drawn here, as sixteenth-century reformers did not challenge the authority of scripture or the divinity

and authority of Jesus Christ, but the mediation via which their truth was presented to ‘the people’, a mediation seen as corroding. In many ways, *sola scientia* (versus its allegedly politicised, mediated, corroded, weaponised, commodified form) is the battle cry of modern dissenters, corresponding to *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*.

The question is, why does all this matter? What does this attempted historical parallel offer, apart from theoretical speculation? I would like to argue here that it offers a better interpretative framework for understanding the nuances in certain developments, particularly so far as the whole ‘conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers versus believing in science’ discourse is concerned. This discourse, particularly during the pandemic, unfolded as a narrative of light versus darkness: the powers of rationality, of science, of the Enlightenment even, against the powers of darkness, of obscurantism, of unintelligibility, of populism, of chaos. This was the case, in varying degrees, not only in the public discourse, but in scholarly literature as well. However, such a schematisation does not seem to *explain* a phenomenon or to shed light on it, or to offer an epistemological reading. Apart from setting a rather political, or politico-cultural, framework around it, in many ways it constitutes an exercise in *explaining away*. It could be argued that it is more ideological than interpretational in nature. Yet if one:

- i. takes into account the vast difference between scientific endeavours and the representation of ‘science’ in public discourse, as well as the role it plays in the social imaginary,
- ii. discerns the developing religionization of science in the public square throughout modernity, and
- iii. reads the mass emergence of dissent as a ‘Reformation’, i.e. as an attempted appropriation of the institutional prerogative of the relay of scientific knowledge by the individual intellect of a layperson and by its capacity to access and interpret ‘sources’ (or to opt for alternative interpreters) in a way that is allegedly *better, purer, more correct* than that of the institution, and all this precisely *in the name of scientific knowledge and truth*,

then, perhaps, a more nuanced picture emerges. A picture that paints more parts of the itinerary and adventure of science when it is grounded in (late) modernity’s public discourse and social imaginary.

A picture that sees quasi-religious public turbulences, developments, and schisms where other readings offer metaphysical epic tales of light versus darkness, progress versus obscurantism, incandescent rationality versus regressive barbarism—tales that, in themselves, are quite religious in nature as well. Let us not forget that, by and large, dissenters do not challenge the religionization of ‘science’ or identify it as such: rather than that, they produce a *schism* in that religionized version of ‘science’. To put this in a different way: it is easy to tread the standard path of approaching these developments as a ‘perennial battle between science/rationality and obscurantism/irrationality’, yet this reading has its limits. What other horizons does an approach that reads all this as a *religious* battle inaugurate?

In the beginning of this section, I have termed this Reformation an ‘unwelcome’ one. Wouldn’t this be an ideological choice as well? The reader should note that in the same way that I do not need to choose sides in the sixteenth century debates on whether the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Reformers were ‘right’, my task in sketching this historical parallel here is not to choose sides on whether either the institutional relay of scientific conclusions or the decidedly heterogenous archipelago of dissenters<sup>25</sup> (again, usually labelled as conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers—and it is somewhat tempting to examine parts of the literature on this as the more apologetic aspect of an attempted *Counter-Reformation*) has any claim to the *plenitudo veritatis*—and, in any case, that is a political question, not an epistemological one. This is beyond my purview and remit here. Thus, what does naming this Reformation ‘unwelcome’ entail, if not choosing sides?

The problem here is that this dual development, which peaked during the pandemic, this Reformation and its corresponding Counter-Reformation, further aggravates the discrepancy and disparity between scientific practice(s) and the representations of ‘science’ in the public square, and does so in ways that potentially threaten the very viability of an otherwise delicate balance. In a public arena, in which the one extreme dismisses the institutional relay of scientific knowledge *in toto* and opts for individual and idiosyncratic interpretations of scientific

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that contemporary dissenters and their claims are neither more nor less decidedly heterogenous than the differing readings of Scripture.

knowledge, and the other extreme literally sanctifies a reified science and projects upon it messianic and eschatological promises à la Yuval Noah Harari—while speaking for *the advance of technology* as the quintessence, plenitude, and epitome of science (yet this would be the topic of a wholly different paper), *real* scientific practices and advances stop making sense: the gap between scientific practice and the public representation of science becomes an abysmal chasm, thus showcasing the *limits* of the religionization of science.

In the wake of the shock to societies by the particularly rapid developments during the pandemic—from lockdowns to green passes, and beyond—and by the fervent invocation of science as the authority dictating unprecedented political decisions, mistrust over speedily developed COVID-19 vaccines, for example, spills over to mistrust of vaccines *in general* and dynamically boosts a tendency towards vaccine hesitancy. Instead of attempts at a truce, new ‘European (and American) wars of religion’ have erupted over the prerogative to the correct interpretation of *scientia*: this has the potential to steadily lead to a generalised bifurcation of how scientific practices are represented in the public sphere and in the societal imaginary—and the practical, societal, and political side of this is anything but merely philological in nature. Thus, the ‘unwelcome’ nature of this Reformation is not limited to this Reformation itself, but to the wider turn that the modern religionization of science in the public square is currently taking—and to its ominous sides in particular. To put this with an aphorism: the greatest casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic might be, in the final analysis, the extent of the authority of science in the public square—a development that came about via indirect routes.

A number of the observations above are premised on discourse-analytic and ethnographic work I did in Athens, Greece during the pandemic. The report on this forms Part II of this paper, as previously noted. An earlier and draft version of the following report appeared as a working paper earlier in 2022.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘Deepening Greece’s Divisions: Religion, COVID, Politics, and Science’, *Méta Working Papers* 11 (2022): 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.55405/mwp11en>.



*Part II: Report**Dispatches from Greece's public square during the pandemic*

Instead of being a time of unity and solidarity, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a time of *disunity*, a time for deepening Greece's divisions after a decade of crisis—on a spectrum ranging from politics to religion, and more importantly on the *public discourse* on religion. This report offers a perspective on recent developments—by (a) looking into how the Greek state weaponized science in the public square, by (b) examining the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece, by (c) indicatively surveying 'COVID-19 and religion' developments that would not be covered by the latter, and last but not least by (d) discussing the discrepancy between these two areas of inquiry in an attempt to explain it.

*Weaponizing Science: 'Respectable citizens' versus 'the Sprayed Ones'*

Discussing the pandemic and religion in Greece necessarily passes through the country's conceptualisation of 'science and religion'—and, arguably, the commencement of this fierce public debate in February 2020, even *before* either the institutional Orthodox Church of Greece or the religious 'facts on the ground' could provide any indication on how the 'Church and COVID-19' saga would unfold in practice, acts as an indication for how this conceptualisation *preceded* actual events. However, before embarking on an examination of the role of *religion* in this story, it is important to set the conceptual stage as far as *science* is concerned. It would be anything but controversial to note that, across a number of countries, European and otherwise, the tendency of governments to legitimise emergency measures by reassuring the public that they are 'simply following the science' effected a certain confluence of politics and science, much to the detriment of science's authority as an essentially apolitical practice of strictly following the scientific method. However, Greece's case was a rather extreme one (in tandem with the extremity of its particular COVID-19 measures in an EU context, at least as measured by the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker by the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government<sup>27</sup>). Not

<sup>27</sup> 'COVID-19 Government Response Tracker', *Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University*, March 2020-December 2022, Ongoing, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/re->

only did the government feel the need to justify its *every* action or omission as having been dictated by ‘the scientists’—something that the very medical scientists sitting at the governmental expert’s panel have at times publicly refuted<sup>28</sup>—,but every political disagreement with *particular* governmental measures were touted as the fruit of science-denying conspiracy theories. This science-undermining political strategy negated the very possibility of scientific counter-proposals to the handling of the crisis, since these *had* to be conspiracy theories (of which, of course, Greece also had ample quantities), or else an apolitically scientific government would have taken them into account: for example, Stanford University’s Professor John P. A. Ioannidis (who was at some point professor and department chair at the University of Ioannina, Greece, and thus has an audience in the country) was explicitly named an ‘enemy of the people’ and a ‘conspiracy theorist’ (ψεκασμένος=sprayed one) by government-friendly media.<sup>29</sup>

As it happens, Greece has a peculiar vocabulary for ‘conspiracy theorists’, one more akin to ‘tin foil hat enthusiasts’. Following an international trend (with the proper temporal delay for the arrival of trends in Greece), discussions on ‘chemtrails’—αεροψεκασμοί—made their appearance in the farthest fringes of Greek public discourse in the early 2000s; the minuscule number of people actually claiming that chemicals are being used on the population via condensation trails, i.e. that ‘they’ [it’s always an impersonal ‘they’] ‘are spraying us’ via chemtrails, «μας ψεκάζουνε», were henceforth pejoratively named ‘the sprayed ones’, «ψεκασμένοι», or «ψέκες» more recently, in abbreviated form. (Interestingly, the ‘chemtrails’ conspiracy theories entered parliamentary debates: a Parliamentary Question to cabinet ministers on ‘mysterious chemtrails’ was submitted<sup>30</sup> by an MP in November 2010. That MP, Makis Voridis, is today the Minister of the Interior in Kyriakos Mitsotakis’s government, occupying one of the top cabinet

search-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Politicians and governments are suppressing science, argues The BMJ’, *BMJ Journal*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/politicians-and-governments-are-suppressing-science-argues-the-bmj/>

<sup>29</sup> Λεωνίδας Καστανάς, ‘Οι ψεκασμένοι είναι εχθροί του λαού’, *Athens Voice*, 3 August 2020, [https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/668420\\_oi-psekasmenoi-einai-ehthroi-toy-laoy](https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/668420_oi-psekasmenoi-einai-ehthroi-toy-laoy).

<sup>30</sup> Μάκης Βορίδης, ‘Αεροψεκασμοί Αγνώστης Προέλευσης’, Ερώτηση 6714, ΛΑ.Ο.Σ, Κοινοβουλευτικός Έλεγχος, Βουλή των Ελλήνων, 25 November 2010, [https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleutikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovouleutikou-Elegxou?pcm\\_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b](https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleutikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovouleutikou-Elegxou?pcm_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b)



positions). Ψεκασμένοι, ‘the sprayed ones’<sup>31</sup> is a much more frequently used phrase than συνωμοσιολόγοι, ‘conspiracy theorists’<sup>32</sup> in Greece, as a Google search would readily indicate.

The issue here is that this terminology (again, the equivalent of ‘tin foil hats’ or ‘believers in reptilians’) has been officially used by the Greek government against the Greek people, or at least ‘some’ of them—rather than against a minuscule minority of actual believers in the most far-fetched conspiracy theories imaginable. Greece’s Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, used the word on 31 October 2020, in one of his televised addresses,<sup>33</sup> lambasting the ‘few sprayed ones’ who criticise ‘scientists’: ‘let us leave the scientists out of any controversy whatsoever ... legitimate political criticism is to be limited to politicians’.

The irony here is that the Greek state’s version of ‘trusting the Science’ acted as precisely one of the main agents of undermining science’s credibility in Greece’s public sphere at large. I am not referring here to the question of internal coherence in exclaiming that any government follows ‘the Science’ in the singular, with a capital S and in a purportedly apolitical way (or to the political reactions that such a claim of apolitical governance would engender *ipso facto*): after all, if there were a singular Science that would be apolitically followed to the letter by responsible governments, then no variations in the handling of the crisis whatsoever would be encountered among the ‘responsible countries’, something that is countered by such simple observations of reality as the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker by the University of Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government,<sup>34</sup> which points to Greece as one of the strictest EU countries as far as governmental COVID-19 measures are concerned. Rather than that, I am referring—purely indicatively, and among an archipelago of examples—to the Tsiodras-Lytras study scandal.<sup>35</sup> On 1 December 2021, Greece’s PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis

<sup>31</sup> ‘ψεκασμένοι’, Google search.

<sup>32</sup> ‘συνωμοσιολόγοι’, Google search.

<sup>33</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 31 October 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/10/31/25151>.

<sup>34</sup> ‘COVID-19 Government Response Tracker’, *Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University*, March 2020–December 2022, Ongoing, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>. Unfortunately, this strategy did not deliver, since Greece is one of the top EU countries in COVID casualties per million inhabitants (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

<sup>35</sup> ‘Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality’, *To Βήμα*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras->

claimed, from the Hellenic Parliament's podium, that the existence or inexistence of an adequate number of Intensive Care Units does not make any difference whatsoever to the survival prospects of intubated COVID-19 patients in need of admission to an ICU;<sup>36</sup> just a spare bed and an intubation would perfectly suffice. 'We have no indication whatsoever to that effect. I don't have any indication whatsoever! Should the Opposition have any proofs to the contrary, we're looking forward to receiving them.'<sup>37</sup> However, as the Greek people would haplessly come to know *post eventum*, the office of the Greek prime minister had been notified in advance<sup>38</sup> of his parliamentary address of a then forthcoming study by Professors S. Tsiodras and T. Lytras—Prof. Sotiris Tsiodras being the scientist spearheading Greece's COVID-19 public health campaign for 2020 and a sizable portion of 2021, Greece's equivalent of Anthony Fauci—, published on 13 December 2021<sup>39</sup> in the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, which provided proof of precisely the opposite claim to the one defended by Greece's prime minister on the parliament's podium. A prosecutor's investigation has been ordered on the scandal.<sup>40</sup> The political—and, indirectly, governmental—backlash on the two scientists, Prof. Tsiodras and Prof. Lytras, for undermining the PM's claims has been too grim to describe; let it suffice to quote a 2 January 2022 twitter comment by Prof. Lytras apropos both the published paper and the hype surrounding the movie 'Don't Look Up': 'I'm grateful we tried... #DontLookUp #μελετη\_τσιοδρα'<sup>41</sup>.

lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/ .

<sup>36</sup> Γιάννης Μπασκάκης, 'Ο Κ. Μητσοτάκης εθελοτυφλεί για τις εκτός ΜΕΘ διασωληνώσεις', *Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, 21 January 2022, [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/322063\\_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis..](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/322063_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis..)

<sup>37</sup> 'Ο πρωθυπουργός στη Βουλή για τη θνητότητα στους εκτός ΜΕΘ' *Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, *You Tube*, 15 December 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDZCi\\_d-NgE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDZCi_d-NgE).

<sup>38</sup> Κύριος Μάξιμος, 'Αυτοί είναι οι δύο υψηλόβαθμοι του Μαξίμου που γνώριζαν για την έρευνα Τσιόδρα – Λύτρα', *Newsbreak*, 17 December 2021, [https://www.newsbreak.gr/kuri-os-maximos/279783/aytoi-einai-oi-dyo-ypsilovathmoi-toy-maximoy-poy-gnorizan-gia-tin-ereyna-tsiodra-lytra/..](https://www.newsbreak.gr/kuri-os-maximos/279783/aytoi-einai-oi-dyo-ypsilovathmoi-toy-maximoy-poy-gnorizan-gia-tin-ereyna-tsiodra-lytra/)

<sup>39</sup> 'Total patient load, regional disparities and in-hospital mortality of intubated COVID-19 patients in Greece, from September 2020 to May 2021', *NIH-National Library of Health*, 13 December 2021, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34903101/>.

<sup>40</sup> 'Εισαγγελική έρευνα για τη μελέτη Τσιόδρα – Λύτρα', *in.gr*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.in.gr/2021/12/17/greece/eisaggeliki-ereyna-gia-ti-meleti-tsiodra-lytra/>.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Lytras, Tweet on 2 January 2022, 11:33, <https://twitter.com/TheodoreLytras/status/1477573864960012290>.

Other examples include official statements on 31 March 2020 that face masks are not only unnecessary,<sup>42</sup> but potentially dangerous as well;<sup>43</sup> later, this was turned into mandatory masks in all indoor *and outdoor* spaces<sup>44</sup> under penalty of a EUR 300 fine. Disagreeing with the former statement was criticised by government-friendly media as ‘unscientific’ in April 2020; disagreeing with the latter is criticized as ‘unscientific’ ever since. That this enforced confluence, to the point of identification, of governmental decisions and a purported singular, never-changing Science acts to the detriment of popular confidence in the scientific method should need no further explanation.

This context acts as a crucial backdrop in understanding the nuances of the ‘Church and COVID-19’ *as a* ‘religion and science’ debate in Greece; how this was played out, and why the situation is indeed more complex than initially imagined. There is no two-dimensional spectrum of ‘accepting’ or ‘rejecting’ scientific evidence; rather than that, there is a two-year-long political weaponization of the authority of science (which, indeed, *undermines* the authority of the scientific method on a long-term basis), there are the problems, tensions, and polarisations that this engenders, and of course, on the fringes, there’s also a tiny minority of actual anti-science conspiracy theorists allegedly discovering microchips in COVID-19 vaccines. However, mistaking the latter minority with Greece’s complex debate at large would be a rather pernicious exercise.

### *Institutional Religion and Religion ‘in the Field’: COVID-19, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and Dissenting Voices*

The Greek public square and discourse is perpetually characterised by a tense relationship with the Orthodox Church of Greece. On the one hand, Greece regularly appears in surveys (from the Pew Research

<sup>42</sup> ‘Δεν χρειάζεται να φοράμε μάσκα’, Τσιόδρας, You Tube, *antimnimoniakos*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diKCCVDv01A>.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Όχι σε χρήση μάσκας και γαντιών μιας χρήσης – Επικίνδυνες οι μάσκες με βαλβίδα’ Τσιόδρας, ΣΚΑΙ, ΥΓΕΙΑ, 9 April 2020, <https://www.skai.gr/news/ygeia/tsiodras-oxi-se-xrissi-maskas-kai-gantion-mias-xrissi-epikindynes-oi-maskes-me-valvida>

<sup>44</sup> ‘Νέα μέτρα – Επανερχονται τα πρόστιμα για μη χρήση μάσκας και στους εξωτερικούς χώρους’, ΤΑ ΝΕΑ, 24 December 2021, <https://www.tanea.gr/2021/12/24/greece/nea-metra-epanerxontai-ta-prostima-gia-mi-xrissi-maskas-kai-stous-eksoterikous-xorou/>.

Center<sup>45</sup> to Greece's DiaNEOsis<sup>46</sup>) as having one of the highest EU scores in 'believing in God', 'trusting the Church as an institution', 'deeming religion as important'—while seven out of ten Greeks will readily reject statements such as 'when science and religion disagree, religion is right' (p. 77, B10.3<sup>47</sup>). The flip side of this coin is that the Church's prominence, impact, influence, and power engenders frictions and a certain amount of discontent; for example, there is hardly a time in which demands of a France-style separation of Church and State are not present in Greece's public discourse (which are not always characterised by a firm grip on facts by either side, as the utterly chaotic 2018/19 debate on proposed Church-State relations reforms so aptly demonstrated). Greeks relish in firmly believing that there is a Greek exceptionalism in Church-State relations, in which *every other Western country* has a full Church-State separation, in which religion is hermetically banished from the public square, from politics, and from finances, while Greece, woefully, 'finds herself still in the Middle Ages' by not having achieved this. The problem, of course, in framing the question in such a way is that it becomes virtually impossible to successfully propose a political solution of a Greek Church-State separation based on European precedents and best practices, as it would 'never be enough' if it's not French *laïcité*; the practical outcome of this is that nothing ever changes and the *status quo* is most successfully defended by those that purport to undermine it. And while Greece does not have as tight economic Church-State ties as other EU countries, e.g. the *de facto* capital of the European Union, Belgium, where the federal government pays the salaries and pensions of a number of religions' clergy, municipalities pay for the upkeep of churches and provinces pay for larger buildings such as cathedrals,<sup>48</sup> its Church-State relations are indeed close-knit. Article 3 of Greece's

<sup>45</sup> 'Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues', *Pew Research Center*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.

<sup>46</sup> 'WVS team in Greece releases analytical report based on WVS-7 survey findings', *World Value Survey*, 25 November 2018, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=388&ID=388>.

<sup>47</sup> 'WVS team in Greece releases analytical report based on WVS-7 survey findings', *World Value Survey*, 25 November 2018, p. 77, B10.3, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=388&ID=388>.

<sup>48</sup> 'Taxpayers in Belgium support religion to the tune of €415 million a year', *The Bulletin*, Belgium, 19 April 2017, <https://www.thebulletin.be/taxpayers-belgium-support-religion-tune-eu415-million-year>.

constitution<sup>49</sup> describes the Eastern Orthodox Church as ‘the prevailing religion in Greece’, the salaries of a very sizable part of the clergy (~9,500, plus about 500 unsalaried clergy) are paid by the state (yet the state offers no other types of direct financial assistance, in contrast, for example, to Germany<sup>50</sup>), the commencement of a new parliamentary cycle after national elections is blessed by the Church in the parliament building, the religion course at school is predominantly Orthodox, etc. And, of course, Greece houses the monastic community of Mount Athos in the peninsula of Chalkidiki, ‘a self-governed part of the Greek State’ of ‘ancient privileged status’ according to article 105 of Greece’s constitution.<sup>51</sup> (It is interesting to note that although this peninsula is inhabited by monks leaving ‘the world’ in order to die after a life of prayer and solitude in the monasteries and hermitages of Mount Athos, the COVID-19 situation there and the health status of monks regularly preoccupied the Greek media cycle during the pandemic, with abbots of Athonite monasteries accusing other monks of not being vaccinated<sup>52</sup> and so on.)

In this chaotic setting, it is important to distinguish between the institutional church’s stance vis-à-vis the pandemic and further anecdotal evidence, duly explaining both. That is, in order for a proper critical assessment of the situation in Greece to be feasible, certain important distinctions need to be made: individual pronouncements and activities of this or that low- or higher-ranking cleric are of course to be taken into account, as anecdotal evidence of facts on the ground, in order for the big picture to emerge. However, in assessing the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece during the pandemic as an official, institutional body wielding a degree of social power and impact, one has to look at those who have the *authority* to represent it. Who has the *authority* to *represent* the Church of Greece as an institutional, official body? The Holy Synod of 80+ bishops *as a body* and its official resolutions and

<sup>49</sup> The Constitution of Greece, §3, Hellenic Parliament, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Heneghan, ‘Germany continues payments to churches a century after deciding to stop’, RNS Religion News Service, 13 February 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/02/13/germany-continues-payments-to-churches-a-century-after-deciding-to-stop/>.

<sup>51</sup> The Constitution of Greece, §105, Hellenic Parliament, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Ηγούμενος Βαρθολομαίος: Να μην μένουν στο απυρόβλητο οι ρασοφόροι που παρασύρουν για τον ιό’, Skai.gr, You Tube, 11 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fVo1\\_yO6t0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fVo1_yO6t0).

decisions, the more versatile, 12-member ‘Permanent Holy Synod’, and the Archbishop of Greece, who *stricto sensu* is not Greece’s primate but merely the chairman of the Synod and who was in line with the Synod’s decisions throughout the pandemic (something which, by the way, was not the case during the 2018/2019 political turmoil on proposed reforms in Church-State relations; there, the Synod and the Archbishop seemed to be of different minds, the former opposing the reform, the latter endorsing it. The Synod won this battle, the Archbishop’s proposal was rejected, and the Archbishop was subsequently called to act as a mere representative of the decision-making body—the Synod). This being the case, the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece throughout the pandemic is to be located in the texts, decisions, resolutions, announcements and responses of the Holy Synod *as a body*, as well as of the Permanent Holy Synod and the Archbishop of Athens.

Thus, on the Church and the pandemic in Greece, a brief timeline would be in order here:

- February 2020: Greece welcomes its first official COVID-19 case and enters the pandemic proper.
- 28 February 2020: ‘Encyclical of the Synod on COVID-19 Protective Measures<sup>53</sup>’ decreeing, inter alia, (i) that the faithful should follow official, state sources of information and the recommendations of scientists; (ii) that social distancing and other protective measures are to be followed by the faithful; (iii) that persons exhibiting any symptoms should self-isolate and not attend church; (iv) that frail, elderly and high-risk persons should isolate and not attend church.
- 10 March 2020: The Synod orders that<sup>54</sup> Encyclical no. 3013<sup>55</sup> should be read during Mass in all parishes of the Church of Greece, together with a Ministry of Health press release, as well as a prayer for the pandemic.
- 11 March 2020: The Synod publishes further measures<sup>56</sup> against the spread of COVID-19 in churches and other

<sup>53</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 28 February 2020 [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=2627&what\\_sub=egyklloi](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=2627&what_sub=egyklloi).

<sup>54</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 10 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498\\_10032020\\_diav.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498_10032020_diav.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιος 3013’, 10 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498\\_10032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498_10032020.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 11 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498\\_10032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/498_10032020.pdf).



religious buildings and activities, including the closure of Sunday schools, Bible study groups, Byzantine music classes, etc.

- Also on 11 March 2020: In a televised address,<sup>57</sup> PM Mitsotakis informs the Greek people that ‘he knows that faith begins where science ends’ (‘Ξέρω ότι η πίστη αρχίζει, συχνά, εκεί που τελειώνει η επιστήμη’), thus including in the political weaponization of science its purported nature as being *by definition* in contradistinction to religious faith, at a time when official Church encyclicals would repeat the injunction to ‘listen to the scientists’; however, he also noted that ‘he looks forward to the support of Church leadership in the common cause’.
- 16 March 2020: Greece’s PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweets: ‘By decision of the government, the services in all spaces of religious worship of every doctrine and religion are suspended. Churches remain open only for individual prayer. The protection of public health requires clear decisions’<sup>58</sup> and, following this, then enforces via joint ministerial decree<sup>59</sup> a ‘temporary ban on, and prohibition of, any and all religious worship services in Greece’, initially up until 30 March 2020 (and extended well after Easter). Interestingly, the PM introduces the (novel, for Eastern Orthodox standards) theological notion of ‘private/individual prayer’ in an empty church building.
- Follow-up: The Church of Greece acquiesces to the full prohibition of worship services. Interestingly, and in spite of calls in public discourse to do so, the Church of Greece never challenged the total state ban on worship services at Greece’s equivalent of a constitutional court (*Συμβούλιο της Επικρατείας*) on the basis of Greece’s constitution §13 (‘All

[www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/508\\_11032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/508_11032020.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 11 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/11/23545>.

<sup>58</sup> Prime Minister GR, Tweet on 16 March 2020, 10:43, PM, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/PrimeministerGR/status/1239653497118875648>.

<sup>59</sup> ΦΕΚ 872 Β’, «Αριθμ. 2867/Υ1: Επιβολή του μέτρου της προσωρινής απαγόρευσης της τέλεσης κάθε είδους λειτουργιών και ιεροπραξιών στους θρησκευτικούς χώρους λατρείας για το χρονικό διάστημα από 16.3.2020 έως 30.3.2020», 16 March 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hhfP4QzJI5x2bLePBuXdZ3GMVn5okjrF>.

known religions shall be free *and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of the law*') and §25 (principle of proportionality), as other Western European Christian churches successfully did in similar contexts (examples include France: Conseil d'État 18 May 2020;<sup>60</sup> Germany, Bundesverfassungsgericht 29 April 2020;<sup>61</sup> Belgium, Raad Van State | Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak <sup>62</sup>8 December 2020, a fate averted in the Netherlands due to the exemption of 'religious worship and public demonstrations' from any total ban at the time).

- 18 March 2020: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew notes that, as far as the pandemic is concerned, 'it's not the Faith that is in danger, but the faithful and their health'.<sup>63</sup>
- 22 March 2020: Greece's PM announces<sup>64</sup> the first lockdown.
- 10 April 2020: A Synodical Encyclical<sup>65</sup> lambasts those that 'scandalise the faithful with slander, fictions and insults' by criticising protective health measures and their adherence by the Church and asks the faithful to 'stay at home' (in general, since participation in worship services was either way prohibited at the time). At the same time, the Encyclical clarifies that its adherence to COVID-19 measures does not entail a conviction that partaking in the sacrament of the Eucharist itself (the foundational communal sacramental event of the Orthodox Church) might prove to be a cause of pestilence. This forms one of the episodes of a subsection of the present text that could be called 'The Eucharist Wars':

<sup>60</sup> Le Conseil d'État, 18 May 2020, <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/actualites/rassemblements-dans-les-lieux-de-culte-le-conseil-d-etat-ordonne-au-premier-ministre-de-prendre-des-mesures-moins-contraindantes>.

<sup>61</sup> Bundesverfassungsgericht, 20 April 2020, [https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2020/04/qk20200429\\_1bvq004420.html](https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2020/04/qk20200429_1bvq004420.html).

<sup>62</sup> Raad Van State, Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak, 8 December 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EN5o6yW-clugOfZo7PTi9eo24NvxvZN8/view>.

<sup>63</sup> Σοφία Καρεκλά, 'Οικουμενικός Πατριάρχης: Δεν κινδυνεύει η πίστη αλλά οι πιστοί', orthodoxia.info, 18 March 2020, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/οικουμενικός-πατριάρχης-δεν-κινδυνεύει/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 22 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/22/23615>.

<sup>65</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, 'Εγκύκλιος 3019', 10 April 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egykliai/764\\_10042020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egykliai/764_10042020.pdf).



- The Eucharist Wars | From the start of the pandemic, a sizable portion of the Church & COVID debate centred on how the Orthodox Church administers the sacrament of the Eucharist, i.e., by a common spoon shared by all. While temporarily changing the mode of administration for the Eucharist was discussed in the public square, no change has been introduced as of yet; theological arguments put forth include that by Revd Prof. Nikolaos Loudovikos,<sup>66</sup> according to whom while the Church does not see the Eucharist itself as a potential *locus* of infection, the Church could very well change the mode of administration temporarily on the basis of pastoral discernment. On different instances in 2020, University of Athens immunologists Prof. Yamarellou and Linou somewhat reluctantly claimed either that ‘we don’t have definitive proof that the Eucharist can be contagious with COVID-19’ or that ‘this is a matter of one’s personal faith’,<sup>67</sup> igniting the ire of many in Greece’s public debate: now, ‘listen to the credentialed scientists, medical professionals, health experts’ was implicitly followed by the footnote ‘with the exception of Professors Yamarellou and Linou of the University of Athens’. In spite of the fact that ‘the Eucharist Wars’ occupied much of the Church & COVID debate as already mentioned, my personal assessment is that such an overpowering focus on the matter was slightly off-topic, even *before* we knew that COVID-19 is *not* a foodborne virus: being in a crowded worship space, with or without masks, with or without adequate social distancing, *either way* entails a danger of COVID-19 infection, the question rather being what a person, a government, or a church structure is willing to do with this reality in different contexts; the question of the Eucharist itself, however one is to frame it, does not make the difference between an imagined ‘fully sanitised’ church and an actual, more or less crowded one. Here, a sub-subsection of ‘the Eucharist Wars’ would

<sup>66</sup> π. Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, Αντίφωνο, 26 March 2020, <https://antifono.gr/μεταλαμβάνοντας-σε-καιρούς-πανδημία/>.

<sup>67</sup> (This was before it became public knowledge that it is also a matter of one’s stomach acids.)

be in order, as from the beginning of the crisis there were some voices on the fringes (including, among high-ranking clerics, that of Metropolitan bishop Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania, who later died of COVID, one of quite a few clergy casualties) claiming that somehow the church *building* is, miraculously, a sanitised space where there can be no COVID-19 infections due to its holiness, as touched upon in Part I of this paper. Again, the *theological* problem here is that the Orthodox Church had never in the past<sup>68</sup> (in the past *twenty centuries*, that is) held such a view; this fringe theology was a *new* theology, more characteristic of atavistic reflexes than Orthodox Christian theological tendencies, and this fringe position was never the position of the Synod or the Archbishop during the pandemic.

- 19 April 2020: Orthodox Easter, Greece's most important religious feast, is for all intents and purposes cancelled as the faithful are banned from attending church services. Services take place behind closed doors, with only the priest and acolytes/chanters present.
- 26 October 2020: Regarding the celebrations of the feast day of St Demetrios, the patron saint of Greece's second most populated city, Thessaloniki, numerous media outlets reported that social distancing measures were not kept by the public,<sup>69</sup> and that as a consequence a Brobdingnagian spike in COVID-19 cases would emerge after two weeks. The Brobdingnagian spike failed to emerge, yet the arena for culture wars inaugurated by the accompanying brouhaha sowed divisions that follow Greece's public discourse to this day: a few weeks ago, on 7 October 2020,<sup>70</sup> 15,000 demonstrators outside Athens's Court of Appeal waited for the verdict of

<sup>68</sup> Rev. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko, 'Do the Sacraments prevent Illness?', Public Orthodoxy, 19 March 2020 <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/19/do-the-sacraments-prevent-illness/>.

<sup>69</sup> Θεώνη Σταματοπούλου, 'Άγιος Δημήτριος Θεσσαλονίκη: Μεγάλος συνωστισμός έξω από την εκκλησία – Ιερείς χωρίς μάσκες', Diakopes.gr, 26 October 2020, <https://www.i-diakopes.gr/eidiseis-live/agios-dimitrios-thessaloniki-megalos-synostismos-exo-apo-tin-ekklesia-iereis-choris-masks/>.

<sup>70</sup> 'Δίκη Χρυσής Αυγής: 15.000 κόσμου έξω από το Εφετείο χειροκρότησαν την απόφαση', iefimerida, 7 October 2020, <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/diki-hrysis-aygis-15000-exo-apo-efeteio>.

the Golden Dawn trial on Greece's criminal neo-Nazi party, on the assassination of Pavlos Fyssas and on numerous other Golden Dawn assassination attempts. A causally related spike in COVID-19 cases failed to materialise there as well, yet suddenly half the population were charging the Thessaloniki St Demetrios celebrations as the root of future COVID-related deaths, while the other half asked whether the Court of Appeal demonstrators were miraculously immune from such a grim fate. In a world of magnets and miracles, the ringing of the division bell had begun: for the following many months, right-wing and/or religious citizens would defend their right of worship while lambasting the danger that public political demonstrations entailed, while left-wing and/or secular citizens would shun places of worship as centres of pestilence while defending the sacred right to demonstrate. Different government-friendly media would fuel both tendencies.

Fast-forward to...

- January 2021: After enduring restrictions during Christmas 2020, the government extended restrictions to include the celebration of Epiphany on the 6th of January; this was the first, and to date the only,<sup>71</sup> full clash of the institutional church with the government, as the Synod announced that it *would* openly celebrate Epiphany with the faithful (rather than *not* do it, as the state had decreed), yet adhering to strict social distancing measures.

Fast-forward to...

- July 2021: The Church of Greece issues an *urbi et orbi*-style pamphlet, 'To the People' («Προς τον Λαό #53<sup>72</sup>»), urging the faithful to get vaccinated with an extensive Q&A by doctors asserting the safety of vaccines. This pamphlet was distributed to all parishes of the Orthodox Church of Greece, and it ends with the assertion that 'vaccination is a supreme act of

<sup>71</sup> Μαρία Ευσταθίου, 'Θεοφάνεια 2021: Πώς θα γίνει ο εορτασμός – Τι ισχύει για εκκλησίες και αγιασμό υδάτων', Flash.gr, 5 January 2021, <https://www.flash.gr/greece/1749692/theofaneia-2021-pos-tha-ginei-o-eortasmos-ti-isxyei-gia-ekklisies-kai-agiasmo-ydaton>.

<sup>72</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, «Πρὸς τὸν Λαό». Ἐκδοση τῆς Ἱερᾶς Συνόδου τῆς Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ελλάδος, 19 July 2021, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/prostolao/53.pdf>.

responsibility towards fellow human beings, while the vaccine against the coronavirus does not come into any contradiction with the hagiographic, paternal and canonical teaching of our Holy Church'. Meanwhile the Russian Orthodox Church decreed resistance to the vaccination programme to be 'a sin'.<sup>73</sup>

- Also July 2021: The Synod summoned two Metropolitan bishops,<sup>74</sup> Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania and Seraphim of Kythera, in order to call them into deposition regarding their 'disobedience and lack of respect for the unanimous decision of the governing body of the Church of Greece concerning the measures taken for the celebration of Holy Services due to the pandemic'.<sup>75</sup>
- 16 September 2021: On the initiative of Metropolitan Ieronymos, bishop of Larisa and Tyrnavos, the first COVID-19 vaccination programme outside of Larisa's churches was inaugurated.<sup>76</sup> When the mobile vaccination unit started administering doses a few days later, a number of anti-vaccine protesters appeared:<sup>77</sup> representatives of the Metropolitan bishop offered them chocolates, trying to convince them to get vaccinated.
- 18 November 2021: PM Mitsotakis announces that the faithful may enter churches only with a green pass,<sup>78</sup> i.e. either with a vaccination certificate or with a negative COVID-19 test result, otherwise a EUR 300 penalty would occur. Up until 18 November 2021 (that is, during the months in which religious

<sup>73</sup> Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία Ρωσίας: 'Αμαρτωλοί όλοι αρνούνται να εμβολιαστούν', YouTube, Skai.gr, 6 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9CDz85VKdw>.

<sup>74</sup> 'Η Ιερά Σύνοδος καλεί Κυθήρων και Αιτωλίας για προφορικές εξηγήσεις', Romfea.gr, 15 July 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/44540-i-iera-synodos-kalei-kythiron-kai-aitolias-gia-proforikes-eksigiseis>.

<sup>75</sup> 'Metropolitans of Kythera and Etoloakarnania are called into deposition', Orthodox Times, 15 July 2021, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/metropolitans-of-kythera-and-etoloakarnania-are-called-into-deposition/>.

<sup>76</sup> 'Λάρισα: Εμβολιασμοί με Κινητή Μονάδα έξω από τις εκκλησίες', Πρώτο Θέμα, 16 September 2021, <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1161659/larisa-emvoliasmoi-me-kiniti-monada-exo-apo-tis-ekklisies-deite-video/>.

<sup>77</sup> Λάρισα: Η Μητρόπολη τrolάρει τους... πικραμένους αντιεμβολιαστές με σοκολατάκια, Ethnos.gr, 24 September 2021, <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/175297/larisahmhtropol-htrolareitoyspikramenoyantiemboliastesmesokolatakia>.

<sup>78</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 'Μήνυμα του Πρωθυπουργού Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη προς τους πολίτες για την πανδημία και τα μέτρα για την προστασία της δημόσιας υγείας', 18 November 2021, <https://primeminister.gr/2021/11/18/27977>.

worship was not prohibited), entrance to churches did not require a green pass; PM Mitsotakis added that ‘this, after all, is what the Synod’s encyclical foresees, it’s just that now the state will oversee the process’. However, the 4 November 2021 encyclical in question<sup>79</sup> once again urged the faithful to strictly adhere to health measures and *proposed* that the faithful be tested for COVID-19 before attending church; naturally, the Synod does not possess the legal power (or desire) to prohibit the entrance of anybody anywhere on the basis of a green pass—a prerogative of the state—, thus the reason for the PM’s assertion that ‘this is what the Synod decreed in its encyclical’ remains a mystery to this day.

- 13 December 2021: PM Mitsotakis meets with the Permanent Holy Synod and the Archbishop<sup>80</sup> on a Church-State relations agenda *sans* coronavirus. In his address to PM Mitsotakis, Archbishop Ieronymos remarked once again<sup>81</sup> that ‘the Holy Synod recognises the Greek government’s responsible stance in the struggle against the spread of coronavirus, the preservation of the National Health System and the protection of human life, forcing you to make difficult decisions. In this national effort, the Orthodox Church of Greece was from the very beginning (28 February 2020) and remains in support and solidarity with the Greek government. The Permanent Holy Synod and the vast majority of hierarchs and the clergy constantly urge the faithful with announcements, encyclicals, but also through personal pastoral care, so that they strictly observe the legislated measures, both inside and outside our churches. We want to make it clear once again that we are all working with the government and the medical community towards the common goal of eradicating the pandemic and

<sup>79</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα, 4 November 2021, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=3080&what\\_sub=egyklloi](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=3080&what_sub=egyklloi).

<sup>80</sup> Ἡ προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, [https://www.romfea.gr/ekklesia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5\\_i0hB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk](https://www.romfea.gr/ekklesia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5_i0hB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk).

<sup>81</sup> Ἡ προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklesia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki>.

returning to normal living conditions. That is why we reiterate at this time the appeal [that] all protective measures must be strictly observed [together with] the necessary diagnostic tests. In addition, we ask everyone, clergy and laity, to be vaccinated, because this is the essential measure of protection against the pandemic, as suggested by the medical community. All the above constitute the official position of the Church of Greece'. A joint press release<sup>82</sup> underscored the Church's role in urging citizens to get vaccinated and to observe all public health measures and the PM's congratulatory remarks on how the Church helped in countering the pandemic.

- Late December 2021, on the topic of deepening Greece's divisions: A minor storm emerged over a public Facebook post by Professor Elias Mosialos, official representative of the Government of the Hellenic Republic to international organisations on coronavirus, with a sarcastic meme on the belief of Christians in Mary's virginity; the meme posted just before Christmas was 'part of the COVID-19 awareness campaign',<sup>83</sup> as he later clarified on ΣΚΑΪ TV, also noting that 'the true meaning of Orthodox Christianity consists in guarding one's [biological] health'. The Synod responded to the Christian outcry that emerged with a press release<sup>84</sup> noting the timing of Prof. Mosialos' intervention and remarking drily that 'fanaticism is not the exclusive prerogative of religions ... but of many, be they conservative or progressive'. Opponents described the Church's press release as an obscurantist attempt at censorship, pointing to a return in the (always historiographically opaque yet ubiquitous in the public discourse) 'return to the Middle Ages'.

<sup>82</sup> 'Κοινό ανακοινωθέν ΔΙΣ – Γραφείου Πρωθυπουργού, Orthodoxia info.gr, 24 January 2022, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/koino-anakoinothen-dis-grafeioy-prothy/>.

<sup>83</sup> 'Ο Η. Μόσιαλος μιλάει για τις αντιδράσεις της εκκλησίας για την σατιρική του ανάρτηση', Skai.gr, 25 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5klMRd1EE>.

<sup>84</sup> 'Η Ιερά Σύνοδος για την προσβλητική ανάρτηση του κ. Μόσιαλου', Romfea.gr, 24 December 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47504-i-iera-synodos-gia-tin-prosvliti-ki-anartisi-tou-k-mosialou>.



*Schrödinger's church?*

In assessing the situation at large, one would be safe to say that, in spite of occasional bumps in the road, the Orthodox Church of Greece as an institution has been one of the government's strongest allies in securing an acceptance rate for the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and in rolling out the vaccination programme; at the time of writing this, Greece's fully vaccinated amount to 71.2%<sup>85</sup> of the population, while the EU/EEA average is 72.8%.<sup>86</sup> Many factors contribute to this, perhaps the main one being that, together with its influence on Greek society, Greece's Orthodox Church is also in a very close relationship with the state apparatus in the context of a Church-State separation that leaves much to be desired; in many primarily indirect rather than institutional ways, it can be seen as *part* of the state apparatus as things currently stand, and the enlistment of the Church in the battle against COVID-19 may be seen in this context. At the same time, it is often reported that the Orthodox Church in Greece forms an *impediment* to countering COVID-19 and completing the roll-out of the vaccines. How is this to be explained?

There are several factors at play here. And some of them indeed describe a reality. Other factors do not. For example, last July Politico<sup>87</sup> ran a piece entitled 'Science vs. religion as Greek priests lead the anti-vax movement: with COVID-19 cases on the rise, influential clerics are urging people not to get vaccinated'. The piece is first and foremost about a particular priest, Revd Vasileios Voloudakis, who is described as 'prominent', 'influential', having 'a lot of supporters'; this description of one of Greece's about 10,000 low-rank clerics, whom I did not know about prior to looking him up (also finding out an array of rather colourful pronouncements of his on any conceivable topic throughout the years), may seem to be somewhat economical with the truth among those with an overview of the clerical field. Furthermore, Metropolitan bishop Seraphim of Kythera is credited as 'one of the country's most powerful clerics', failing to mention that he was one of the two bishops

<sup>85</sup> Εμβολιασμός κατά της COVID-19, 28/9/2022, gov.gr, <https://emvolio.gov.gr/>.

<sup>86</sup> 'Total doses distributed to EU/EEA countries', *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*, 28/9/2022, <https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab>.

<sup>87</sup> 'Science vs. religion as Greek priests lead the anti-vax movement', Politico, 20 July 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/science-vs-religion-greece-priests-anti-vaccine-coronavirus-movement/>.



summoned by the Synod to be chastised for disobeying the body's decision on matters pandemic (the other being Metropolitan bishop of Aetolia and Acarnania Kosmas, who had refused to get vaccinated against the virus and who died of COVID-19 in January 2022). The irony here, of course, is that Kythera is one of the tiniest dioceses in Greece (and nobody really knows why and how it is a jurisdictionally distinct diocese), with nominally 3,000 inhabitants; the country's most powerful clerics usually have a different background—or audience.

On more serious matters, a distinction needs to be made that often eludes the overview of observers. Greece has a minority of various and disparate Old-Calendarist groups<sup>88</sup> or 'Genuine Orthodox Christians' (Γ.Ο.Χ. — Γνήσιοι Ορθόδοξοι Χριστιανοί), usually at odds with one another and differing in acronymical ways as far as their official titles are concerned. 'Old-Calendarist' does not here entail the mere adherence to the 'Old' Julian calendar (as this is either way the case with numerous canonical Orthodox churches: the churches of Russia, Jerusalem, Greece's Mount Athos monastic communities, etc.), but the separation, rupture, and schism from the official Orthodox Church following its early twentieth century adoption of the *revised* Julian calendar, in the context of Greece's division between royalists and republicans at the time.

While suffering in numbers and impact, Old-Calendarist groups are particularly active in conservative and ultra-conservative public demonstrations in Greece's streets or on the internet—including, for example, the demonstrations against the Prespes Agreement on North Macedonia in recent years. The vast majority of media articles featuring photos of clergy demonstrating against coronavirus restrictions or against COVID-19 vaccines depict clerics not belonging to the official Orthodox Church of Greece and sporting stereotypically Old-Calendarist-groups attire (such as the one in this article here,<sup>89</sup> among many others); editors are usually unaware of the distinction.

Thus, while the activity of the various Old-Calendarist groups falls very well within the subject of 'Greece and religion' or 'COVID-19

<sup>88</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Calendarists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Calendarists).

<sup>89</sup> 'Συγκεντρώσεις διαμαρτυρίας με λάβαρα και εικόνες κατά του υποχρεωτικού εμβολιασμού', Lifo.gr, 17 July 2021, <https://www.lifo.gr/now/greece/sygkentroseis-diamartyrias-kata-toy-ypohreotikoy-emboliasmoy-kai-ton-diahorismou-se>.

and religion in Greece' as a religious minority, it would be erroneous to include them in the 'Greece's Orthodox Church and the pandemic' bundle. And this activity is, indeed, excitingly convenient in the context of a particular narrative: who is it that could voice second thoughts to the handling of the pandemic, given that this handling is allegedly apolitical and solely dictated by a singular Science? It cannot be respectable citizens in the context of a democratic process. And while 'the sprayed ones' provide a handy starting point for media-managing this, it does not provide an explanation in the way that a proper scapegoat would. However, 'religious fanatics' and 'obscurantists' trying to take us 'back into the Middle Ages' because they 'deny Science' due to their 'faith' in the context of a 'perennial battle between Science and Religion': this would support said narrative in more potent ways. Thus, fringe Old-Calendarist supporters (presented by the media as priests of the Orthodox Church of Greece) do not merely form *part* of a dissenting crowd; they *characterise* the crowd and a *representative* thereof — better still, they are the crowd's *leaders*, according to the narrative.

It is in no way the fact, however, that there are no Orthodox Church of Greece clerics (or Greek citizens at large, for that matter) who publicly oppose either coronavirus restrictions and measures or COVID-19 vaccines or both, calling upon their flocks to act accordingly. And the situation in monasteries is by definition a lot more complicated, given the very nature of these establishments as promised places of *exit* from 'the (secular) world', while a certain amount of friction with their local overarching ecclesiastical authorities is often to be observed. Again, however, the reader would be imprudent to draw a distinction between the 'official Church line' versus 'everything/everyone else' (from individual bishops to monasteries, parishes, grassroots clergy) in which the former supports public health measures and the vaccination programme whereas the latter reject or undermine it.

It is simply impossible to have reliable, quantifiable data on *who does/says what* on the ground, as far as percentages are concerned. If the present author's day-to-day observations hold any value as 'empirical data', the overwhelming, vast even, majority of Athenian parishes surveyed adhere to the state-designated health measures to a tee, from social distancing to face masks and disinfecting agents. However, in a country of about 10,000 active parishes, exceptions of

COVID-denying or anti-vaccine priests and flocks cannot but be, by definition, numerous in absolute numbers, most probably in a way proportional to the same tendencies in the general population—even if bishops such as the Metropolitan Bishop of Dodoni go as far as to claim that ‘vaccine-denying and COVID-denying priests should be hanged’,<sup>90</sup> in a somewhat unrestrained bout of enthusiasm live on conservative ΣΚΑΪ TV, since ‘by opposing COVID-19 vaccines they exclude themselves from the Church and become minions of Satan’.<sup>91</sup> In any case, however, these exceptions to the rule enforced by the institutional church (*sans* hanging, hopefully) appear augmented in Greece’s conservative media,<sup>92</sup> finding an unexpected ally in voices of the Greek Left often keen to identify an obscurantist ecclesial counter-example to an Enlightened progressivist cause. Not to put too fine a point on it, for the whole duration of September 2021 I had struggled to single out three or four instances of ΣΚΑΪ TV’s news that would not include a story on ‘anti-vaccine priests spreading outrageous lies’<sup>93</sup> (3/12/21), on ‘COVID-denying priests in a battle against the vaccines’<sup>94</sup> (16/9/21), on Metropolitan bishops informing the audience that ‘COVID-denying/anti-vaccine priests are heretics’<sup>95</sup> (6/11/21), on a ‘priest attacking a schoolmaster for wearing face masks’<sup>96</sup> (14/09/2021), on ‘priests having been spotted without masks’<sup>97</sup> and so on. By regularly watching the news, one gets the impression that the country is under an anti-vaccine mass insurgency spearheaded by hundreds of combative science-denying priests in COVID-infected cassocks. By visiting fifty or a hundred

<sup>90</sup> ‘Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος για αρνητές ιερείς: Κρέμασμα θέλουν’, VimaOrthodoxias.gr, 24 November 2021, <https://www.vimaorthodoxias.gr/eipan/dodonis-chrysostomos-gia-arnites-iereis-kremasma-theloyn/>.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Μητροπολίτης Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος: Οι αρνητές ιερείς γίνονται όργανα του σατανά’, Skai.gr, 23 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6UHq5ZFoJc>.

<sup>92</sup> Alice Taylor, ‘EU media watchdogs and associations urge Greece to protect press freedom’, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/eu-media-watchdogs-and-associations-urge-greece-to-protect-press-freedom/>.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Αρνητές ιερείς διασπείρουν εξωφρενικά ψεύδη’, Skai.gr, 03 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laSShBSa7fo>.

<sup>94</sup> ‘Αρνητές ιερείς πολεμούν τα εμβόλια’, Skai.gr, 16 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78LEOoGhQ6M>.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Μητροπολίτης Πειραιώς: Σχισματικοί οι ιερείς που είναι κατά του εμβολιασμού’, Skai.gr, 06 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-qP-p\\_\\_ZEM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-qP-p__ZEM).

<sup>96</sup> ‘Το σχόλιο του Βασίλη Χιώτη - Επίθεση ιερέα σε λυκειάρχη για τη μάσκα’, Skai.gr, 14 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7TNvcmiUC8>.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Παπάδες και ψάλτες χωρίς μάσκες στον Αγ. Δημήτριο Θεσσαλονίκης’, Skai.gr, 26 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay9f6f-y5g>.

random Athenian parishes, one gets a very different picture, according to which state-dictated measures are adhered to in the vast majority of cases, exceptions notwithstanding. Thus, perspective is everything: there *are* anti-vaccine priests in Greece; the question is whether these are *more* in number than anti-vaccine *Greeks*, proportionally to the population; an educated guess would highly doubt that. And, as far as exceptions are concerned, their politico-religious dimension might induce a certain hilarity at times: for example, the Metropolitan bishop of Zakynthos wrote a letter to the PM<sup>98</sup> on 4 January 2022 complaining to him that one of the governing party's parliamentarians is politically courting the very anti-vaccine priests and monks that the bishop is trying to contain.

After all is said and done, however, one has to somehow account for the reality that there are *some* priests that defy the decisions of the state-friendly Church's governing body—and even a minority in a population of about 10,000 priests can prove to be quite a substantial number indeed. How is this to be explained, given that the Church of Greece is usually thought to be a tight and strict hierarchical structure with a top-down flow of decisions rather than an anarchist collective in which the governing body's decisions may not amount to much? The Orthodox Church is not 'Schrödinger's cat': we cannot be content with the explanation that it is *at once* tightly top-down hierarchical *and* anything-goes, or to resort to conspiracy theories implying that the Church desires to appear as if it defends the state's policy vis-à-vis the pandemic while in actuality it intends to undermine it. One might have to look for the answer in this seeming discrepancy by taking into account certain class considerations. The pandemic brought with it a blitzkrieg of radical changes to social life and life in general, as well as a number of vaccines developed with hitherto unforeseen speed, with which the entire population has to be vaccinated—together with the government's claim that it is simply, and apolitically, following the science, a claim with which reality has not proven to be very kind, as the Tsiodras-Lytras scandal<sup>99</sup> so aptly demonstrated. To think that this

<sup>98</sup> Επιστολή Μητροπολίτη Ζακύνθου Διονύσιου στον πρωθυπουργό, Newsbreak.gr, 4 January 2022, <https://www.newsbreak.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CE84A80F-D753-49B7-9329-821358F94B83.jpeg>.

<sup>99</sup> 'Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality' Το Βήμα, 15 December 2021, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsio->

violent situation would not engender dissenting voices in the population would be an apolitical folly: we become happily polarised in much less challenging settings, with the halo effect<sup>100</sup> entailing a change in our opinions and perspective even when the issue is whether we find a politically-charged feline aesthetically pleasing.<sup>101</sup> In the case of the pandemic and its class consideration, dissenting citizens from, say, the upper middle class, or higher still, have a voice of their own in the public square in order to articulate their dissent, and require no collective, or communal, way to do so. However, claiming the same for the working class would not be factually correct. It would not be oversimplistic to state that there are only roughly two kinds of institutional communities (apart from political parties) where working-class people throughout Greece, and particularly in Greece's provinces beyond the all-consuming capital of Athens, may join their voices with the voices of others: the local church, when pious citizens are concerned, and football clubs usually belonging to Greece's most powerful businessmen, when sports fans are concerned. Football clubs can be political at times,<sup>102</sup> but analysing coronavirus measures and the state of vaccines was not quite their primary calling; all of Greece's parliamentary parties support the COVID-19 vaccination programme (perhaps and only partly apart from the minor far-right party 'Greek Solution', «Ελληνική Λύση»); thus, the only kinds of *local* communities where the minority of dissenting citizens could bundle up (from sceptics, to groups that suffer financially from COVID-19 restrictions, to proper conspiracy theories) would be *those* local churches and parishes where a priest would be willing to lead them and to take on the microphone; a minority of priests, in a country with a minority of dissenters, if we are to judge from Greece's full vaccination percentages being roughly equivalent to the EU/EEA average. To put it otherwise: the only community that's *already there* and *could*, under certain circumstances, give voice to dissenters without it needing

dras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/.

<sup>100</sup> 'Halo Effect', Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_effect).

<sup>101</sup> Philip Cowley, 'Don't believe in tribal politics? Take a look at how people respond to Downing Street's cats', *The Spectator*, 4 November 2014, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/don-t-believe-in-tribal-politics-take-a-look-at-how-people-respond-to-downing-street-s-cats>.

<sup>102</sup> «Βράζει» η Μακεδονία κατά της κυβέρνησης: Χιλιάδες οπαδοί του ΠΑΟΚ εν χορώ εξυβρίζουν τον Κ.Μητσοτάκη, *Paskedi.gr*, 2 November 2021, <https://www.paskedi.gr/vrazei-h-makedonia-kata-ths-kyvernshshs-xiliades-opadoi-toy-paok-en-xorw-exyvrizoy-n-ton-k-mhtso-takh-video/>.

to be set up *ad hoc* (as has been the case with various organisations calling for anti-COVID demonstrations, etc.) would be a local church *in which there's a priest of similar opinions*. Perhaps this offers some kind of preliminary explanation as to why clerics are indeed visible in the anti-COVID and anti-vaccine crowd in spite of the fact that the official Church of Greece via its governing body so staunchly defends COVID-19 health measures and the vaccination programme: reality is not always as simple and as one-dimensional as we would like it to be.

Sometime in the future, the pandemic will be a thing of the past. Yet the divisions sowed by the handling of the crisis—on top of a decade of *financial* crisis—will persevere within Greek society. One could argue that, during the pandemic, Greece's media,<sup>103</sup> Greece's scientists,<sup>104</sup> and Greece's 'prevailing religion', the Orthodox Church, faced the danger of becoming weaponized as servants of political power, or *ancillae potestatis*, in the name of a common and noble cause: public health. After the pandemic recedes and leaves us with its bitter memories, one way for Greeks to heal the divisions inflicted upon them would be to re-articulate certain realities of foundational importance: the centrality of the freedom of the press, the integrity of the scientific method as a *scientific* rather than political enterprise in the bipartisan arena, and the liberation of the Church from the claws of the state—as an accurate description of a Greek Church-State separation would have it.

*Concluding Remarks: Is there an Orthodox distinctiveness in the 'science' and 'religion' debate during the pandemic?*

Returning to the question of predominantly Orthodox countries and Greece in particular, and in the light both of the above and of the more detailed overview of developments during Greece's experience of the pandemic I have attempted elsewhere as preparation for this paper,<sup>105</sup> I would like to argue that there is, indeed, *no true distinctiveness* in the Orthodox case, or at least Greece's case: the narratives, my-

<sup>103</sup> Dr Athanasios Grammenos, 'Freedom of the Press in Greece', *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.freiheit.org/greece/freedom-press-greece>.

<sup>104</sup> 'Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality' *To Βήμα*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/>.

<sup>105</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, 'Deepening Greece's Divisions: Religion, COVID, Politics, and Science', *Méta Working Papers* 11, no. 2022 (2022): 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.55405/mwp11en>.



thologies, representations, and ideological wars that were played out in the public discourse centring around the notions of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ were not *substantially* different from the ones encountered in countries with different Christian denominations predominating. This is interesting on its own, *precisely* because of the largely distinct historical trajectories of Orthodox countries vis-à-vis countries of a Western Christian religious pedigree—and I am referring to distinct historical trajectories *in the plural*, since Greek Orthodoxy’s Byzantine and post-Byzantine/Ottoman historical experience, the historical itinerary of Slavic countries, and in the twentieth century the experience of the USSR and its stance towards religion form trajectories that are substantially different from the Western European historical schematisation of the Middle Ages leading to modernity and the Enlightenment via the Reformation. If there was a distinctiveness in Greece’s case during the pandemic, this was to be observed in how its different historical trajectory was weaponised in public discourse<sup>106</sup> in the context of a narrative of negative exceptionalism. According to this narrative, *other* countries, *Western* societies—with Greece excluding itself from Western societies only when *problematizing* itself—possess the maturity to deal with the pandemic in a *scientific* way, ‘believing in science’, yet Greece being lamentably pre-modern is plagued by religious obscurantism and regressive populism. The problem with this narrative, of course, lies in the mere fact that it is factually incorrect, both from a historical and from a contemporary perspective relating to the pandemic: for example, the vaccine uptake percentage in Greece equals almost precisely the EU/EEA countries’ average (in all categories: at least one dose, primary dose, booster/additional dose),<sup>107</sup> there is no indication whatsoever that ‘populism’ or ‘COVID deniers’ scored better in Greece than in Western European countries whereas there are indications to the contrary, as mass demonstrations on COVID-19-related issues did not take place in Greece in contrast to, e.g., Germany, and so on. Thus, these narratives in the public square seem to have much more to do with Greece’s

<sup>106</sup> For a more general overview of the corresponding narratives in Greece, see Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘Studying Contemporary Greek Neo-Orientalism: The Case of the “Underdog Culture” Narrative’, *Horyzonty Polityki / Horizons of Politics* 8, no. 25 (2017): 125–49, <https://doi.org/10.17399/HP.2017.082508>.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Total doses distributed to EU/EEA countries’, *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*, <https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html>.

national soul-searching as a liminal country and society between a number of ‘worlds’—religious, geographical, historical, political, and so on—than with a Greek and/or Orthodox peculiarity and particularity in the domain of science and religion in the public square during the pandemic.

One of the conclusions we may draw from this is that the modern Western conceptual adventure of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ has been adopted in countries such as Greece to the same extent and in the same way as it is to be encountered in Western European countries that had begotten it on the basis of truly different historical circumstances, trajectories, developments, and conflicts. Thus, we see here a successful cultural and conceptual transplant, of cardinal importance, of the *outcomes* of historical, cultural, and intellectual developments on societies *without* the itineraries to which these outcomes owe their formation, as well as the wide adoption of these cultural and conceptual outcomes in those countries’ social imaginary. Be that as it may, it seems that the modern conceptual adventures of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ are by now common to countries of varying historical and cultural trajectories, both in times of calm and tempest.



# EVOLUTION, COMMUNION, AND VACCINES: SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY DEBATES IN THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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During the twentieth century, the relationship between theology and science had been debated in the Serbian public within three conceptual frameworks: (1) the founding of the University of Belgrade, (2) Serbian post-Second World War theological apologetics, and (3) Neo-patristic theology. The twenty-first century, especially in the last couple of years, saw three different instances in which scientific issues were a matter of theological debates that gained the attention of the wider public. These debates were on (1) the theory of evolution and creationism, (2) the means of distributing Holy Communion in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) vaccines against the Coronavirus. This paper presents an overview of the three instances of theology and science debates in the Serbian Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century, as well as some key factors whose interplay shaped these debates to a great extent.

## *Introduction*

Recent years have somewhat unexpectedly seen a rise in interest in science within the Serbian Orthodox Church. For a quite long period of time, theology and science debates, especially within the context of the rise of neo-patristic theology, were seen as being an interest of those theologies that were both ‘un-patristic’ and somewhat outdated, i.e. Christian apologetics. However, in a short period of time, the theology and science relationship became a focus of much heated public debate and caused certain controversies within Church structures. These debates were on (1) the theory of evolution and creationism, (2) the

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means of distributing Holy Communion in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) vaccines against oronavirus. This paper aims to analyse these three debates, as well as some key factors whose interplay shaped these debates to a great extent. But before focusing on that, I will point out three distinct frameworks within which the relationship between theology and science were thematized in the twentieth century.

### *Theology and Science in the Twentieth Century*

Being one of the perennial issues of theological endeavour, the relationship between theology and science was discussed in Serbian public life throughout the twentieth century. In particular, one could mention three specific contextual frameworks in which this issue was particularly dealt with. Namely, these are (1) the founding of the University of Belgrade, (2) Serbian post-Second World War theological apologetics, and (3) Neo-patristic theology.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, the scientific status of theology was a subject of much debate at the very beginning of the century, at the time when the new state university of what was then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians was being established in Belgrade. Journals, booklets, daily newspapers, but also the Parliament itself became the ground on which the scientific nature of theology was hotly debated. The outcome of this debate was in favour of the place of theology in the university and therefore the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was established as a part of the University of Belgrade.<sup>3</sup>

After the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime, things changed significantly for the Serbian Orthodox Church and theology itself. Religion was excluded from the public square, the Church hierarchy was marginalized and persecuted, and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was expelled from the University of Belgrade. It was in this context that apologetics became a prominent expression

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrej Jeftić, 'Pitanje naučnosti teologije u srpskoj teološkoj misli 20. vijeka' in *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku: istraživački problemi i rezultati*, vol. 10, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2011) 26–38.

<sup>3</sup> Bogoljub Šijaković, Aleksandar Raković, *Univerzitet i srpska teologija: istorijski i prosvetni kontekst osnivanja Pravoslavnog bogoslovske fakulteta u Beogradu (istraživanja, dokumentacija, bibliografija)*, (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2010); Vladan Perišić, 'Teološki fakultet: pro et contra', in *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku: istraživački problemi i rezultati*, vol. 2, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2007), 50–9.

of the orthodox faith. Theologians deemed it necessary to compensate for the pressure exhibited by the communist ideology and defend the scientific and epistemic status of theological claims. While the political battle had already been lost and the influence of the Church on the public marginalized, what was left for theologians was to seek to defend their ground in the realm of epistemological claims. Christian truth was defended on scientific grounds while ontological naturalism as a sole interpretative framework of the scientific endeavour was itself questioned.<sup>4</sup>

With the ‘patristic turn’ and the renaissance of the interest in the works of the Church Fathers there came a certain decline of theological interest in the issues of its relationship with science. Although it was proclaimed as a programmatic engagement with contemporary issues on the grounds of patristic theology, the neo-patristic paradigm brought a certain disinterest in those problems, which were perceived as foreign to the authentic orthodox mindset.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between science and theology, as well as the scientific status of the theology itself, were perceived as ‘too western’ and became regularly neglected. Focusing on the patristic writings that reflected the pre-modern status of human thought, which did not actually contain empirical science in its present form, neo-patristic theologians viewed the relationship between theology and science as foreign to the patristic mindset and therefore irrelevant.

### *Three recent debates*

Before the turn of the century, the Serbian Orthodox Church entered a new era. Marked by the national and religious renaissance, this period also saw the flourishing of theology. The Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Foča (Republic of Srpska, Bosnia, and Herzegovina) was founded

<sup>4</sup> As famous Serbian apologetic theologian Lazar Milin put it, the primary role of apologetics is to systematically lay out ‘the basic principles of religion, proving their truthfulness and validity, and defend them from the objections posed ... to establish the truthfulness of the Christian religion in the face of the reason.’ Lazar Milin, *Naučno opravdanje religije: apologetika*, vol. 1 (Šid: Bogoslovski fakultet Beograd, 2002), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Dimitrije Bogdanović strongly dismissed the entire apologetical endeavour, claiming that it is founded on the sense of guilt and shame that Christians have internalized in face of the modern world. Dimitrije Bogdanović, ‘Kuda ide hrišćanska apologetika’, *Glasnik SPC* 5 (May 1960) 112–5.



as a part of a newly founded state university of Eastern Sarajevo. On the other hand, in 2004 the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade regained its place within the University, with the court decision that nullified its expulsion in 1952. The Church itself has regained a central position in public life, certain members of the hierarchy gained wider prominence, and theology itself gained a great impetus with the publication of new books, journals, translations, etc. Regained importance of the Church and religious life in society and the presence of the Church hierarchy and theologians in public life have almost inevitably led to public debates pertaining to the issues of the relationship between theology and science. I will present and discuss three recent debates. While two of them are quite recent and related to COVID-19, the first one has to a large extent set the framework for the latter, structured by the factors that will be discussed further below.

#### *a. Evolution and Creationism Debate*

In May 2017 ‘a group of interested citizens’ issued a public petition asking for the revision of the curriculum for the study of evolution on all educational levels, from primary schools to universities. The petition was signed by 170 people, more than fifty of whom were academics, one hundred having postgraduate degrees, as well as five priests. The document was circulated to governing bodies in charge of the Serbian education system, including the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development, the Standing Committee for the education of the Serbian Parliament, then headed by the former Mufti of Novi Pazar, late Muamer Zukorlić, as well as the boards and heads of the universities in Serbia and Republic of Srpska. The request was made that the theory of evolution should be taught as ‘just a theory’, its weak points should be equally presented in the classrooms, and the alternative ‘biblical theory of creation’ should be taught alongside it. A similar initiative was brought up previously in 2004 by the former Minister of Education, but it never gained wider acceptance. This time, however, the initiative was met with a theological response.

On the 10 May, 2017, eleven professors and assistants of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Belgrade reacted to the pre-

viously signed petition.<sup>6</sup> The statement has seven points, which deserve to be briefly overviewed. First, it is stated that it is not up to the state institutions to make a final judgment and ‘revise’ what is going to be considered a scientific theory. Secondly, such a revision can only be made through the scientific research done properly and by the scientific community of each discipline. Thirdly, it acknowledges that the theory of evolution is ‘currently the only scientifically accepted theory that explains the development of life on Earth’ and, as such, at the moment it has no plausible alternatives. Fourthly, it is argued that the ‘biblical theory of creation’, the proposed alternative to the theory of evolution, is not a viable scientific theory nor is it a well-based theological position. Fifthly, it is claimed that the biblical narration concerning creation should be studied in the course of religious education, which is already present in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Sixthly, any form of scientism attempting to offer a sort of a philosophical or even religious alternative to Christian teachings about God, man, and the world is dismissed as a non-scientific metaphysical claim. Finally, the value of maintaining the autonomy of scientific disciplines was affirmed and the artificially generated conflicts between them, hence between biology and theology, are to be avoided.

The most important contribution of the Statement was to offer an alternative to the standard narrative of the clash between science and religion, biology and theology, theory of evolution as a scientific, and creationism as a theological standpoint. It offered a sort of a proposal to establish a ‘middle way’ between the extremes and open up a discussion on these matters. Most importantly, it argued for the autonomy of scientific disciplines and against the unnecessary conflicts between them. Also, the statement itself was an act of theological responsibility manifested in the public sphere, meaning that theologians must not refrain from the public sphere and are supposed to challenge any dubious theological standpoint and abuse of the interests of the religious community.

However, the statement was met with a strong backlash, mostly coming from the higher Church hierarchy. This development also pro-

<sup>6</sup> A brief and very useful overview of the debate with the useful links to the original statement is provided by Gayle Woloschak, ‘Evolution and Science Curriculum Debates in Serbia’, *Public Orthodoxy*, 10 October 2017, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/10/10/evolution-debates-in-serbia/>

foundly influenced the circumstances and to some extent formed the framework in which the science-religion debates during the time of the pandemic took place.

### *b. Holy Communion and the Common Spoon*

The second issue was with regards to the question of whether Holy Communion, consisting of consecrated bread and wine and distributed by a spoon from the common chalice, can be a transmitter of a coronavirus. This issue was raised in the first weeks of the pandemic.

At the outbreak of Coronavirus in mid-March 2020, an influential bishop of the SOC invited people to take Communion without fear, because for him 'God is more powerful than any evil and epidemic'.<sup>7</sup> In this statement God and the Coronavirus are portrayed in a Manichean fashion as absolute good and absolute evil. As Cyril Hovorun argued, such a dualistic view is in stark contrast with at least two Christian Orthodox stances. First it overlooks the stance that the Coronavirus, like other viruses and bacteria, are part of the ecosystem created by God and second, it fails to acknowledge that evil is a product of human freedom, and it is not embedded in nature.<sup>8</sup>

The popular Serbian theological web magazine *Teologija.net* (Theology.net) began to publish articles debating these issues. Thus, a lecturer of patristics at the University of Tübingen Vladimir Latinović claimed that since Communion can make one drunk or sated and it can be spoiled, indented, or turned sour, it may also have the characteristic of transmitting viruses and bacteria.<sup>9</sup> The reactions to Latinović's article acknowledged his arguments but dismissed the article as a sheer attack on the authority of the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which holds that Communion cannot transmit the virus. The whole theological debate about the effects of the Coronavirus on the practice

<sup>7</sup> Episkop Fotije pozvao vernike da se pričešćuju, 'Bog je jači od bolesti' [Bishop Fotije called believers to take Communion, 'God is stronger than illness'], *Semberija.info* 15 March 2020: <https://www.seberija.info/cir/news/novosti/Republika-Srpska/6222.episkop-fotije-pozvao-vjernike-da-se-pricescuju,-%E2%80%9Cbog-je-jaci-od-bolesti-.html>

<sup>8</sup> Cyril Hovorun, 'COVID-19 and Christian (?) Dualism', *Public Orthodoxy* 23 March 2020: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/23/COVID-19-and-dualism/>

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Latinović, 'Od hrane do leka: Efekti pričešća na telesno zdravlje' [From food to medicine: Effects of Communion on physical health], *Teologija.net* 24 March 2020: <https://teologija.net/od-hrane-do-leka-efekti-pricesca-na-telesno-zdravlje/>

of distributing the Communion was reduced to the debate about the infallibility of the Synod of the Serbian Church.

The practices of distributing Communion varied in the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church and reflected the theological positions of the bishops. Thus, in some churches, as long as they were not closed by the decision of civil authorities, the distribution of Communion was continued in a traditional manner, with a chalice and spoon, while the measures of wearing a mask and keeping distance were even ignored. This practice reflected the theological position that the eucharist is not only the ‘medicine of immortality’ (Ignatius, *Eph.* PG 5, 753–6), but also a kind of vaccine against Coronaviruses.<sup>10</sup> Hovorun deems this position as docetist or Eucharystian, because for him those who believe that a virus cannot be transmitted through the Communion hold that Communion is either exempted from the laws of nature, as the body of Jesus Christ was exempted from the laws of nature, or the nature of the bread and wine is changed, as for Eucharystians the human nature of Jesus Christ is changed in Communion with his divine nature.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Hovorun, Nikolaos Loudovikos argues that in spite of the fact that the nature of Eucharist bread and wine remain the same, their ‘way of existence’ is changed.<sup>12</sup> Due to the different ‘way of existence’ the Eucharistic bread and wine are free of their natural limits, such as being prone to infections. Therefore, for Loudovikos, Communion cannot be the transmitter of viruses.

Some bishops ordered their priests to celebrate the liturgy with the participation of a few members of the laity. The theological explanation offered for this practice is that in spite of the small number of people, liturgy is celebrated for all people and for the whole of creation, and those who are absent are absent for justified reasons.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a few bishops introduced an adapted version of the distribution of the Holy Gifts, such as one practiced in the liturgy of St James. Namely, a priest approached each communicant, one and a half

<sup>10</sup> Latinović, ‘Od hrane do leka’.

<sup>11</sup> Hovorun, ‘COVID-19 and Christian (?) Dualism’.

<sup>12</sup> Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, Μεταλαμβάνοντας σε καιρούς πανδημίας, *Antifono* 26 March 2020: <https://antifono.gr/μεταλαμβάνοντας-σε-καιρούς-πανδημία/>.

<sup>13</sup> Episkop požarevačko-braničevski g. Ignatije, ‘Reč utehe, u susret Vaskrsu!’ [‘A word of comfort in approaching Easter!’], *RTV Biser* 15 April 2020: <https://rtvbiser.rs/6404-2/> Cf. also John Zizioulas, ‘The Church without the Eucharist is no longer the Church’, *Public Orthodoxy* 23 March 2020: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/27/church-without-eucharist/>

meters distant from the others, with a plate with consecrated pieces of bread and a cup of consecrated wine, and he or she took the bread and immersed it in wine.

At the theoretical level, the participants in the debate took positions that could be divided into three groups: a) Communion, consisting of the bread and wine can transmit viruses, b) Communion cannot be a transmitter of the disease, but the spoon or chalice for distributing Communion may be the transmitter, and c) neither Communion nor the means of distributing it can be infectious. However, at the practical level there prevailed, mostly among the episcopate, an attitude that neither Communion nor the means of distributing it can be infectious. The only reason why some bishops decided to introduce alternative ways of distributing the Communion is out of the Church *oikonomia* and for those people who are weak in faith, as Metropolitan John Zizoulas described it.<sup>14</sup> Ten of the fifteen bishops that have their diocese in the of Republic of Serbia, being older than sixty-five, were obliged by the decision of the Serbian Government from 21 May 2020 to stay at home and could not attend services. A priest and assistant professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Vukašin Milićević, who publicly stressed the importance of social distancing, avoiding direct contact, and following all the other preventive measures during the performance of the service, was punished for disobedience by the ban to perform his priestly duties.<sup>15</sup>

In order to stop further debates and various liturgical practices, the member of the Holy Synod, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, in early May of 2020 wrote the booklet, entitled *Holy Communion – a source of health or a source of disease?* He attacked ‘quasi-modern, ultraliberal, scientific theologians’ from the web-magazine *Teologija.net* for their stance about Communion as a transmitter of infections, but also those who introduced the distributions of gifts like the one in the liturgy of St James, opting for the most traditional method of distributing the gifts, from a single chalice using a common spoon. The booklet was printed in one hundred thousand copies and distributed in diocese of the Serbian

<sup>14</sup> Zizioulas, ‘The Church without the Eucharist is no longer the Church’.

<sup>15</sup> Milica Resanovic, ‘Beliefs and knowledges – Between a Purifying and Polluting Spoon’, *The European Sociologist* 46/2, 1 May 2020: <https://www.europeansociologist.org/issue-46-pandemic-impossibilities-vol-2/beliefs-and-knowledges-between-purifying-and-polluting>

Church. The Synod avoided making any decision about the implementation of restrictive measures during the pandemic and urged the hierarchy to continue distributing Holy Communion in the old fashion. However, COVID-19 took its toll on the Church. Many bishops and priests of the Serbian Church died from COVID-19, including most notably Patriarch Irinej, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro, and Littoral, retired Bishop Atanasije of Zahumlje, Herzegovina and Littoral, Bishop Milutin of Valjevo, and deposed Bishop Artemije.

### *c. Vaccines*

At the convocation of the Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Church held in May 2019, the mandatory vaccination of children was discussed. The assembly decided that both the reasons for vaccination of scientific medicine and the parents' fear of vaccinating their children should be respected.<sup>16</sup> With the release of COVID-19 vaccines, the debate re-emerged in the Serbian Church. In addition to the ongoing debate between those who insist on the benefits of vaccination and those who oppose it, usually called 'vaxxers' and 'anti-vaxxers', some Church members were insisting on Holy Communion as the only successful protection from the contentious disease. However, the episcopate of the Serbian Church was divided on the issue of the benefits of vaccination.

In public messages to his flock and other people, Bishop Grigorije of Germany insisted on vaccination as the best way to fight COVID-19. The conference of the canonical Orthodox bishops of Germany, of which Bishop Grigorije is a part, issued an appeal to people to immunize themselves.<sup>17</sup> Several bishops, including Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid and Assistant Bishop Stefan of Remesiana took an active role in the public campaign for vaccination.

On the other hand, other bishops, such as Bishop Irinej of Bačka, argued that the Church as the space of freedom cannot issue any official statement either in support of or against vaccination. He also emphasized that if the state insists on mandatory vaccination, the Church will

<sup>16</sup> The Communique of the Holy Assembly of Bishops, SPC 22 May 2019: [http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/communique\\_holy\\_assembly\\_bishops\\_2](http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_assembly_bishops_2)

<sup>17</sup> Grigorije: Vakcina nije napravljena da nas ubije nego da nas spase [Grigorije: The vaccine was not made to kill us, but to save us], *Politika* 13.11.2021: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/492055/Grigorije-Vakcina-nije-napravljena-da-nas-ubije-nego-da-nas-spase>



be against it, because of possible abuse and unreliability of vaccines, as well as unwanted side effects.<sup>18</sup> The main argument for the lack of support of the Serbian Church to the mandatory vaccination is not a suspicion of its efficiency, but rather lack of knowledge about the vaccine. Thus, the Serbian Church did not recommend vaccination to its members, but it left to each individual member to decide for herself of himself, being against the decision of the authorities to take the right from people to decide about their personal health.

### *How a debate takes shape*

In all of the three mentioned instances, public discourse on the relationship between theology and science was shaped through the interplay of different factors. Some of them reflect the particularities of the Serbian public sphere, while others pertain to the dynamics of the inner life of the Serbian Orthodox Church. It is important to point out some of these factors if not provide a detailed analysis. Although they are related to the Serbian context, they can be related to other contexts, especially those of predominantly Orthodox countries.

These factors have shaped the way that the theology and science debates are internally understood within the context of the Church. This internal debate, on the other hand, impacted the public discourse on these matters.

#### *a. 'It's always personal'*

In all of these debates, more often than not Church doctrine was used as a 'weapon' in settling personal disputes. Certain church hierarchs aimed at establishing their dominance in the Church over other parties and used the theology and science debates as a tool for doing so. At the convocation of the Assembly of Bishops of the SOC in May 2017, Bishop Irinej of Bačka demanded that the blessing of the Synod for further teaching at the Faculty of Theology should be denied to the

<sup>18</sup> Episkop bački Irinej: Na braniku vere, morala i tradicije ostaje pravoslavlje [Bishop Irinej of Bačka: Orthodoxy remains on the bulwark of faith, morality and tradition], *Novi standard* 3.1.2022: <https://standard.rs/2022/01/03/episkop-backi-irinej-pravoslavlje-ostaje-na-braniku-vera-morala-i-tradicije/>

signatories of the statement on evolution. This may be interpreted not so much as the debate between the evolutionists and creationists, but rather as a personal dispute between Bishop Irinej and some of the signatories, especially Bishop Maxim of Western America.

In order to gain the upper hand and acquire support from other parties, some hierarchs would use the populist representation of the confrontation between science and religion on specific matters, such as the theory of evolution. Arguing that a Christian should consider their oldest common ancestor to be Adam and not an *Australopithecus*, proved to be a successful strategy to gain political alliances. Solidification of the believers for the continuation of the endangered teaching of the Church easily took shape. This strategy proved to be especially fruitful with those Church members who had lived through the communist regime in which ‘scientific facts’ were constantly used as conclusive proof that there is no God and that there should be no religion either.

When on 8 July, 2019, the Synod decided to withdraw the blessing for teaching at the Faculty of Theology to two signatories of the Statement: Bishop Maxim, a full professor, and Marko Vilotić, an assistant professor, the explanation included some odd accusations. Thus, Bishop Maxim was not only criticized for signing his support for the theory of evolution, but he was also accused of professing Taoism, because he quoted in one of his articles an author who drew some parallels between Christian and Taoist teachings.

Theological scholars were not themselves excluded from this either. Some of those who felt the opportunity to criticize their counterparts on the basis of their alleged ‘progressivism’ and the betrayal of core beliefs used these debates to do so. Here is where I come to the second factor, closely related to the first one.

### *b. Epistemic dominance*

In the course of these debates, theological knowledge was represented as being exclusively produced and verified by the ecclesial authorities. Theologians and scholars who act publicly without being previously approved by these authorities and/or are offering contrasting opinions are to be deemed as invalid sources of knowledge and therefore silenced. This factor became more important since the public

appeal regarding the theory of evolution was made by a group of theologians in 2017. Through the ‘silencing’ of the important contributors to the debate, the debate itself has taken another form. It became, once again, the case of ‘warfare between science and religion’.

The reactions to the articles about Communion by Vladimir Latinović, who holds an academic post at the University of Tübingen, are a good example of a clash between ‘scientific theology’ and ‘theology in the service of the Church’. Since it was difficult to refute Latinović’s arguments, he was accused among other things of lacking both personal faith and scientific rigorism, for taking a sectarian approach and for allegedly labelling the Synod of the Serbian Church as the fortress of backwardness.

On the other hand, the self-proclaimed promoters of the scientific worldview perpetuated this very notion and strived to establish epistemic dominance, albeit in the opposite direction. Aligning with ‘science’, they opted for epistemic dominance in the public space. Diverging opinions, and especially those related to the Church and its core teaching, were dismissed as backward and in opposition with the truth itself, conveniently and self-evidently revealed in the latest scientific findings. In addition to that, those theologians offering support to the theory of evolution or hesitant to accept as a scientific fact that the ecclesial space is by definition free of the Coronavirus were perceived as actually supporting the fight *against* the Orthodox Church that is the supposed source of all backwardness in the Serbian society. They were perceived as ‘Christian atheists’, siding with the truth and against their own beliefs and communities (whether they are aware of it or not). Therefore, the confrontation and the means of establishing epistemic dominance were further developed and welcomed by both parties.

### *c. Performative identities*

In the course of the mentioned debates, public representations of the theological standpoints were driven by the need for the preservation of the Orthodox identity. Orthodox doctrine is understood as a public virtue that should be communicated *via public speech acts*

but not necessarily put into practice.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, public speech acts through which one represents one's own doctrinal standpoints serve as a means by which one's identity is constructed. However, practical behaviour does not necessarily align with these speech acts. Sometimes it is even contrary to the publicly proclaimed theological standpoints. The Orthodox identity is produced through the public communication of the conservative standpoints, but not necessarily through practical enactment of their implications as well.

In the case of the dispute regarding the use of a common spoon, this meant that any change in the traditional way of receiving Holy Communion was condemned as an unholy innovation calling into question the belief in the healing power of Christ's own body. 'In the history of the Orthodox Church, no one has ever been infected through Holy Communion', was often repeated by many. But, on the other hand, this did not prevent the actual alteration of the way that Holy Communion was distributed in many diocese, even those headed by bishops who stood against such changes or at least kept silent about it. Also, some bishops would publicly call the believers to attend the Church services and 'not be afraid' of getting infected, while simultaneously refraining from participating in the Church services, thereby obeying the recommendations directed to elderly citizens to avoid public gatherings.<sup>20</sup>

The same attitude could be recognized by the other party in the debate. Those who protested strongly against any sort of Church gathering, calling Christians 'the spoon lickers', were eager to participate and applaud other sorts of public gatherings if they were performed for 'the right purposes'. Therefore, political protests opposing the current regime were praised by the same media and public figures who were eager not to allow the usual celebration of Easter. Also, the large gathering of people at the funeral of famous Serbian singer Đorđe

<sup>19</sup> As Judith Butler puts it 'Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names'. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'sex'* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) 13.

<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, this ambivalence was also reflected in some decisions of the Synod. E.g., while all the bishops were required to continue distributing Holy Communion with a common spoon, they were also asked to 'throw in' the Communion in the mouth of believers in order to prevent them from touching the spoon with their lips. Therefore, it proved that often Orthodox identity is to be maintained publicly through speech acts, even if the nonverbal practices tell a different story.

Balašević were viewed positively by the same people who would call the liturgical commemoration of the late Metropolitan Amfilohije 'a corona party'. Therefore, what was on 'both sides' deemed as crucial are not actually practices but 'speech acts' that one might also deem to be nothing more than instances of virtue signalling. These practices lead us to the next factor.

#### *d. Culture wars*

The three debates were also profoundly shaped by the ongoing culture wars in Serbia. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, a political division between what was called 'First' and 'Second Serbia' has developed. It was initiated by a group of intellectuals who represented themselves as an alternative to the 'First Serbia' and protested not only the regime of Slobodan Milošević, president of Yugoslavia, at the time, but also what they perceived as the traditional understanding of the Serbian identity and statehood. Over the last three decades, this division has heavily influenced and (mis)guided political but also cultural debates in Serbia. To simplify, everything promoted by the 'Second Serbia' was seen as opposing the traditional understanding of Serbian identity and therefore of the Church and its importance as well.

This war was internalized by some Church hierarchs in order to portray their counterparts as those essentially belonging to the 'enemy side' and being infiltrated as a 'fifth column' in the midst of the Church. Also, it was used by the 'other party', the one in constant battle with all things traditional, in order to discredit and stigmatize the Church communities as 'a source of disease and thereby responsible for the deaths of thousands'.

#### *e. Conceptual frameworks*

The concept of science deployed in these debates on the side of the Church hierarchy often bears resemblance to the controversies of early modernity. Science is understood in a similar way that it was in nineteenth-century natural theology, and therefore the theological standpoints are adapted in order to confront it wherever needed. Its aim is to seek truth so that whenever it becomes seemingly confronted with

what is understood to be the truth in terms of Orthodox doctrine, it is to be corrected or disposed of. It is no wonder that, therefore, pseudo-scientific standpoints are adopted from other confessional and even religious traditions (such as Protestant and Islamic creationism) in order to protect what is understood to be the Orthodox doctrine.

On the other hand, a secularized understanding of science aims to expel any kind of religious narrative from the public sphere, *unless* it offers direct support to the claims made by those with the 'right' worldview.<sup>21</sup>

### *Conclusion*

For the almost five decades of the Serbian Church under communist rule, the issue of the interplay between science and religion was of a great importance due to the need of the Church to present its teaching as scientific knowledge to communist authorities. After the fall of communism, the topic of the relationship between religion and science was abandoned, but it returned unexpectedly by the end of the 2010s, first with the theological interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution and then with the practice of receiving Communion during the Coronavirus pandemic and the Church attitude towards the Coronavirus vaccines. The clash between religion and science emerged on several levels. The members of staff of the Faculty of the Orthodox Theology issued a statement against the attempts of certain groups in Serbian society to replace the scientifically accepted theory of evolution with the non-scientific 'biblical theory of creation'. This bold move in deeming 'creationism' neither as a viable scientific theory nor as a well-based theological position was severely criticized by the ecclesial authorities, who introduced a distinction between 'scientific' theology and 'theology in the service of the Church'. The staff members of the Faculty of Theology gained public support from the secular audience, while the Church authorities took the side of the proponents of creationism. The existing rift was deepened with the outbreak of the Coronavirus. As a preventive measure against the spread of Coronavirus, some theolo-

<sup>21</sup> As Peter Harrison puts it 'One of the reasons that our science makes universal claims, then, is that it borrows from "the Christian religion" its notions'. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, vol. 4 (The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 195–6.

gians proposed an alternative method of distributing Communion, but they faced very bold opposition from the highest ecclesial authorities, who tended to maintain the status quo. Finally, in spite of the fact that many church dignitaries took an active part in promoting vaccination against the Coronavirus, the Serbian Orthodox Church did not take any official stance toward vaccination. The official explanation was that the SOC does not possess relevant scientific knowledge in order to publicly recommend massive vaccination and that it leaves to each particular believer to decide about this issue for him or herself.



# THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES IMPOSED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TOO MUCH FOR SOME, TOO LITTLE FOR OTHERS

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This paper discusses the religious dimension of the public debate concerning the public health measures adopted by the Romanian authorities during the pandemic and focuses on the role played by the Romanian Orthodox Church within this context. It delineates the different camps that were formed within the Church in this regard and traces their evolution throughout the pandemic. It contextualizes the position of the Church in order to better understand it, placing it within the broader context of the Romanian society during the pandemic and integrating it within the longer history of post-communist relations between the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Romanian state and the Romanian civil society. It analyses the political impact of the public health measures and the role of the Church in shaping this impact. Finally, starting from the Romanian experience of the pandemic and from the ideological, theological and political disputes that it has generated within the Romanian public sphere, it develops some general conclusions regarding the relation between faith, science and politics whose relevance, if proven valid, surpasses the Romanian context and thus contributes to a more ecumenical discussion regarding the theological, pastoral and political lessons that can be learned from an otherwise tragic experience.

## *Introduction*

Eastern Europe is the region of the world that was hardest hit by COVID-19. Nine out of ten countries with the highest number of deaths caused by COVID-19 per million inhabitants are located in

Eastern Europe and four out of these nine countries are predominantly Orthodox. Romania ranks eleventh in the world, with over 65,000 deaths. Given the scale of this humanitarian tragedy, not to speak of its additional economic and social impact, it is easy to understand why the disputes in the Romanian public sphere regarding the public health measures adopted in response to COVID-19 have been extremely tense. As one of the most important institutions in Romania, the life of which involves large-scale socialization, the Romanian Orthodox Church was inevitably involved in these disputes, leading to the formation of various factions within the Church that have argued both with each other and with other secular factions from wider Romanian civil society.

The object of these disputes was the medical, political, and religious legitimacy of the public health measures. These dimensions have frequently overlapped. For example, many within the Church have opposed the public health measures *not* for religious reasons or *not only* for religious reasons, but also because they believed in 'alternative' or 'heterodox' medical theories. While there has been a lot of open opposition to the public health measures within the Church at all levels, laity, clergy, and hierarchy, there was certainly no unique and homogeneous position of the Church on this topic. The landscape is complicated by the fact that individual positions sometimes shifted as the pandemic evolved, not all individuals opposed all public health measures, but some opposed some of them, though not others, and overall there were also clear differences of degree in the opposition to some or all measures and in the type and quality of the arguments invoked by the various opponents.

Generally speaking, the attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the public health measures was divided between tacit and reluctant acceptance from some within the Church and open opposition from others, with few cases of enthusiastic support. Overall, we can speak of an ambiguous and hesitant attitude, which triggered, in the Romanian public sphere, a lot of secular criticism that is rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment and that saw in this opposition or insufficient support a new proof for the already existing belief that the Church was opposed to science and social progress. As a result, the pandemic opened a new front in an older and broader Romanian cultural battle, which inevitably became more vicious in the new

context marked by tragedy, uncertainty, and the emergency measures that redefined the social contract.

While at first glance it does seem that the opposition to the public health measures, which involved to different extents almost all segments of Romanian society, was overrepresented within the Church, a sociological study would be necessary to establish where exactly the Church stands on this issue when compared with other segments of Romanian society. But I am not a sociologist and hence this is not the objective of my paper. Instead, the paper attempts a qualitative analysis of the religious dimension of the debate over the public health measures, as the latter has been reflected in the Romanian public sphere (mass-media, social media, official positions of Church hierarchs) during the pandemic. It follows the evolution of this debate in parallel with the evolution of the pandemic and of the subsequent public health measures adopted by the Romanian government and relates the reactions to the public health measures coming from within the Church to the broader reactions of Romanian society. An accurate understanding of the particular position of the Church requires a broader understanding of the general context of Romanian society during the pandemic and my paper will not treat the Church as a separate entity, but as a part of Romanian society, in order to understand it better.

The article is written from the perspective of somebody who has been actively involved in this debate and has developed his current understanding of the subject matter through this active engagement. My engagement has fostered a wider theoretical reflection that goes beyond the context of Romanian society during the pandemic. Hence, the presentation of this context and the analysis of the religious component of the Romanian debate concerning the public health measures will be followed by some theologico-political considerations concerning the relation between science, faith and, society/politics, which will be formulated in the final section of this paper.

### *The first wave and the first Pascha spent at home*

Romania registered its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020, while all eyes were on Italy, where the pandemic was gaining momentum. Romanian public opinion and the Romanian authorities

were particularly worried given the fact that over 100,0000 Romanians were living in Italy, many of whom were migrant seasonal workers, which meant that Romania was much more exposed than other countries through its Italian diaspora. But even before large-scale restrictions were imposed by the Romanian government, a religious conflict had already started within the Church. It was a conflict between those who thought that Church life should adapt to the prescriptions of the scientific community and those who thought that Church life, as the life of the Resurrected Christ, is immune to disease and other causes of death affecting corrupted nature and should therefore go ahead unabated in accordance with the established tradition.

The trigger of the conflict was a press release issued by the Romanian Patriarchate on February 27, one day after the first recorded case in Romania, in which his Beatitude Patriarch Daniel announced several ‘temporary, exceptional measures’ through which the Church was ‘adapting’ to the new pandemic context. The measures included a dispensation for those fearful of catching the virus in the Church, who were permitted to refrain from venerating icons and to commune with a single-use spoon brought from home, not with the common spoon used by all believers.<sup>1</sup> The press release was instantly denounced on social media by lay conservatives and conservative members of the lower clergy<sup>2</sup> as a betrayal of faith. Their argument was that if one believes that they can get sickness and death from the body and blood of the Resurrected Christ, then they do not actually believe in the Resurrected Christ and in his real presence in the eucharistic bread and wine, so they cannot call themselves Orthodox Christians.<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with the outrage stirred by its initial press release from February 27, the Romanian Patriarchate backtracked and issued another press release the next day, February 28, in which it sought to mollify initial reactions by making the following statements: ‘The press

<sup>1</sup> ‘Patriarhia Română: Măsuri sanitare și spirituale în timp de epidemie’, Basilica News Agency (February 27, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/patriarhia-romana-masuri-sanitare-si-spirituale-in-timp-de-epidemie/>.

<sup>2</sup> For lack of a better term, I will use in the term ‘conservative’ in this paper to refer to those Christians who thought that adapting Church practice to the public health measures imposed or merely recommended by the public authorities amounted to a betrayal of faith.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Patriarhul Daniel revine cu precizări despre regula împărtășirii’, *Cuvântul Ortodox* (February 29, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/recomandari/patriarhul-daniel-revine-cu-precizari-despre-regula-impartasirii-dar-precedentul-linguritelor-perso-nale-este-creat-in-numele-grijii-pentru-cei-mai-fricosi-si-mai-slabi-in-credinta-ps-ignati/>.

release of the Press Office of the Romanian Patriarchate from February 27, 2020 was issued in the context of an excessive mediatization of the pandemic provoked by the coronavirus and of some requests from some state institutions that the Church take measures to prevent the spreading of the virus’.

Thus, the Patriarchate was suggesting was that the Romanian state was exercising pressure over the Church to adapt its liturgical practice to the new epidemiological context or, to put it bluntly, it was suggesting that ‘we did not really believe what we wrote, they made us do it’. The new press release further stated that the initial one was addressed only to those who were weak in faith, offering them a dispensation, but that by no means was it aiming at changing the existing general rule of administering communion with a single spoon. The press release ended by ‘strongly reaffirming the fact that the Holy Eucharist is not and can never be a source of sickness and death, but a font of new life in Christ, of forgiveness of sins and of healing of soul and body’. Likewise, it stated that ‘the faithful who have a strong living faith are not afraid of getting sick’ by venerating the icons, ‘but rejoice in the prayer and blessing of the saints painted in the icons’.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, while the first press release was welcomed by secular liberals and infuriated conservative Christians, the second infuriated secular liberals and triggered a series of vicious attacks against the Church, as Orthodox Christians who communed with the same spoon and venerated icons and relics were lambasted and demonized for undermining the government efforts to stop the pandemic. In an uncertain and rapidly changing environment, the Patriarch was trying to maintain a very difficult equilibrium between that part of its flock that was staunchly opposed to any liturgical innovations—requested mostly by atheists, agnostics, and those who do not attend Church very often—and the Romanian state authorities with which, like all Orthodox Churches, the Romanian Orthodox Church has a very close connection that it wishes to preserve. Most likely, the Patriarch was also seeking at the same time to protect the Church from attacks that were becoming ever more vehement and aggressive.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Cuvânt pastoral pentru întărirea în credință și în comuniune euharistică – Patriarhul Daniel’, Basilica News Agency (February 28, 2020) accessed June 23, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/cuvant-pastoral-pentru-intarirea-in-credinta-si-in-comuniune-euharistica-patriarhul-daniel/>.

After the Romanian government gradually implemented a series of tougher restrictions in the first half of March 2020, on March 16, the Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, declared a state of emergency and on March 24, Romania instituted an almost full lockdown that lasted until May 15. During this period, schools moved online, restaurants, bars, theatres, parks, cemeteries, and all non-essential shops were closed, people were allowed to leave their homes only to buy food, medicine, to exercise, to help a family member, or to go to work. Many medium- and large-scale enterprises were still working, while other small businesses, deemed unessential, had been closed. By government decree, attendance at funeral, baptism, and wedding services was limited to a maximum of 8 persons, and no public attendance was allowed for regular Church services. However, Church services could still be held by priests inside the churches, without the faithful, and with the participation of a maximum of three choir singers. On March 22, two days before the beginning of the lockdown, the Patriarchate issued new guidelines for spiritual services during the state of emergency, which indicated that the faithful, especially the sick, could confess and receive communion at home, on request, on condition that all sanitary measures recommended by the government were to be respected, including the disinfection of all liturgical objects that were being used.<sup>5</sup>

March 24, the day when the lockdown, announced a week earlier, was supposed to begin, was a Tuesday, and while the Church hierarchy accepted the new measures without protest, advising the faithful to 'strictly follow all public health measures',<sup>6</sup> secular liberals in Romanian society expected more from the Church and were enraged when the Liturgy was held as usual on Sunday, March 22, when it was still legal to hold it, being horrified by the images of Orthodox Christians receiving communion with the same spoon in the context where a full lockdown had already been announced and was supposed to begin in two days. As a result, an MP from the liberal Save Romania Union (USR) filed a complaint to the district attorney in Cluj, requesting a criminal investigation into the undermining of the public health measures meant

<sup>5</sup> 'Noi măsuri privind slujbele și activitățile sociale bisericesti', Basilica News Agency (March 22, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/noi-masuri-privind-slujbele-si-activitatile-sociale-bisericesti/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



to stop the pandemic;<sup>7</sup> a well-known liberal intellectual wrote that the Church hierarchy should be jailed for its 'direct contribution to the spread of the pandemic' and that this was a good opportunity to nationalize the properties of the Church;<sup>8</sup> while the former adviser of the USR leader, a well-known liberal influencer, called the Romanian Orthodox Church 'a demonic sect', an insult for which he was later fined by the Anti-Discrimination National Council.<sup>9</sup>

While secular liberals thought that the Church hierarchy did not do enough, conservatives within the Church accused that it accepted too much, and some accused the bishops and the Patriarchate of apostasy.<sup>10</sup> Others in the Church, although not as vocally opposed as the last group, were certainly reluctant, hesitant, worried, and on the verge of losing their patience. The situation was even more dramatic as the lockdown imposed during Lent and Pascha was approaching. Finally, it is worth noting that while the Church was confronted concomitantly with external threats and internal divisions, it was providing financial support and relief to those affected by the pandemic, increasing throughout 2020 its charitable contributions from 32.3 million euros in 2019 to 38 million euros in 2020.<sup>11</sup>

Although initially Patriarch Daniel spoke for the entire Church hierarchy and the opposition to his compromise with the Romanian

<sup>7</sup> Vasile Magrădean, 'Cluj : Plângere penală față de preoții care au folosit aceeași linguriță la împărtașanie', Mediafax News Agency (March 26, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/cluj-plangere-penala-fata-de-preotii-care-au-folosit-aceeasi-lingurita-la-impartasanie-19023257>.

<sup>8</sup> Denisa Miron, 'Propunere: Rechiziționarea unor proprietăți ale Bisericii Ortodoxe și Naționalizarea lor după criză', Stiripesurse.ro (March 24, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, [https://www.stiripesurse.ro/proponere-rechizitionarea-unor-proprietati-ale-bisericii-ortodoxe-si-nationalizarea-lor-dupa-criza-donatii-de-buna-voie-nu-vor-face-trebuie-obligati-\\_1444125.html](https://www.stiripesurse.ro/proponere-rechizitionarea-unor-proprietati-ale-bisericii-ortodoxe-si-nationalizarea-lor-dupa-criza-donatii-de-buna-voie-nu-vor-face-trebuie-obligati-_1444125.html).

<sup>9</sup> 'Andrei Caramitru a fost sancționat cu 5.000 de lei de CNCD, după ce a scris că Biserica Ortodoxă este 'o sectă demonică'', Digi24 (September 30, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/andrei-caramitru-a-fost-sanctionat-cu-5-000-de-lei-de-cncd-dupa-ce-a-scris-ca-biserica-ortodoxa-este-o-secta-demonica-1376767>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Sfășietoarea scrisoare deschisă către Raed Arafat a preotului Andrei Roșca, cerând redeschiderea bisericilor', *Cuvântul Ortodox* (March 30, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/recomandari/scrisoare-deschisa-catre-raed-arafat-a-preotului-andrei-rosca-daca-nu-ii-dam-voie-lui-dumnezeu-sa-lucreze-prin-preoti-si-prin-oameni-mortalitatea-va-inghiti-lumea/>; 'IPS Teodosie, Sorin Lavric, Silviu Biriș – Apeluri la redeschiderea bisericilor cel puțin pentru Înviere', *Cuvântul Ortodox* (April 5, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/recomandari/ips-teodosie-sorin-lavric-silviu-biris-apelu-ri-la-deschiderea-bisericilor-cel-putin-pentru-inviere-presedintele-iohannis-cere-deja-romanilor-sa-inteleaga-ca-nu-pot-merge-la-biserica-de-paste/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ștefana Totorcea, 'Filantropia Bisericii a crescut în anul pandemiei: 38 de milioane de euro' (February 23, 2021), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/filantropia-bisericii-a-crescut-in-anul-pandemiei-38-de-milioane-de-euro/>.



state was voiced only by the lower clergy and members of the laity, soon this opposition was also voiced in the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The first bishop who openly criticized the restrictions imposed on Church life and called on the Romanian authorities to open the churches just nine days after the lockdown had been imposed was Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis, who would throughout the pandemic become a sort of *bête noire* of the liberal media and the uncontested leader of the Orthodox opponents of the public health measures.<sup>12</sup> While his calls for the opening of the churches on Pascha were not heeded by the Romanian authorities, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Marcel Vela, who according to Romanian law was responsible for the implementation of the emergency measures, reached another compromise with Patriarch Daniel. With the purpose of providing some sort of solace to the faithful who were not allowed to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord in the Church as usual, the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Romanian Patriarchate agreed that priests and volunteers from parishes would distribute to the faithful, at their homes, the holy light brought by plane from Jerusalem, as well as the blessed bread that is usually distributed on Pascha at the end of the Church service.<sup>13</sup> When news of the agreement reached the Romanian media, a new wave of anger and vitriol was unleashed against the Church and its supposedly irresponsible and unscientific behaviour. Moreover, the agreement triggered the public intervention of the Romanian President himself, who was apparently unaware of what his Minister of Internal Affairs had approved. In an alarmed tone, he warned people in a televised appearance to ‘stay home’ for Pascha, ‘for otherwise we will have funerals after holidays’.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the President’s warning, the distribution of the holy light and bread went ahead with just minor changes to the initial plan. But by Pascha, which was celebrated on April 19, Bishop Teodosie was no

<sup>12</sup> ‘IPS Teodosie: Doar bisericile sunt închise! Cei care ne-au silit să nu vă primim în biserică să ne dea voie să deschidem’, Digi24 (April 2, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ips-teodosie-doar-bisericile-sunt-inchise-cei-care-ne-au-silit-sa-nu-va-primim-in-biserica-sa-ne-dea-voie-sa-deschidem-1285419>.

<sup>13</sup> Sorin Ionițe, ‘Acord între Patriarhia Română și MAI privind sărbătorile pascale’, Basilica News Agency (April 14, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/acord-intre-patriarhia-romana-si-mai-privind-sarbatorile-pascale/>.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Iohannis: Stați acasă. Altfel, după sărbători vom avea înmormântări’, Agerpres (April 15, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2020/04/15/video-iohannis-stati-acasa-altfel-dupa-sarbatori-vom-avea-inmormantari--487686>.

longer alone in the Synod. In their paschal letters, various bishops voiced at least their concern, if not their outright denunciation of the ‘new normality’ that was being imposed on society and on the Church, one of them asking rhetorically: ‘what place is there for us believers, and for our gatherings in the House of the Lord, in a world dominated by and through fear, in a world of interdictions (...), in a world that eliminated God from its centre and for which the Liturgy is just an ordinary public gathering with a high risk of infection’. With direct reference to the public intervention of President Iohannis, the embittered bishop noted that ‘a small’ paschal ‘consolation’ that was conceded with great difficulty by the public authorities has been turned into a new ‘occasion for intimidating the faithful’, and an event that would have brought ‘serenity, peace and confidence for all, not just for the faithful, has been presented as an event that will lead to funerals’.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, it can be argued that this renewed attack against the Church represented a turning point that triggered a clear shift in the general mood within the Church, with many who had more or less meekly accepted the initial compromise requested of the Church clearly losing their patience, and those hesitant and/or silent joining the ranks of those who opposed this from the very beginning. In my view, this shift of mood was explained by the fact that when all Orthodox Christians were deeply affected by the impossibility to celebrate, in the full liturgical sense, the greatest feast of Christianity, these same Orthodox Christians came to realize that many of those whose fears and concerns they had sought to accommodate, in the name of bodily health, did not care at all about their feelings or concerns for what may be termed as spiritual health. On the contrary—and contrary to the pluralist logic of our modern constitutional democracies—they were simply imposing

<sup>15</sup> ‘Pastorala PS Macarie la o praznuire ‘tristă și pustie’ a Învierii’, *Cuvântul Ortodox* (April 18, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/pastorala-ps-macarie-la-o-praznuire-trista-si-pustie-a-invierii-2020-cuvant-de-exceptie-marturisitor-si-indurerat-despre-starea-reala-a-bisericii-si-a-oamenilor-in-timpul-izolarii-impuse-de-p/>; ‘PS Ignatie, Episcopul Hușilor, mărturisiri (ne)așteptate în pastorala de Paști din vremea bisericilor goale’, *Cuvântul Ortodox* (April 26, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/recomandari/ps-ignatie-episcopul-husilor-pastorala-pasti-vremea-bisericilor-goale-functionam-incomplet-2020-sfanta-euharistie-pandemia-mai-malefica-pentru-credinta-decat-orice-regim-totalitar/>; ‘PS Sebastian, Episcopul Slatinei, cuvânt curajos în pastorala de Paști 2020’, *Cuvântul Ortodox* (April 17, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/ps-sebastian-episcopul-slatinei-cuvant-curajos-pastorala-de-pasti-2020-dumnezeu-amurit-de-tot-va-mai-invia-hristos-anul-acesta-coronavirus-laborator-razboi-impotriva-omului-biologic-economic/>.

their materialist worldview and their priorities on people with a very different worldview and priorities; and they viewed the initial concessions of the Church as a blank cheque with unlimited validity.

But the mood shift within the Church cannot be separated from the broader social landscape of which it was a part. By now, many started to feel the economical and psychological brunt of the lockdown, and many were outraged by the numerous heavy fines that the Romanian authorities were imposing on a scared, generally poor, and now even more impoverished population, as well as by reports of police abuses. The initial consensus on the need to support public health measures was greatly damaged when images of thousands of crowded migrant agricultural workers waiting at Cluj airport to board planes for Germany reached the Romanian media and, consequently, the millions of Romanians who were locked in their houses, unable to go to work, to Church, or to visit their friends and families.<sup>16</sup> The workers were granted an exception from the restrictions imposed on the rest of Romanian society because Germany relied on them for picking asparagus and it had negotiated an agreement with the Romanian government that had not been made public, but the public perception was that Romanians were allowed to leave their homes only to do low skilled work for rich foreigners, and in that case the authorities did not even bother to enforce some minimal social distancing measures. Meanwhile, thousands of patients suffering from chronic conditions, in many cases cancer, were deprived of much needed and potentially life-saving medical assistance because the Romanian authorities had converted many hospitals into Covid wards, anticipating a huge influx of Covid patients. Also, irrespective of the severity of symptoms, hospitalization was mandatory for all Covid patients, who were now occupying, in some cases against their will, hospital beds to which other chronically ill patients no longer had access. But the emergency care units were very far from reaching full capacity and the occupancy rate was approximately eight times lower than it would be in the autumn of 2021, at the height of the fourth Covid Delta wave, when indeed the health system was on the verge of

<sup>16</sup> 'Cum își pasează autoritățile vina pentru înghesuiala de pe Aeroportul Cluj, în plină pandemie de COVID', HotNews (April 9, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-coronavirus-23820369-video-cum-isi-paseaza-autoritatile-vina-pentru-ingesuiala-aeroportul-cluj-plina-pandemie-covid-prefect-situatie-nefericita-despre-care-nu-stiut-directorul-aeroportului-fie-demis.htm>.

collapse and doctors were forced to practice disaster medicine. Whether that low occupancy was a result of the lockdown, which according to public opinion had become a victim of its own success, or whether the Romanian authorities gravely miscalculated and practically killed a still unknown and unacknowledged number of Romanians as a result of their wrong estimates, is not for me to establish. But this is certainly what many came to believe, while others were increasingly convinced that they had been manipulated, becoming the victims of a sinister global conspiracy, the goals of which had nothing to do with health, whether public or individual, biological or spiritual.

Yet, even more lucid minds were unable to visualize any coherent and realistic long-term plan that would consist in something other than eternally hiding from an eternally recurrent diehard virus, at the cost of destroying the economy and depriving life of all its dimensions that make it worth living, a perception that would intensify not only in Romania, but globally as well, as the initial goal of ‘stopping the virus’ was making place for the more realistic goal of learning, somehow, to coexist with it. In any case, Romanian leadership, traditionally perceived as incompetent, inept, and corrupt, was certainly not able to provide such a vision. Thus, the visible shift of attitude within the Church must be seen as part of a broader popular backlash against the government that implemented the initial draconic public health measures and the liberal, pro-Western segment of Romanian society that, with few exceptions, has supported them. But it is also important to emphasize that, despite some individual cases of discontinuity, the new conflict over public health measures overlapped with already existing fault lines, aggravating an older cultural war, that had by that point gone through various phases. In other words, with a few exceptions, the same people who were fighting now with greater intensity over public health measures were old enemies, having already fought before for other reasons, and the accumulated enmity and distrust undermined the possibility of co-operation in the new context.

*The background:**A brief history of Romania's post-communist cultural wars*

During the first decade after the collapse of communism, Romanian Orthodoxy experienced a revival and the Romanian Orthodox Church faced little opposition against its renewed hegemony over the public sphere. Although the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church was criticized for failing to expose and remove from its ranks the bishops who had supported the former communist regime and had collaborated with its secret police, or for its refusal to return to the Greek Catholic Church its properties that the communist regime had confiscated and then transferred to the patrimony of the Orthodox Church, these criticisms did not touch on the core practices and beliefs of Orthodoxy, but were rather trying to purify Orthodoxy from its compromising association with the communist regime. As such, they were often voiced by members of the laity whose commitment to Orthodoxy was otherwise unquestionable. But by the late 2000s the tide of public opinion turned, especially among the young, and the Romanian Orthodox Church started facing a growing public hostility.

I would argue that prior to the pandemic there were three moments of public contestation of the Romanian Orthodox Church that helped shape the identity of a progressive camp that attacked the Church and a conservative camp that defended it.

The first moment took place around the mid-2000s, when the Romanian Orthodox Church brought back to life an ambitious architectural project, of building a large and very expensive National Cathedral, also known as the People's Salvation Cathedral, the origins of which date back to late nineteenth century. The project started to gain traction after 2007, when Metropolitan Daniel of Moldova, renowned for his managerial skills, was elected Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and it is now close to completion. But this cathedral, the tallest Orthodox Cathedral in the world and the largest by volume, was regarded by many liberals and progressives as symbolically aggressive because of its sheer size, as too kitschy and, last but not least, as obscenely expensive for a country with one of the highest poverty rates in the European Union and one of the lowest rates of social spending. It thus gave birth to the slogan 'we want hospitals, not cathedrals', which

became the rallying cry of a new progressive caucus that grew increasingly hostile towards the Romanian Orthodox Church.<sup>17</sup>

This hostility reached its peak in the autumn of 2015, in the context of a national tragedy, which represents the second crucial moment of this protracted cultural war. On the night of October 30, 2015, there was a fire at a club in Bucharest, Colectiv, that hosted a rock concert that left 64 people dead and many more mutilated for life, almost all victims being young people. The next evening, large-scale protests erupted in Bucharest that led to the resignation of the prime minister as the protesters put the blame for the fire on the rampant corruption that, at least in their view, was plaguing Romanian society, the ruling Social Democratic Party being viewed by the protesters as the epitome of this societal disease.

But the protests were not directed only against the Social Democratic Party (PSD), but also against the Romanian Orthodox Church. This somewhat unexpected turn of events can be explained by a combination of factors. First of all, there already existed a perception that the Church had supported the outgoing prime minister in his failed bid for the presidency in the autumn of 2014. Second, in the eyes of the social categories that took to the streets, the clergy was perceived as corrupt, and thus as part of the broader corruption problem. This perception was largely shaped by the representations of the Romanian media, which often depicted the clergy as wealthy parasites who were asking for money for spiritual services and who were draining public funds that could have been used for better purposes, the National Cathedral under construction being the most poignant example.

But this perception became particularly painful in the context in which the Romanian hospitals proved to be unprepared for the large influx of critical patients and, apparently, many lives were lost due to inadequate medical assistance. Thus, the crowds again started chanting ‘we want hospitals, not cathedrals’. In addition to that, in an already extremely tense and emotionally charged situation, some Orthodox Christians concerned about demonic activities poured more gas on the fire by claiming on social media that the victims of the fire had

<sup>17</sup> For more details on the People’s Salvation Cathedral and the opposition to the project, see Giuseppe Tateo’s book: *Under the Sign of the Cross: the People’s Salvation Cathedral and the Church-Building Industry in Post-Socialist Romania* (New York & Oxford: Berghan Books, 2020).



been punished by God for listening to ‘satanic metal’ on the eve of Halloween, statements that caused outrage among many, even within the Church. The last straw that angered the crowds to the point where some were now booing churches was the fact that during the coming days and despite growing calls, Patriarch Daniel did not come in front of the club to join in prayer with the large crowds of mourners that had gathered there for vigil. One can only speculate about the exact reasons for his choice, and I personally tend to believe that he simply was not able to handle a very difficult pastoral situation and that his personality did not help. Independently of his actual reasons, while many, especially among the young, were left with the impression that the Church was not only corrupt and narrow-minded, but also callous, the Church hierarchy and many of the faithful ended up feeling that the Church was being attacked and scapegoated by people whose fashionable secularism was both ignorant and increasingly aggressive.<sup>18</sup>

The third crucial moment of this cultural war was the 2018 referendum for the constitutional redefinition of marriage as union between a man and a woman, an initiative meant to prevent any possible future legalization of gay marriage. The referendum was initiated by the Pro-Family Coalition, a coalition of Christian NGOs, not only Orthodox, but also Catholic and Protestant, which were able to gather more than 3 million signatures in 2016 for their constitutional initiative. Organized in October 2018, the referendum was invalidated due to a lack of quorum, as voter turnout was less than 20%. The referendum was boycotted by those opposed to the initiative, who again viewed it as an aggressive, even inquisitorial attempt by conservative Christians to reaffirm their hegemony in the public sphere at the expense of sexual freedom and minority rights. While secular liberals now also had a new party to represent them, the pro-market, pro-European and secular Save Romania Party, the only parliamentary party that consistently opposed the referendum and publicly called for a boycott, conservative Christians relied on the half-hearted support of the traditional parties. And while the public debates that predated the Romanian referendum

<sup>18</sup> For more details on the *Colectiv* protests, see Remus Crețan and Thomas O’Brien: ‘Corruption and conflagration: (in)justice and protest in Bucharest after the *Colectiv* fire’, *Urban Geography* 41 (2020): 368–388, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02723638.2019.1664252>.



aggravated already existing divisions, the defeat of the Pro-Family Coalition after an aggressive, demonizing campaign full of prejudices on both sides fuelled a sense of alienation, bitterness, and resentment among the conservative Christians, most of them Orthodox, who supported the initiative.<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned, despite some notable exceptions and various nuances, if we look at the broader sociological structures, it can be argued that generally speaking, the same people who confronted the Orthodox Church and Christian and conservative civil society on all these three occasions were now telling the same people to ‘stay at home’, to adapt their ancient liturgical practices to the reality of the twenty-first century pandemic, and in some cases were even calling for tough police action against those who disobeyed. So, it is easy to understand why Orthodox Christians were inclined to regard the pandemic as a pretext for attacking the Church. This perception and the intensity of the backlash was only strengthened by the fact that the doomsday scenarios that were invoked when the lockdown was initially imposed had largely failed to materialize. But the worst was yet to come, and again, in general, those who opposed the initial lockdown would also oppose all future public health measures imposed, pushed, or merely recommended by the public authorities: new restrictions, mask wearing, vaccination.

*The second and third wave, the October pilgrimages, and the December elections*

On May 15, the state of emergency officially ended and was replaced with a so-called ‘state of alert’ that lasted, without interruption, until the spring of 2022. During the state of alert new restrictions were imposed, toughened, or loosened, depending on the evolving situation, but Romania never again entered a full-scale lockdown. If we leave aside the fact that schools were moved online for almost the entire 2020–2021 school year, there were much fewer restrictions in Romania compared to Western Europe after the initial lockdown from the Spring of 2020.

<sup>19</sup> For more details on the 2018 referendum see Alexandru Racu, Aurelian Giugăl, Ron Johnston and Alexandru Gavriș: ‘When Cultural Strength Means Political Weakness: Romania’s Marriage Referendum and the Paradox of Conservative Mobilisation’, *Moravian Geographical Reports* 28 (2020): 70–80, <https://www.sciendo.com/article/10.2478/mgr-2020-0006>.

But there were partial and sometimes total restrictions on clubs, restaurants, gyms, theatres, and concert halls, as well as on protests, though frequent small-scale protests against public health measures took place despite the official interdictions. Few economic support measures were taken to compensate those who were affected by public health measures and about a quarter of Romanian children missed school completely throughout this period due to lack of material resources that would have allowed them to participate in online classes.<sup>20</sup> Combined with the widespread perception that the government was poorly managing the pandemic, the measures led to a collapse of the ruling National Liberal Party (PNL) in the opinion polls. It is important to mention that throughout this period the Church enjoyed a privileged status, as Church services were not subject to any restrictions, even though gatherings of similar size for other purposes were banned, at least in theory. Some argued that the government authorities were afraid to further antagonize the Church while they were confronted with growing popular discontent, but others may argue that they sincerely felt that depriving Romanians of the comfort of Church services was simply too much to ask during this time in which many were mourning or were struggling with loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

The only significant exception from this privileged regime regarded the organization of large-scale pilgrimages and Romania's most important pilgrimages, the Jassy pilgrimage on the feast of St Paraskevi and the Bucharest pilgrimage on the feast of Saint Demetrios the New, which take place in the second half of October. But by this time Romania was well into its second wave, with new infections and deaths rapidly growing, and by the time the wave peaked at the end of November, unlike in the spring, the health system was overwhelmed and it became harder for public opinion to deny that Covid was a dangerous virus, responsible for thousands of tragedies that were affecting Romanian families.

In this context, starting from midsummer, the Romanian authorities gradually began to tighten restrictions, and by the beginning of October bars and indoor restaurants were again closed and private events and

<sup>20</sup> 'Copii care nu au făcut niciodată cursuri online', Digi24 (January 12, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/educatie/copii-care-nu-au-facut-niciodata-cursuri-online-ministerul-educatiei-inca-nu-stie-care-este-situatia-1432435>.

public gatherings were again banned in localities with more than 1.5 reported cases per thousand inhabitants. However, Church services were permitted and the yearly pilgrimage on the feast of St Paraskevi, which takes place on October 14 and which in previous years had often gathered approximately one million people, was not banned, but the government restricted the access to the holy relics only to residents of Jassy. Again, while for secular liberals that was not enough, as they wanted the complete cancellation of the pilgrimage, for many pious Orthodox Christians that was too much and led to a tense situation in front of the Jassy Metropolitan Cathedral on the feast day, where worshipers from outside Jassy, most of them without masks, started booing and in some cases even pushing the gendarmes, chanting slogans such as ‘freedom’, ‘shame on you’, and ‘respect the Constitution’.<sup>21</sup>

One of the figures that stood out from the crowd during that day as well as during the various small-scale anti-mask and anti-restriction protests that were organized beginning in the summer of 2020 was a lawyer from Bucharest, Diana Ivanovici Șoșoacă, who became a sort of tribune of the people against the so-called ‘sanitary dictatorship’. In fact, while the number of deaths was rising and restrictions were tightened, popular discontent was growing in an ever-gloomier atmosphere. The Church as well voiced its discontent, becoming to a large extent a part of this popular front that included other forms of discontent: from business owners and their employees who were affected by the public health measures while receiving little or no support from the government, to parents exasperated by online school or no school at all for children without tablets and access to the internet, young people exasperated by the new sanitary puritanism, libertarians and others who, though supportive in principle of at least some public health measures, were exasperated by the perceived incompetence, corruption, and arrogance of those in power. The Metropolitan of Moldavia, Teofan, whose episcopal see is in Jassy, protested against the government measure that prevented worshipers who did not reside in Jassy

<sup>21</sup> Cristina Dobreanu, ‘Răspândirea Covid 19 aduce noi restricții, inclusive la pele-  
rinaje’, *Europa Liberă* (October 5, 2020), accessed June 21, 2022, [https://romania.europalibera.org/a/guvernul-anun%C8%9B%C4%83-noi-restric%C8%9Bii-%C3%AEmpotri-  
va-r%C4%83sp%C3%A2ndirii-COVID-19/30876755.html](https://romania.europalibera.org/a/guvernul-anun%C8%9B%C4%83-noi-restric%C8%9Bii-%C3%AEmpotri-<br/>va-r%C4%83sp%C3%A2ndirii-COVID-19/30876755.html); ‘Scandal la Iași, la moaștele Sfintei Parascheva’, *Digi24* (October 14, 2020), accessed June 21, 2022, [https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/evenimente/video-scandal-la-iasi-la-moaștele-sfintei-parascheva-dumneavoastra-tre-  
buie-sa-fiti-informat-ca-dumnezeu-e-deasupra-dumneavoastra-1384138](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/evenimente/video-scandal-la-iasi-la-moaștele-sfintei-parascheva-dumneavoastra-tre-<br/>buie-sa-fiti-informat-ca-dumnezeu-e-deasupra-dumneavoastra-1384138).

from worshipping the relics of St Paraskevi on her feast day, calling the measure a ‘discriminatory measure, which violates numerous legal provisions and international principles that protect the freedom of religious expression’.<sup>22</sup>

By October 27, the feast day of St Demetrios the New, the epidemiological situation had significantly worsened, and although at a certain point Prime Minister Ludovic Orban declared that he intended to ban the Bucharest pilgrimage altogether, a few days later, fearing a backlash, in the circumstances in which elections were scheduled to take place on December 6, he changed his mind and allowed the pilgrimage to go on as scheduled on condition that, just like in Jassy, only residents of the capital would participate.<sup>23</sup> On the eve of the feast, in a significant change of tone, Patriarch Daniel, who up until then had been mostly cautious and cooperative, recalled the government authorities that in the autumn of 1989 the communist authorities banned the pilgrimage to St Demetrios the New. According to the Patriarch, who triggered a new wave of secular outrage, the bloody collapse of the communist regime, a few weeks later, which ended with the execution of Romania’s former dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and his wife Elena, was a divine ‘retribution’ for ‘the humiliation of St Demetrios the New’,<sup>24</sup> the Patriarch suggesting thus that a similar fate might befall those who were governing Romania at that time if they kept preventing the faithful from worshipping the relics of the saints. On November 30, the feast day of St Andrew, Patron Saint of Romania, Archbishop Teodosie, the most vocal opponent of the public health measures from the Synod, defied the Romanian government when he ordered all priests from his diocese and called on believers from all over Romania to come for pilgrimage to the cave of St Andrew, in the conditions in which, once again, the Romanian author-

<sup>22</sup> ‘Metropolitan Teofan of Moldavia and Bukovina warns against religious freedom violations’, *Orthodox Times* (October 9, 2020), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/metropolitan-teofan-of-moldavia-and-bukovina-warns-against-religious-freedom-violations/>.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Pelerinajul de Sfântul Dumitru în Capitală va avea loc, timp de trei zile’, *HotNews* (October 22, 2020), accessed June 21 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24368872-pelerinajul-sfantu-dumitru-capitala-avea-loc-timp-trei-zile-prevede-protocolul-patriarhia-aprobat-gabriela-firea.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Patriarhul Daniel: În toamna lui 1989, autoritățile comuniste au interzis închinarea la sfintele moaște ale Sf. Dimitrie’, *HotNews* (October 27, 2020), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24379317-patriarhul-daniel-toamna-lui-1989-autoritatile-comuniste-interzis-inchinarea-sfintele-moaste-ale-dimitrie-pestecateva-luni-regimul-comunist-cazut.htm>.

ities wanted to restrict access only to locals living in the small village where the cave is located. Heeding Teodosie's call, worshipers led by Diana Șoșoacă broke through the police cordon. However, traditionally, this is a small-scale pilgrimage that gathers far less people than the great October pilgrimages, and this year was no different.

The Patriarch's foreboding was not out of touch with the political developments unfolding before his eyes. On November 9, the government caused a new burst of public outrage, especially among conservatives, through another discriminatory measure that closed down peasant markets, quite widespread in Romania, while allowing the supermarkets, mostly owned by multinational corporations, to continue to operate as normal. It is important to stress here that the popular front that was opposing the public health measures was composed mostly of people who were equally opposed to the cultural as well as economic 'imperialism' of the West, regarding gay parades, the favouring of multinational corporations to the detriment of small local producers, and, more recently, public health measures that imposed restrictions on Church life as part of an wider attack by 'globalists' against the Romanian economy, Romanian identity and the Romanian way of life. On November 14, while the daily number of deaths caused by Covid kept rising, a Covid intensive care unit burned down in Piatra Neamț, and ten patients died in the fire, which brought back painful memories of the Colectiv nightclub fire. Throughout 2021, three more Covid intensive care units burned down apparently due to electrical overstress, as a result of the overcrowding of the intensive care units, the total number of patients who died in these ghastly incidents rising to 26. The fires amplified public perceptions of government incompetence and, more gravely, indifference towards the loss of human lives, feelings that were intensified on January 30, 2021, when, one day after the second fire from Matei Balș Institute in Bucharest, the deadliest of all four, the same Romanian President who, on the eve of Pascha 2020, was warning worshipers to stay at home, for otherwise 'there will be funerals' after holidays, was seen on holiday, skiing in a resort from the Carpathian Mountains, one day after 17 people burned, again, to death, in a state hospital.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Andreea Pora, 'Iohannis, la schi după Balș', *Europa Liberă* (February 1, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/iohannis-schi-bals/31080696.html>.

The President's party, PNL, which had governed Romania since the start of the pandemic, performed very poorly in the December 6 elections and barely managed to secure a majority with their pro-European allies from USR and with the Democratic Union of Hungarians from Romania. But the greatest shock was the entry into Parliament of the newly created Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), a far-right party, which in two and a half months surged from 1% of the votes in the September 2020 local elections to a staggering 9% on December 6. Fuelled by popular anger against the public health measures, which included those that targeted the Church, AUR brought into Parliament new figures such as Diana Ivanovici Șoșoacă, the vocal leader of the anti-mask and anti-restrictions protests, the nationalist ultras leader George Simion, but also the journalist Claudiu Târziu, and the philosopher Sorin Lavric, two Orthodox intellectuals who during the post-communist period have sought, through their writings and public interventions, to rehabilitate former members of the interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael (a fascist, terrorist, and antisemitic organization with deep ties to the Romanian Orthodox Church) as Christian martyrs who suffered for their faith during communism.

AUR also led the protests that erupted throughout the country in late March 2021, when the new coalition government again tightened restrictions, in response to the third Covid wave, which hit Romania and which was as serious as the second. Driven by fears that Romania's relatively relaxed restrictions regime would be abandoned in favour of the much stricter regime that was imposed in Western Europe, the protests, in which many clergymen participated, broke out when the prime minister announced that the curfew would no longer start at 10 PM, but at 8 PM, as well as the closing down of shops and supermarkets at 6 PM in all localities with more than 7.5 cases per thousand people. But unlike previous protests against public health measures, these were large-scale protests that also led to violent clashes between protesters and the police.<sup>26</sup> Although up until this point, with the exception of

<sup>26</sup> 'Noile restricții adoptate de Guvern', Digi24 (March 25, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/document-noile-restrictii-adoptate-de-guvern-de-la-ce-ora-se-inchid-magazinele-si-cand-se-interzice-iesirea-din-casa-dupa-ora-2000-1474155>; 'A treia seară de proteste anti-restricții în Capitală și în mai multe orașe', *Europa Liberă* (March 30, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/noi-proteste-antirestrie%C8%9Bii-%C3%AEn-bucure%C8%99ti-%C8%99i-%C3%AEn-%C8%9Bar%C4%83/31178649.html>; 'Protestul anti-restricții din Capitală, încheiat cu violențe și arestări', *Libertatea* (March 30,



Bishop Teodosie, the Church hierarchy remained largely cooperative and protested only occasionally, it was clear that many from within the Church now played an important role in the broader popular movement whose discontent fuelled AUR's spectacular growth in the polls.

*The failure of the vaccination campaign, the devastating fourth wave and the silence of the Patriarch*

On December 27, 2020, Romania started its vaccination campaign. However, after a promising start, by midsummer the vaccination campaign largely stalled and by September, when Romania was entering its fourth and most devastating wave, a little over 30% of Romanians had been vaccinated, the lowest rate in the EU after Bulgaria. It is important to note that despite calls from politicians and civil society for the Church to actively support the vaccination campaign,<sup>27</sup> the Church hierarchy as a whole decided to remain neutral and so it has remained until today. There were individual cases of bishops who publicly supported vaccination: the Archbishop of Cluj, Andrei Andreicuț, the Archbishop of Argeș, Calinic, Metropolitan of Oltenia, Irineu, and Archbishop of Galați, Casian.<sup>28</sup> But the incorrigible Bishop Teodosie warned of the many possible adverse effects of a vaccine that was developed 'too fast' and criticized the authorities for seeking to impose it on reluctant believers who, he said, should appeal to the courts for the safeguard of their right to choose.<sup>29</sup>

2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/noi-proteste-impotriva-restrictiilor-in-capitala-un-barbat-a-fost-saltat-de-jandarmi-pentru-ca-nu-purta-masca-si-a-refuzat-sa-se-legitimeze-3474290>.

<sup>27</sup> 'Dan Barna: Este momentul ca Biserica Ortodoxă să se implice pentru accelerarea vaccinării', HotNews (July 26, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24939963-dan-barna-este-momentul-biserica-ortodoxa-implice-pentru-accelerarea-vaccinarii-clar-daca-nu-vaccinam-vor-luate-masuri-restrictii-putea-aplica-pentru-persoanele-navaccinate.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Cristi Șelaru, 'Mitropolitul Clujului anunță că SE VACCINEAZĂ', Stiripesurse.ro (April 29, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, [https://www.stiripesurse.ro/ips-andrei-andreicut-vaccin\\_1763398.html](https://www.stiripesurse.ro/ips-andrei-andreicut-vaccin_1763398.html) <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24490692-mitropolitul-olteniei-indeamna-romani-vaccineze-impotriva-covid.htm>; 'Arhiepiscopul Argeșului spune că se va vaccina după „cei din prima și a doua urgență”', HotNews (January 10, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-coronavirus-24531421-arhiepiscopul-argesului-spune-vaccina-dupa-cei-din-prima-doua-urgenta.htm>; 'Arhiepiscopul Casian: Lăsați, fraților, interpretările! Știu mai bine medicii ce e vaccinul', Digi24 (January 31, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/arhiepiscopul-casian-lasati-fratilor-interpretarile-stiu-mai-bine-medicii-ce-e-vaccinul-n-am-auzit-medic-sa-se-vaccineze-cu-moarte-1433098>.

<sup>29</sup> 'IPS Teodosie, pledoarie împotriva vaccinării și apel la juriști să îi apere pe oamenii care

Meanwhile, judging by a social media pulse check, antivaxx feeling was rampant among believers and the lower clergy. That feeling did not seem to subside but rather gained in intensity when authorities, alarmed by the growing number of patients in intensive care, closed schools again at the end of October, reimposing other restrictions as well. But this time many of the restrictions were differentiated, being imposed only on the unvaccinated, many of them practicing Orthodox Christians, which led them to protest against what they regarded as ‘discrimination’ and ‘segregation’, and many called on the Church hierarchy to follow in the steps of Bishop Teodosie and publicly condemn what they perceived as an abuse, the more so since by November there was serious talk in the government to allow only the vaccinated to go to work.

But for many within the Church who were protesting, this was more than mere discrimination. It was a form of demonic social control which—to quote a well-known and certainly not unintelligent and uneducated Orthodox influencer—was ‘reducing’ human beings ‘to mere biological life forms lacking the dignity of a way of life’. Referring in a Facebook post to Giorgio Agamben’s views on the emergency public health measures and voicing in a more sophisticated manner a conviction that seemed to be quite widespread within the Church, this person claimed that we were dealing with nothing less than the Apocalypse.

I don’t know why some wonder’, he wrote, ‘that this ‘marking’ of man reminds one of the Apocalypse. Without doubt, such a powerful image, the impossibility to work, to sell and to buy (to have access to the public space and public services) without the mark’, that is, without the certificate (...), cannot but remind us of the well-known verses from the Apocalypse of Saint John the Evangelist. And those who imposed the certificate also know this very well.<sup>30</sup>

nu vor să se vaccineze’, HotNews (October 15, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.hot-news.ro/stiri-esential-25108043-video-ips-teodosie-pledoarie-impotriva-vaccinarii-apel-juristi-apere-oamenii-care-nu-vor-vaccineze-sunt-atatea-urmari-negative.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1288106904958736&id=100012783161805](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1288106904958736&id=100012783161805), accessed June 21, 2022.

Meanwhile, Romania was facing a public health disaster, much more severe than the three previous waves, and, on average, around 500 people were dying of covid every day, the overwhelming majority of the dead being unvaccinated. For about two weeks in October, Romania had the highest number of deaths per million in the world. Yet, even in these dramatic circumstances, Patriarch Daniel stuck to a middle, neutral position, resisting both calls from Orthodox antivaxxers to condemn what they perceived as discriminatory or even outright demonic policies, as well as calls from liberal pundits and politicians, and a few in the Church as well, to exhort the faithful to get vaccinated. When during this unprecedented tragedy, on October 14, the feast day of St Paraskevi, Bishop of Giurgiu, Ambrozie, told the faithful in a sermon ‘not to rush to get vaccinated’, but let the politicians do it first, because ‘the vaccines are expired’, while also claiming that the hospital fires were deliberately set by the government,<sup>31</sup> the Patriarch responded in an unusually harsh tone with a public letter addressed to all bishops. Reprimanding Ambrozie and reminding him that such manifestations ‘have generated reactions in the media that have had a negative impact on the image of the Church’, the Patriarch exhorted him to ‘avoid expressing public opinions on political and medical topics for which the clergy is not qualified and to have a pastoral attitude in line with the canonical, statutory and disciplinary’ provisions ‘and with the decisions of the Holy Synod, so as to confirm that the Romanian Orthodox Church is truly a factor of social peace in this difficult period for all Romanians’.<sup>32</sup> A week later, when a monk from Moldova said in a sermon which reached the Romanian media that the purpose of the vaccination campaign was ‘to reduce the world population’ and to modify the DNA ‘so that we will more easily communicate with the computer system and the 5G network’, the spokesperson of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Vasile Bănescu, declared that ‘the Church firmly disavows such absurd messages which have nothing in common with authentic Christian realism and with the love of neighbour’ and which are ‘toxic’ for the

<sup>31</sup> ‘Derapaj al Episcopului Giurgiului’, Digi24 (October 18, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/sanatate/derapaj-al-episcopului-giurgiului-nu-va-grabiti-sa-va-vaccinati-vaccinurile-sunt-expirate-incendiile-din-spitale-o-facatura-1704989>.

<sup>32</sup> Florin Marinescu, ‘Efectul “Ambrozie și Teodosie”’, G4Media.ro (October 22, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.g4media.ro/exclusiv-efectul-ambrozie-si-teodosie-patriarhul-daniel-scrisoare-dura-prin-care-le-cere-capilor-bisericii-ortodoxe-sa-se-abtina-de-la-comentarii-despre-vaccin-si-pandemie.html>.

‘social organism now confronted with the tragic effects of antivaccine theories (...), essentially anti-Christian’ and rooted in ‘apocalyptic conspiracy theories’.<sup>33</sup>

As can be seen, while the Patriarch called for neutrality in his angry letter sent to the Romanian bishops only one week before, in his public intervention Bănescu was far from neutral: he was clearly pro-vaccine and, unlike Bishop Ambrozie, he was not reprimanded by the Patriarch for abandoning neutrality. But for many critics of the Church, this was too little, too late. Moreover, two weeks later, while the extent of possible new restrictions to be applied to the unvaccinated was discussed by the Romanian government, the Patriarchate explicitly requested the Romanian authorities not to impose the Covid certificate as a condition for participating in Church services. Thus, Bănescu insisted that the green certificate could not be used to restrict access to ‘spaces that provide vital goods and services’, such as pharmacies and grocery stores, emphasizing that the Church too was such a vital space,<sup>34</sup> for ‘man shall not live on bread alone’ (Matthew 4, 4).

But while Orthodox antivaxxers greeted the public intervention of the Patriarchate and its spokesman, they too thought that this was not enough and by not being enough it was also incoherent. Quoting Berdyaev’s famous passage, ‘my bread is a material problem, but the bread of my neighbour is a spiritual problem’, a well-known Orthodox public figure, Iulian Capsali, wrote on his Facebook page that it was not enough for the Church to defend the right of the unvaccinated to partake in the spiritual bread; it should also defend their right to earn the material bread through work, unconditioned by vaccination;<sup>35</sup> for, to quote Saint Paul, ‘he who does not work, neither shall he eat’ (Thessalonians 3, 10); and what shall it profit a man to have access

<sup>33</sup> ‘Vasile Bănescu, despre un călugăr care atacă vaccinarea’, Digi24 (October 26, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/vasile-banescu-despre-un-calugar-care-ataca-vaccinarea-mesaje-razna-la-realitate-toxice-cu-efect-total-smintitor-1713749>.

<sup>34</sup> Deacon Iulian Dumitrașcu, ‘Punctul de vedere explicitat al Patriarhiei Române referitor la certificatul digital UE privind COVID-19’, Basilica New Agency (December 3, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://basilica.ro/punctul-de-vedere-explicitat-al-patriarhiei-romane-referitor-la-certificatul-digital-ue-privind-COVID-19/>; Cosmin Pirv, ‘Punctul de vedere explicitat al Patriarhiei Române referitor la certificatul digital UE privind COVID-19’, Mediafax (December 2, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/biserica-ortodoxa-romana-se-pronunta-in-privinta-certificatului-verde-nu-poate-deveni-restrictiv-20378462>.

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3084665431859590&id=100009484907272](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3084665431859590&id=100009484907272), accessed June 21, 2022.

to a vital grocery store as long as he does not have the vital right to work, through which he can earn the means needed to satisfy his vital needs? A week later, together with other Orthodox intellectuals and activists, among them the award-winning director Cristi Puiu and one of the leaders of the Pro-Family Coalition, Capsali signed an open letter addressed to the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in which the signatories were calling on the Synod to also defend ‘the earthly bread’<sup>36</sup> of the faithful that was up for debate, as the Romanian Parliament was discussing the possibility of limiting the right to work on those with a green certificate, a policy that had already been implemented in several European states. The Synod did not respond to this call, but, soon after, as the fourth wave began to subside, the Romanian authorities dropped the project for fear of social unrest and of a subsequent political backlash, the main beneficiary of which would have been, as already argued, AUR.

Given the fortunate change of circumstances, the Synod managed to avoid answering a very uncomfortable question and drawing the logical but politically challenging conclusion from the premise stated by Bănescu, who emphasized that vital services, whether material or spiritual, could not be dependant on vaccination. And thus, it managed to avoid taking sides in a conflict between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated in which it was becoming more and more difficult to remain (or to pretend to be) neutral. A conflict that was beginning to look like the prelude of a civil war and that might have turned nasty if the epidemiological situation had not been ameliorated by God’s mercy. But despite the devastating Delta wave from the autumn of 2021, the vaccination rate went from a little over 30% when the fourth wave started, in September, to a little over 40% in March, after Romania also passed through a Fifth omicron wave in February 2022, albeit one that proved significantly milder than the previous one. By then, almost all restrictions had been lifted and people suddenly stopped talking about Covid

<sup>36</sup> Andrei Nicolae, ‘Scrisoare către Sf. Sinod semnată între alții de regizorul Cristi Puiu și actrița Manuela Hărăbor, prof. Pavel Chirilă și Radu Baltasiu, avocații Gheorghe Piperea și Florentin Țuca, publiciștii Iulian Capsali și Sergiu Ciocârlan’, ActiveNews (November 22, 2021), accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.activenews.ro/stiri/BISERICA-SA-NU-TACA.-Scrisoare-catre-Sf.-Sinod-semnata-intre-altii-de-regizorul-Cristi-Puiu-si-actrita-Manuela-Harabor-prof.-Pavel-Chirila-si-Radu-Baltasiu-avocatii-Gheorghe-Piperea-si-Florentin-Tuca-publicistii-Iulian-Capsali-si-Sergiu-Ciocarlan-170887>.

as attention was shifted to Russia's invasion of Romania's northern neighbour.

One remarkable aspect with which I wish to conclude this section was the silence of Patriarch Daniel. Not only did he refuse to endorse the vaccination campaign or to condemn the restrictions targeting the unvaccinated, but for a long time and despite the fact that the question was repeatedly raised in the media, which he shuns as much as he can, he also refused to say if he personally got vaccinated or not. He would simply ignore, from a distance, those who asked. On November 25, as he was leaving the Romanian Parliament after participating in a solemn meeting dedicated to Romania's National Day, the Patriarch, pressured by a prying reporter who was asking him whether he got vaccinated or not, briefly replied to his question by saying: 'Yes, of course, I got vaccinated, that's it'. When the reporter insisted, further asking him with which vaccine he got vaccinated, the Patriarch retorted irritated that 'this is confidential information'. And when further asked what message he had for the faithful, he gave an equally laconic response: 'I don't have any message. They should listen to the doctors'.

*Some final considerations on the relation between science, theology, and politics*

I will end my paper with the brief presentation of some ideas concerning the relation between science, theology, and politics that I developed through my active engagement in the Romanian public debate concerning the pandemic and the way in which Romanian society, the Romanian government and the Romanian Orthodox Church responded to it.

First of all, it is clear that one has to look critically at the distinction between essential and nonessential. When 'nonessential activities', among them Church services, were suspended in March 2020 for the purpose of protecting public health, it was apparent in public discourse that many viewed the distinction between 'essential' and 'nonessential' to be as 'objective' and nonproblematic as the science that recommended the lockdowns. Independently of what one thinks about the accuracy of the science that justified the lockdowns, the 'essential' vs. 'nonessential' distinction that determined the choice of prohibited activities was obviously not scientific, for science does not answer religious or phil-



osophical questions such as the question ‘what is essential?’. Giorgio Agamben—who ended up being viewed as some sort of a prophet by some Romanian Orthodox opponents of the public health measures at a time when they felt betrayed by some of their bishops and theologians—argued that the implicit ethical presupposition of the lockdown was a reduction of life to ‘purely biological life’, deprived not only of any ‘social and political dimension’, but also of any ‘human and affective’ dimension. ‘It is clear’, he argued in March 2020, ‘that Italians are ready to sacrifice practically everything, the normal conditions of life, social relations, work, even friendships, feelings and religious and political beliefs’ for the sake of biosecurity.<sup>37</sup> If Agamben viewed things this way, no wonder that a significant part of the Romanian Church, without necessarily reading Agamben, denounced public health measures, with their implicit assumptions about what is and what is not essential, as a new materialist and dehumanizing religion that was fundamentally incompatible with the Orthodox faith; and no wonder that those Romanians who were most supportive of closing churches, were, generally speaking, the same people who long before the pandemic had expressed, through the slogan ‘we want hospitals, not cathedrals’, their view with regard to what is useful and what is useless even in normal circumstances.

However, it is equally important to stress that many of those from the Church who opposed the liturgical restrictions did not do so because they had *a certain faith in God* that did not allow for flexibility and the acceptance of a particular compromise, but rather did so because they did not have *faith in the government and in the official science* or because of a mix of both; not because they necessarily thought that the Liturgy should go on whatever the risks, for one should ‘seek first the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew 6, 33), entrusting his/her health and that of others to God as that which is less important in the order of priorities;<sup>38</sup> but because they did not believe Covid was real or because

<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Chiarimenti’, *Quodlibet* (March 17, 2020), accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti>.

<sup>38</sup> When asked if the loss of a single life would be too great a sacrifice for the pilgrimage that he was organizing despite restrictions imposed by the Romanian authorities, Bishop Teodosie answered: ‘No, he who comes at this feast, and then is the moment for him to leave this life, will go to God’. Andreea Pavel, ‘ÎPS Teodosie, despre posibilele decese ale pelerinilor care s-ar putea infecta cu COVID-19’, *G4Media.ro* (November 29, 2020), accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.g4media.ro/video-ips-teodosie-despre-posibilele-decese-ale-pelerinilor-care-s-ar-putea-infec->



they thought that the danger of the virus and the efficiency of the measures were, generally speaking, overestimated, as suggested by the fact that many of them rejected *all* public health measures, including those—like wearing masks and vaccination—that could be much more easily reconciled with the Orthodox faith than the cancellation of Church services. In theory, lack of trust in the government and in the official science may sometimes prove to be justified, though often it just proved to be intellectually embarrassing. Regardless, this particular lack of faith in Caesar and the scientists, whether right or wrong, is never an article of faith of the Orthodox Church. But zealots often treat it as such, especially if they find an elder to endorse their ‘alternative science’, denouncing fellow Christians who do not share their sense of ‘alarm’ and their belief that they have uncovered a new ‘plot’ against the Orthodox faith and flock as apostates.<sup>39</sup> The question of whether to obey the state and therefore suspend Liturgy in specific circumstances is a legitimate and complex theological and pastoral question without an easy answer. But legitimate answers to this question are only those that are free from presuppositions concerning a field of knowledge that is outside the Church’s sphere of competence.

Objectively speaking, religion and science are different: while the former presupposes faith in revelation, the latter relies solely on the ‘unassisted human mind’,<sup>40</sup> which should produce the most accurate ex-

ta-cu-COVID-19-daca-acolo-este-momentul-sa-plece-din-viata-aceasta-pleaca-la-dumnezeu-teodosie-a-invocat-o-pe-mama.html

<sup>39</sup> Referring to this typology of believers, Blessed Augustine writes the following in his *Confessions*: ‘When I hear this or that brother Christian, who is ignorant of these matters [pertaining to natural science] and thinks one thing the case when another is correct, with patience I contemplate the man expressing his opinion. I do not see it is any obstacle to him if perhaps he is ignorant of the position and nature of a physical creature, provided that he does not believe something unworthy of you, Lord (...) But it becomes an obstacle if he thinks his view of nature belongs to the very form of orthodox doctrine, and dares obstinately to affirm something he does not understand’. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 76–77.

<sup>40</sup> I use here the formula of Leo Strauss. See ‘What is Political Philosophy?’ and ‘Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis of Western Civilization’, in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 4–7, 303–5. For Strauss, modern natural science inherits the same principle of reliance on the ‘unassisted human mind’ alone in the search for truth from classical philosophy. The difference between the two resides in the fact that while the former limits itself to empirically observable phenomena and excludes value judgments, the latter, which was science in the original acceptance of the term, aspired to be the science of the ‘whole’, which included both physics and that which is beyond physics (metaphysics); likewise, it thought to be not only descriptive, but also normative, to discover through independent reasoning not only physical and metaphysical truths, but also ethical and political truths.

planations of natural phenomena when the proper method of research is employed. But from the subjective and practical point of view of the ordinary man, science is almost always a religion, though it is almost never acknowledged as such. Of course, following a Socratic method, one can expose the many contradictions and logical fallacies in the discourse of antivaxxers. But the Socratic negative method will not lead us far enough: for it is one thing to demonstrate that the theories of the pseudo-specialists are unreliable in as much as they are proven to be incoherent and plagued with numerous logical fallacies, and it is another thing to demonstrate that the theories of the specialists are, indeed, reliable. Similarly, it is easy to come up with general arguments that would invalidate the more rudimentary conspiracy theories, for example, why it would be impossible to organize a global conspiracy meant to ‘reduce world population’, which would involve 99% of the scientists in the world, but it is much harder to respond to more sophisticated sceptics who only challenge the official science when it comes to the risk / benefits ratio of a vaccine for a specific category of age with a specific health profile. And while one can correlate personal empirical observation with official government data about the percentage of the vaccinated and unvaccinated, respectively, who fell seriously ill, and I certainly used this argument in my debates, this does not invalidate the claim, often put forward by sceptics or pseudo-sceptics, that ‘we still do not know the long-term effects of the vaccines’.

Setting aside the possibility of sceptical objections to science, to which science itself would be unable to respond, which means that one would have to ‘believe’ in science, the idea is that even those objections that can be properly addressed only by scientists would have to be ‘believed’—or accepted on trust—by non-scientists. Only a minority of people can be specialists in a certain field, not only because most people do not have the interest as well as the personal and institutional resources to become properly trained specialists, but also because a society in which everybody would be a properly trained specialist in the same field, for example vaccines, would be impossible, for society requires the division of labour and the division of labour becomes more pronounced as a society becomes more scientifically and technologically advanced. As a result, non-specialists—whether pro-vaccine or anti-vaccine—are ultimately left with the option to have or not to

have faith in specialists, more precisely in the system that is producing science and its practical medical applications. But in that case, almost everybody would trust a hypercomplex system that almost nobody understands, for understanding the system of production and dissemination of medical science in all its relevant details—the functioning of the scientific community and of the network of relations between academia, industry, regulatory government agencies, and the media<sup>41</sup>—would require an even more titanic intellectual achievement, which is not only beyond the reach of the overwhelming majority of non-scientists, but also beyond the reach of most qualified scientists that are specialists only within their own rather narrow field of research.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, while unlike God, who is completely beyond the reach of human reason, the system of scientific production may be understood

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting here that many antivaxxers insist that they recognize the value of ‘true science’ and its capacity to identify relevant scientific truth. In fact, they often rely on the public positions of rebel scientists who have broken with the scientific consensus and whom they view as ‘true scientists’. Thus, many antivaxxers claim that science has been hijacked by greedy corporations, which control the academic community through the financing of research, and which were able to take over science with the complicity of corrupt governments and corrupt media. Thus, the ‘true scientists’ whom they quote are viewed as ‘prophets’ who have the courage to speak out against those who, in their view, have turned ‘the Temple of science into a den of thieves’ (Matthew 21, 13).

<sup>42</sup> The fact that one’s personal understanding is decreasing and therefore a higher degree of blind faith in science is required from the individual as science advances is also, in my opinion, one of the explanations of the antivaxx phenomenon in contemporary society. Distance breeds suspicion. It is true that a less complex science is often less effective and therefore less compelling for someone who decide to follow or not follow the science strictly on the basis of the results. But it is also true that a less complex science, such as that of traditional societies, is more accessible to one’s understanding and closer to one’s immediate experience, while its experts are familiar figures whom it is easier to trust. While it may be less efficient, the latter is also less alienating. On the other hand, in a neoliberal society dominated by the profit motive and where this universal domination is everybody’s familiar experience, it may prove challenging to believe that the science that almost nobody understands and its priests whom few have ever met are somehow able to escape this logic. Hence the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Finally, the scientific method and the modern world were built on the premise that one should trust one’s reason and accept as true only what he or she personally understands, instead of accepting established traditions and the dogmas of the religious authority that are beyond the reach of one’s reason. As Tocqueville noticed in *Democracy in America*, modern democracy and the Cartesian method are intrinsically connected, the belief in the equality of all men tending naturally towards the belief in the equal value of all opinions and towards the conclusion that one must rely only on ‘the individual exercise of his understanding alone’ and must ‘constantly’ be ‘brought back to’ one’s ‘own reason as the most obvious and proximate source of truth’. ‘Americans’, Tocqueville wrote, ‘do not read the works of Descartes (...)’, but they follow his maxims because ‘their social condition naturally disposes them to adopt them’. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve (Pennsylvania State University Electronic Classics Series, 2002), 488–93. Needless to say, this democratic mindset that Tocqueville described in his classical study of American democracy does not only undermine the authority of religious experts, or the priesthood, but that of scientific experts as well. Rather than ‘trusting science’, many rely only on their own reason, as limited as it may be, not on an expertise that is beyond its reach.

rationally by the very few who have the time and means to do so; for the overwhelming majority of people, it inevitably remains a mystery. At least, one may have a general idea about it, more accurate than that of most conspiracy theorists, but often not accurate enough to justify specific medical choices. This is true not only for the uneducated, but also for the great majority of the highly educated, not only for those who think they know better than the overwhelming majority of scientists or think that the latter cannot be trusted and defend their claim with illogical arguments, but also for those who lucidly admit that they are unqualified to judge for themselves and humbly choose to follow science. And, to be fair towards the antivaxxers, one should emphasize that many of those who are pro-vaccine are far from being lucid and humble, and even though they may have made the right choice, they often do not have the right arguments to support that choice. Because they simply do not (and cannot) know enough.

I do not claim that the most ridiculous conspiracy theory is as good as the best theory that justifies faith in science because ultimately, they both rest on blind faith. On the contrary, just as there are reasons to believe in the Biblical God whom the Church Fathers sometimes invoke, so too there can be reasons (accessible reasons) for the non-specialist to believe in science. But there is also room for doubt and faith; and ultimately, when confronted with particular life choices that can be decisive for one's health or salvation, the choice comes down to having or not having faith in the Church and one's Spiritual Father, in the case of religion, and in the scientific community and one's doctor, in the case of science; a choice that always involves a bigger or smaller leap of faith and which—at least from the perspective of the overwhelming majority of non-specialists—can never be exhausted or fully guaranteed by reason.

If science is a religion with its own mysteries and priests and the choice to follow science is ultimately a matter of faith, then the opposition between those who are pro-vaccine and antivaxxers is ultimately a secularized version of the opposition between Catholics and Protestants. While the former believe that salvation / health depends on obedience to the ecclesial / scientific authority, which alone has the capacity to establish what is good for one's salvation / one's health, the latter believe that every individual has the capacity to interpret Scripture / science by

himself and to decide henceforth independently what is conducive to one's salvation or health. If health becomes the secularized substitute of salvation, and the distinction between essential and nonessential discussed earlier showed that that was certainly the case for many, then the vaccine becomes the secularized substitute of the Eucharist, with some believing in the 'real presence' of protective effects and others denying it. And just as Christ foretold that his coming would 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' (Matthew 10, 35), so too did the vaccine generate bitter divisions within Romanian society and the Church, sometimes tearing families apart and leaving the impression that we were on the brink of a new war of religion. Ultimately, it may be impossible to avoid violence when two groups cannot agree about what is most important for each of them, about what kills and what heals, what damns and what saves; when a group views its own faith and practice as essential for the health or salvation of its members, while the other group views the same faith and practice as an existential threat to itself. In one case, heretics are viewed as those who poison the souls of the believers, dragging them to hell with them, while in the other case, the unvaccinated are seen as those who endanger not only their own health and wellbeing, but also the health and wellbeing of everybody else, while in both cases, 'Catholics' are viewed as the enemies of the God-given freedom to judge for oneself.

Carl Schmitt said that states of exception emerged from sovereign decisions. Sovereign is he who decides that a situation is dangerous enough to justify the suspension of the ordinary legal order and the introduction of a state of exception. And through a similar act of will, the sovereign also decides the means to address the dangerous situation that justified the declaration of a state of emergency, establishing therefore what is essential and what is nonessential and which rights should be sacrificed for the public good. But this decision always implies a distinction between friend and enemy, the identification of the enemy and of the necessary means for combating him, for the state of emergency is always declared in response to the perceived presence of a public enemy that cannot be effectively combated through ordinary constitu-

tional measures.<sup>43</sup> Turning regular adversaries who coexist despite their differences in a pluralist liberal environment into enemies engaged in an extra-constitutional battle that may lead to chaotic or institutionalized violence, the exception brings with it the spectre of a return of the wars of religion. The liberal pluralist order, Schmitt argues, has been constructed precisely as a pacifying response to the European wars of religion of the early modern period. However, the exception may always reignite the wars of religion, thus ending the liberal pluralist order.<sup>44</sup>

The pandemic has certainly revealed the limits of pluralism, radicalizing pre-existing enmities and creating new ones, even among family members and friends. And this is no wonder, taking into account the life-and-death stake: the belief of some that the others were condemning them to a dystopian 'new normal' future and were forcing them through mandates or green certificates necessary for employment to be inoculated with dangerous substances produced and promoted by a medical authority that they did not trust, while the others thought that those who refused to obey the public health measures were spreading deadly pathogens and were pushing the health system to the verge of collapse, thus threatening the life and health of ever the pandemic had lasted longer and been deadlier, otherwise said, if the situation had been even more 'exceptional' than it proved to be, amplifying even further the level of social enmity, our liberal political system may not have withstood the pressure. The pressure was visible, in the Romanian case, through the spectacular political rise of AUR. Meanwhile, the long-term political effects of the pandemic still remain to be seen.

One last striking aspect of the public debate in a country such as Romania (where religion still plays an important role) that is worth mentioning is the almost complete absence of theological themes that in the past have always been associated with humanitarian catastrophes: I am referring here to the problems of evil, sin, punishment, repentance and theodicy. With only one minor exception, the ultra-conservative Orthodox poet and writer Răzvan Codrescu, who eventually died of Covid during the autumn of 2021, nobody stopped to ask:

<sup>43</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1976); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, translated by George Schwab (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation. De Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Vrin, 2002), 146, 163–165.



Why is this happening to us? What is the meaning of all this suffering? Is God punishing us? If he is, then why? Is there a lesson that we must learn? Of course, secular liberals do not ask these questions because they do not believe in God. Liberal Christians avoid them because they want to emphasize God's love and forgiveness instead of his justice and divine pedagogy. But there are not many liberal Christians in Romania. Instead, despite the visible secularization undergone by the Romanian society during the past two decades, there are still quite a few conservative Christians. Having protested for so many years against the advance of secularization and 'the legalization of sin', one could have expected that this was the moment for some of them to claim that God punished the world for its sins (and for not heeding their warnings). Some of them certainly insisted that that was the case after the Colectiv fire club killed 64 metal fans in 2015, on the eve of Halloween. But now many of them were simply too busy exposing 'the lie' of the globalists, and thus denying or minimizing the seriousness of the suffering. Or you can turn suffering into a subject of theological reflection only if you first acknowledge it. Not only was it hardly acknowledged, but in some isolated and deeply disturbing instances it was even mocked. For many pious Christians, if it was not simply a globalist lie or a gross exaggeration meant to justify the imposition of a global dictatorship that some viewed as the apocalyptic reign of the Antichrist, the virus was itself produced by men in a laboratory as part of the 'plan', which also included the large-scale production and use of vaccines. The pandemic was not a punishment from God for the sins of mankind that would justify, as in other ages, prophetic sermons and calls to repentance, nor a natural evil that inexplicably coexisted with God's goodness, which could generate profound theological reflections such as those of Job or Dostoyevsky, which deal with the mystery of evil and suffering, while refusing to rationalize it. Instead, it was a man-made 'plandemic', and while theoretically one could still ask why God allows the evil done by men, even in this form the question was almost completely absent from public discourse, as focus was shifted away from God's plan and towards 'unveiling' the 'globalist' plan and debunking the official science. Paradoxically, a very modern attitude that forgets transcendent meaning and the providential order in order to concentrate on immanent causes of problems and their scientific (or pseudoscientific)

and political solutions. The death and suffering of tens of thousands of Romanians were at best secondary, the greatest (or only) evil that may have justified theological interrogation being the deprivation of freedom, including the freedom to not get vaccinated and to not wear a mask. Beyond the regression from apophatic theology and humble awareness of God's incomprehensible mystery towards pseudoscience and unjustified confidence in one's ability to uncover the secret plans of the 'world government', one cannot fail to notice a profound human failure.



# COVID-19 AND ORTHODOXY: UNCERTAINTY, VULNERABILITY, AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF DIVINE ECONOMY

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COVID-19 was a great challenge for Orthodox Christians worldwide. As all natural disasters in modernity, the pandemic was explained and combatted on the basis of science. There could be no doubt that death, pain, suffering, despair, imprisonment (the quarantine can indeed be experienced as an imprisonment) are opportunities for the Church to bear witness to Christ. To be ashamed of one's vulnerability and to neglect the communal aspect of suffering means to render oneself less capable of bearing witness. Hence, it is important to find the conceptual ground for calibrating the truthful reaction to the pandemic in terms of the Christian ethos. To achieve this, we need the proper interpretative lens through which to examine the disaster of the pandemic.

COVID-19 was a great challenge for Orthodox Christians worldwide.<sup>1</sup> As all natural disasters in modernity, the pandemic was explained and combatted on the basis of science. There could be no doubt that death, pain, suffering, despair, imprisonment (the quarantine can indeed be experienced as an imprisonment) are opportunities for the Church to bear witness to Christ. To be ashamed of one's vulnerability and to neglect the communal aspect of suffering means to render oneself less capable of bearing witness. Hence, it is important to find the conceptual ground for calibrating the truthful reaction to the pandemic in terms of the Christian ethos. To achieve this, we need the proper interpretative lens through which to examine the disaster of the pandemic.

The *Book of Acts* contains an example of how the young Church faced a similar crisis. The end of Chapter 11 speaks of the famine that came to

<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to Dr Maria Spirova for the inspiration to reflect on this question, as well as for the thorough reading and in-depth editing of this text.

pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. The Church was warned about this calamity through a prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit. The reaction of the community is telling: 'Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul'.<sup>2</sup> Striking in this episode is the pragmatic reaction of the disciples: they do not seek any hidden meaning of the event other than the imperative to help those in need and to protect the community. Furthermore, they do not see the famine and its combatting as events jeopardizing the life of the Church. On the contrary, they see it as an opportunity to promote the ecclesial ethos. These hermeneutic lenses are calibrated in light of the Christ-event.

The attitude of the early Church to calamity is to focus on the community. The community gathers in one place, takes decisions, and appoints people responsible for their implementation. No one is worried that the Church might lose its identity in combatting a disaster in which it cannot read any particular meaning. The early Church is not reluctant to acknowledge that the forthcoming famine is a manifestation of the physical vulnerability of its members. Its members do not consider themselves immune to suffering and weakness. The community connects with the suffering of its most vulnerable without fear of losing its own identity.

This attitude is in striking contrast to what we have observed in many Orthodox communities during the pandemic. I refer here to my experience with Orthodox communities in Bulgaria. A significant number of lay people and clergy were reluctant either to openly acknowledge the reality of the pandemic or to admit that deaths within their communities were due to COVID-19. In some cases, COVID-19 deaths of parishioners and priests were denied or attributed to other reasons instead. Although the Synod of the Bulgarian Church adopted the sanitary measures imposed by the state, the local communities by and large were unwilling to enhance them according to their specific needs. Of course, they applied the general sanitary restrictions, but their focus was to preserve their 'normal course of parish life', being unwilling to change the rhythm of ecclesial life. There were, of course,

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* 11, 27–30.

some notable exceptions from this trend, but this is an adequate account of the situation. Furthermore, said parishioners and clergy considered the measures imposed by the sanitary restrictions as a defamation of the ecclesial ethos.

To arrive at the reasons for this attitude, I would like to focus on the 'centrist' segment of the spectrum of attitudes I encountered. Aside from the blatantly anti-scientific views espoused by some members of these Orthodox communities, the strongest opposition to sanitary precautions came from sceptics who, although acknowledging the pandemic, expressed doubts concerning the dominant scientific narrative and the measures that followed from it. At stake here is the problematic common ground between science and Orthodox teaching. The claiming of such a common ground is the task of theological anthropology. In what follows, I will try to pitch historical examples of such common ground structured along the principles of communality and vulnerability. To begin with, I will examine the sociological aspects of the attitudes I encountered.

### *Cultural and sociological context of uncertainty*

The current debates on theology and science are only relevant in a certain normative pattern of rationality. During the post-scholastic epoch, rationality has been considered predominantly a producer of rational explanations of reality, rather than a provider of meaning. Nevertheless, the scientific theories themselves are not void of existential significance for Christians. The meaning ascribed by Christian intellectuals and Christian communities to many a modern scientific paradigm is a reaction to the uncertainty that the former implies. Uncertainty is often seen as a threat from which protection is needed.

The defensive attitude towards scientific knowledge is possible in an epistemological context taking for granted the juxtaposition between the human subject of knowledge and reality. This dichotomy also determines the optics through which Christians view their own doctrinal positions. Theologians try to trace rationality in the theories of scientific cosmology, how the world began and how it develops, pointing to specific onto-theological concepts of divine being. Thus, for instance, the Christian theological concept of creation gains specific rendering. A



characteristic example is the Deep Incarnation theory developed by the Danish theological school. Informed by the findings of modern physics and biology, this systematic model offers tools for the articulation of the cosmological aspects of Incarnation.<sup>3</sup> The fact of human freedom remains problematic for this interpretative approach, as freedom is seen as an agent of contingency and, hence, a source of uncertainty. Freedom, this most sublime of expressions of human nature and human personhood, seems antinomic to rationality.

But the clash between Christian anthropology and modern science has a longer history. The appearance of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection during the nineteenth century caused much confusion. As the English physicist and apologetic writer John Polkinghorne notes, Darwin's theory stirred debates, as some English natural scientists criticised it. For instance, the anatomist Sir Richard Owen pointed to difficulties in Darwin's thesis from the perspective of anatomy. The physicist Lord Kelvin wrote that the length of the period during which the sun is shining is shorter than the time required for the evolution to take place. It is worth mentioning that, although accurate, Kelvin's calculations did not take into account what was still unknown at the time—namely, that the energy emitted by the radioactivity and nuclear fusion that power the Sun lasts for billions of years.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, many theologians of the late nineteenth century felt a moral obligation to push back against the theory of evolution, because it destabilized an established social consensus of what it means to be a human being.

The anxiety of theological consciousness, caused by contemporary biology or astrophysics, is not of strictly scientific nature. It is due to the problematizing of the concept of man. Many theologians and Christians engage in these debates not driven by pure scientific motivation, but because they worry about something much more fundamental. They perceive the new scientific models as spreaders of uncertainty in the realm of anthropology. Such uncertainty is seen to violate the belief in human freedom and moral agency.

<sup>3</sup> In modern debates there is the position of compatibilism—all natural processes are compatible to divine activity. But in the face of uncertainty this is difficult to hold. There are the kenotics—who underline the vulnerability of God acquired through the incarnation. The Danish school seek a middle path.

<sup>4</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology – an Introduction* (London: Fortress Press, 1998), 7.

Does the scepticism against the sanitary measures against COVID-19 fall into the reactionary pattern described above? Most relevant to our analysis of the situation in Bulgaria are two explanations provided by the cultural anthropologist Maria Spirova and the political thinker Ivan Krastev.

According to Spirova, the stance of pandemic denialism dominant in Bulgarian society, as well as the resulting sustained communal effort to deny the pandemic's real-life consequences, stems from an overpowering need to preserve cognitive stability in the face of total existential uncertainty. In a rapidly changing world where the flow of information is no longer a resource but an overpowering deluge, the personal cognitive stability of the individual becomes the only guarantor of continued stability. This is why the individual's cognitive stance becomes increasingly fixated on coping against all odds and thus increasingly incompatible with any admission of weakness or vulnerability. In line with this social habitus, any interaction that might point to physical weakness is considered problematic and is actively refused.<sup>5</sup> The attitude described by Spirova is popular among Orthodox communities in Bulgaria as well. Thus, many Orthodox in the country who do not share the extreme crypto-pagan view that divine grace provides protection against the virus are still 'religiously' confident in their own immune system—so much so that they think they do not need to observe any precautions. Any objection that observing the precautions protects not only and not primarily themselves, but others, is viewed as a social trap, intended to make them [look] weak.

Spirova adds that compliance with the anti-pandemic measures is recognized as an act of accepting plurality and identifying with vulnerable groups that are stereotypically marginalized and seen as lacking prestige through lacking the personal resources to ensure fitness. Ultimately, the rejection of sanitary measures is a survivalist expression of contempt. It is a rejection of any communal bond with the inferior Other.

Spirova's conclusions are commensurate with the speculation of Ivan Krastev. In his study *Is It Tomorrow Yet*<sup>6</sup> Krastev states that for

<sup>5</sup> Maria Spirova, <https://www.facebook.com/mspirova/> (posts, 27.06.2022).

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Krastev, *Is It Tomorrow Yet, Paradoxes of the Pandemic* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 25.

what he calls the ‘nativist political views’,<sup>7</sup> the acceptance of the scientific position is considered dangerous because it implies acknowledging of a universal solidarity in confronting other global risks, such as global warming. Being on the side of the suffering and the vulnerable is experienced as highly problematic and undesirable.

The plurality and vulnerability of society implied by the need for universal precautions are seen by some groups of Orthodox Christians as jeopardizing the normative hierarchy of society with which they are comfortable. But what is the axiological value of plurality and vulnerability in the history of Orthodox theological anthropology? In other words, do we have any fundamental, rather than moralistic, conceptual ground to critique the attitude described above?

*Uncertainty and plurality: Byzantine theology meets scientific paradigms*

*The Fourth Century*

The uncertainty caused by science is not solely typical of the Modern Age. Christian theological thought has already faced it in the different phases of the development of science. Uncertainty is also characteristic of the scientific developments of late Antiquity.

With Galen (second century), human physiology took a new turn. Not the heart, but the brain became the centre of human being. But there is an even more important shift pertaining to the system of the human body. Galen describes complex models of regulation between parts of the body whereby the paradigm of humoral regulation is abandoned. A much more complex model of regulation was proposed, relying on the circulatory system, the muscular system, and the nervous system. Many diseases, according to Galen, occur because of the domination (ἐπικρατεία) of one organ or system over another.<sup>8</sup>

In his treatises *De nature hominis* the Christian philosopher and physiologist Nemesius of Emessa (fourth century) discusses the rational regulation of the bodily processes in view of the Galenic physiologi-

<sup>7</sup> These views are popular in Bulgarian society.

<sup>8</sup> Julius Rocca, *Galen on the Brain: Anatomical Knowledge and Physiological Speculation in the 2nd century AD* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

cal model. Nemeseius aims at demonstrating that there is a sphere of autonomy and moral agency within a human being where free human activity is possible. There are also aspects that are completely out of rational control, as well as intermediary aspects that are only partly under the control of reason. These all form the part of the soul that governs desire (τὸ ἐπιθυμικόν), situated in the liver, as well as the anxious part (τὸ θυμικόν), situated in the heart.

Nemeseius introduces a differentiation between the act (ἐνέργεια) of the organs and the passions. Strictly speaking, the act is the existential activity of an organ that is not provoked externally but is intrinsic. The passion is a movement caused by an external agent. In that sense, the passion is against the nature of the body. Thus, for instance, the normal heartbeat is an act in a strict sense, i.e., an existential act of the heart, whereas the frequent heartbeat is a movement caused by external passion, such as anger or shame.<sup>9</sup>

The passionate movements of the bodily organs are possible, Nemeseius continues, because the soul is capable of getting impassioned. It follows that the passions are proper acts. But as far as they are not according to nature and are not moderate, they are anomalous. Thus passion, as the movement of the irrational soul, has two meanings. Only the second meaning bears worrying uncertainty; it is seen as violating the natural order and blurring the limits of the bodily organs.

The external provocation of the passions is a problem, as far as we humans are liable to acts against our nature that follow from external causes that are totally beyond our control. And personal identity is only valid within certain boundaries of rational control. No moral responsibility can be borne for processes outside these boundaries. These two types of soul acts co-exist within the individual with the result that in our existence there is room for acts and processes that are not ours, not human. These are not in the realm of human freedom.

The model of Nemeseius ostensibly affirms a holism of soul and body by postulating that all actions of the soul correspond to the respective organs and their natural acts the body. However, as passions are concerned, a discrepancy occurs. Whereas the passions are caused by

<sup>9</sup> Nemeseius of Emessa, *De natura hominis* XVI 73–75 [TLG 0742.002, Moreno Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni de natura hominis – Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1987)], 1–136.

irrational movements, external to the essences of soul and body, they are transmitted from the soul to the body because of an ontologically guaranteed connection that remains intact. Could one and the same act be simultaneously passionate and neutral/natural, or is there a filter that fully or partially transforms a passion into a natural action and vice versa? Nemesisius does not say. He does his best to reclaim ontological territory for freedom and human agency, but his analysis leaves a gap of indeterminacy as to the relation between personal identity and determinism.

### *The Seventh Century*

John Damascene adopts the physiological model of Nemesisius but introduces a new criterion for the axiological qualification of passions. In his *Exact exposition of the Orthodox Faith* the Damascene describes the sinful passions as egotistic, i.e., as closing the single hypostasis from communion with the others and with God. The deficiency of passions is not due to causation, which is out of rational control, but due to a failure to share the content of one's personal existence with other human beings and with God. All natural actions, the passions included, are platforms for intersubjectivity.<sup>10</sup> Damascene's model ascribes a positive role to uncertainty, in so far as the vulnerability caused by passions is a conduit to a meaningful interpersonal communion. Symptomatically, he insists that even those aspects of the soul—and of bodily life respectively—that are completely out of rational control are still relevant to self-determination and to the manifestation of personal identity.

What remains unclear is whether there are specific physiological mechanisms that engage the human body, with its indefinite chains of causation, in this interpersonal communion. Unclear is also the theological significance of the normative criterion introduced by the Damascene. He gives some hints but does not elaborate on the relevance of this interpersonality to incarnation and salvation.

<sup>10</sup> John Damascene, *Expositio fidei* 25, 22–51 (Bonifatius Kotter, ed., *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. II (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973), 7–239. Cf. Smilen Markov, *Die metaphysische Synthese des Johannes von Damaskus – historische Zusammenhänge und Strukturtransformationen* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), 165–178.

### *The Ninth Century*

These open questions remain highly relevant in the ninth century. After the second phase of Iconoclasm, physiology occupies the centre of Byzantine intellectual culture. There are many physiological treatises in circulation emphasising the relevance of physiology to theological anthropology.

The example of ninth-century Byzantine physiologists is quite relevant when analysing the scepticism among contemporary Orthodox towards the pandemic and the sanitary measures because we have an example of overcoming the perplexing uncertainty of the bodily life without falling into the trap of anti-scientific statements or activating stereotypes of resentment of the Other.

The ninth-century monk and physiologist Meletius offers a two-tier model of the cognitive activity of the soul in order provide a proper epistemological model corresponding to the complexity of human physiology. According to Meletius, the cognitive activity of the soul is of two types: *intelligible* (νοητή) and *noetic* (νοερά).<sup>11</sup> The intelligible aspect denotes the knowledge that the soul possesses of itself (νοεῖται νοητῶς). This knowledge is self-reflexive, immediate (intuitive), and truthful. The other tier of the soul's cognitive activity has to do with the participation of all bodily parts in the acts (energies) of the soul (κατὰ μέτεξιν). In this second tier of cognitive activity, the soul remains unmixed (ἀμιγῇ) with the bodily matter but penetrates the body in a way that is not frictionless, but is still meaningful.<sup>12</sup> Thereby the soul makes the body alive through participation.

The described relationship between soul and body is reciprocal but does not exist in equilibrium. The soul is both an independent essence and a substrate of the body. The significance of this structural ambivalence is revealed in view of the personal identity of the hypostasis. Meletius quotes here Gregory the Theologian according to whom although the soul is not a body, it still is not bodiless, as it is corporeal according to its position—τοῦ ὄντος θέσις.<sup>13</sup> This participation is immanent to the existence of the single human hypostasis.

<sup>11</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis*, 142, 19–20 (TLG 0730,001: John Cramer, ed., *Anecdota Graeca e codd. manuscriptis bibliothecarum Oxoniensium*, vol. 3 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1836 (repr. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1963)], 5–157.

<sup>12</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis*, 145, 9 (TLG 0730,001).

<sup>13</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis*, 144, 33 (TLG 0730,001).



This ambivalent manifestation of the soul in and through the body is described, in epistemological terms, as apophatic and cataphatic; it exhibits hiddenness and unhiddenness. This structure of soul-body union flaws the efficiency of the cognitive potency, as the body is an imperfect instrument for cognition. The impediment on the cognitive front, however, is constitutive for another potency of self-reflection, namely, the judgement (*συνιδεῖν, γνῶσις ἐν συνέσει*).<sup>14</sup> Unlike the noetic self-reflexivity, the conscience is a dialogical mode of self-knowledge, which manifests the divine image in the single human being. Just as God is known and unknown, manifest and hidden, so is the knowledge of the human soul through the body unclear, discrete, and stochastic.

Meletius studies at length the structures of this discrepancy. But, more importantly for our discussion, he constructs a new horizon of significance when it comes to this structure: the uncertainty occurring from the discrepancy between the sphere of human rationality and bodily causality is interpreted as a kind of edifying vulnerability. There is a difference in meaning between the unknowability of divine nature and the cognitive acts of the soul realized through the body. Whereas divine nature is unknowable according to its essential principle (*τὴν ἀκατάληπτον φύσιν Θεοῦ τῷ καθ' αὐτὴν ἀγνώστῳ χαρακτηρίζει*),<sup>15</sup> the intelligible knowledge of the soul remains hidden for us (*φεύγει τὴν γνῶσιν ἡμῶν τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς ἢ κατάληψις*).<sup>16</sup> So, the uncertainty within human existence is not necessarily *per se*, it is *pro nobis*.

When considered as an individual of the human species, the human being is seen as a unity of soul and body. Soul and body are immanent to one another. On the other hand, when the single human being is in focus, the soul-body union is seen as progressively manifested within human physiology. The personal uniqueness is revealed (*ἐνάργει*)<sup>17</sup> in this dialectical relation between identity and otherness and this is demonstrable in human physiology.

Continuing this conceptual line, another physiologist of the ninth century, Theophilus Protospatarius, develops a physiological model based on the dialectical relation between identity and otherness. The

<sup>14</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis*, 142, 28/144, 10 (TLG 0730,001).

<sup>15</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis* 144, 1–2 (TLG 0730,001).

<sup>16</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis* 143,33–144,1 (TLG 0730,001).

<sup>17</sup> Meletius, *De natura hominis* 151, 33 (TLG 0730,001).



acts (*energies*) of the body relate to both the entire complex of the bodily elements, as well as its parts. The term 'parts' denotes not simply the bodily organs, but systems—such as the digestive system. The action of each system can unfold either as active or passive. But there is a more important differentiation in the energies of the systems: existential and functional. The activity of the digestive system is existential, whereas the activity of the different organs of this system is functional, i.e., it is a movement towards a goal.<sup>18</sup>

According to Theophilus, the physiological systems of the body are not causally dependent on the action of the soul; they are self-activating conglomerates of organs. The unity between soul and body does not activate the systems of the body, but it provides a platform for the manifestation of the external causal effects of the natural energies of these systems.

The different parts of the soul (anger, reason, and volition) are connected to different bodily organs and systems. But this connection does not mean that these parts of the soul use the bodily systems as tools, as instruments for realization of their activity. The parts of the soul are structures of the hypostatic identity that are instantiated (*ἐννούσιον*) in the different bodily systems, and relate to these parts as semiotic structures, conveying meaning. The fitness of the body to express the existential energy of the human being is not determined by the functional action of the organs; it is only made possible by the synthesis of all of them.

This system of relation between soul and body is contradictory. The plurality of bodily systems and the arduous relations between the acts of soul and body make the system extremely vulnerable. But this vulnerability is a guarantor of strength as well. Theodore gives the example of the human wrist. It is comprised of numerous very small and fragile bones and joints with different functions,<sup>19</sup> but it is one of the finest and strongest parts of our body. And its existential efficacy is much more powerful and sophisticated than the functional efficacies of the single bones. Is not such multiplicity a factor for fragmentation and weakness?

<sup>18</sup> Theophilus Protospatarius, *De corporis humanae fabrica libri quinque*, in: Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann, 'Theophilus: Die Aufbau des Menschen' (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2008), 277.

<sup>19</sup> Theophilus Protospatarius, *De corporis humanae fabrica libri quinque*, in: Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann, 'Theophilus...', 282.

The wrist is strong because there are strong bonds (*συνδεσμοί*) between its different parts. So, neither the uniformity of the elements, nor the straightforwardness of their functions guarantee the existential efficacy of the body as a platform for the soul-body union. It is the connectivity between the bodily parts that does.

So, the inherent uncertainty of the human being is interpreted not as a clash with necessity, but as a process facilitating the revelation of personal identity. But what is the theological meaning of all this?

### *The Christological lenses*

This physiological speculation went hand in hand with the developments of post-iconoclastic Christology and the concept of hypostasis. In his metaphysical and Christological speculation, Photius notes that hypostasis is not a mere self-existing unique pillar of natural being. The hypostasis as an active agent, expressing its being within the realm of nature. The enousion (*ἐννούσιον*) of the hypostasis of the Son *in* and *through human nature* reveals the content of Christ's personal identity and his economy to all human persons. The name 'Christ' does not simply denote the existence of the hypostasis of the Son in human nature, but the revealing of his personal identity through human nature, human physiology included. The expression of personal identity encompasses the entire constitution of the human being, with its plurality and uncertainty. And the heteronomy of hypostasis and human nature becomes a starting point of confirming personal identity. As the other great Christologist of this period, Nicetas of Byzantium, notes, the otherness of the Son's hypostasis as One of the Trinity is so radical that his enousion (*ἐννούσιον*) transforms the entire human nature, making it expressive of a new mode of existence.

But how does this transformation of human nature in Christ relate to the plurality and uncertainty of the physiology of the single human being? The answer is: through the law.

*The law as hermeneutic indicator of human vulnerability  
and divine providence*

The law, as conceptualised by patriarch Photius of Constantinople (ninth century) can be seen to subvert models of power and of constitutional order that were previously accepted in Byzantium. Photius argues against the concept of the state as an image of the heavenly kingdom. Rather, he considers the state a platform for manifesting divine revelation.

According to the popular imperial ideology in Byzantium, the emperor is tasked with guaranteeing that the state is kept as an image of the heavenly kingdom, since he must rule in the likeness of the Heavenly King. The emperor is subject to the laws of justice, and he should lawfully govern his subjects, teaching men to defend justice.<sup>20</sup>

In his social philosophy, Photius inverts the model of political power developed in the tradition of imperial ideology in Byzantium starting from Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century). More specifically, Photius's model flips the concept of society developed by Agapetus (fifth–sixth century). The philosophical basis behind the imperial ideological model is neo-Platonic, as it places the centre of human being in the intellect. The intellect of the emperor guarantees that society will follow the path of truth and practical wisdom. The intellect of the emperor is many-eyed in order to push back the torrents of lawlessness and injustice.<sup>21</sup> In a way, he acts as if he is the intellect of society.

Photius' countering model of social philosophy can be found not only in his philosophical texts, but also in the opening chapters of the *Eisagoge*—a law book promulgated in 886 by Emperor Basil I the Macedonian (867–886). Photius compares society to a body, thus establishing pluralism as a criterion for a robust social organism: 'The state consists of members and parts in analogy to the human person, the mightiest and most important parts being the emperor and the

<sup>20</sup> Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* I, 3–5 [TLG 2817:001, Rudolf Riedinger, ed. *Agapetos Diakonos. Der Fürstenspiegel für Kaiser Iustinianos* (Athens: *Εταιρεία Φίλων τοῦ Λαοῦ. Κέντρον Ἑρεῦνης Βυζαντίου*, 1995), 26–76.]. The text is influenced by the political theology of Eusebius and bears many similarities with its ideas. It is documented in the *Suda* and this fact attests to its popularity during the time of Photius. Cf. Agapetus, *Advice to the Emperor*, in: Peter Bell, transl., *Three Political Voices from the Age of Justinian. Agapetus, Advice to the Emperor – Dialogue on Political Science. Paul the Silentiary, Description of Hagia Sophia – translated Texts for Historians* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 8–9/18–19/27–49.

<sup>21</sup> Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* II, 3–5 (TLG 2817.001).

patriarch. Therefore, the peace and well-being of their subjects consists in the concord (ὁμοφροσύνη) and agreement (συμφωνία) between the empire and the priesthood in analogy to the soul and body'.<sup>22</sup> On the backdrop of this physiological analogy Photius postulates the principle of consensus (σύννοδος) as a normative model for society. He does not imply that all individuals and social actors should agree in their volitional acts. What is sought is not a concord and uniformity of everybody's acts, just as there is no uniformity of the functions of the bodily organs. Photius understands consensus as a recognition of the common path to salvation within Christ's economy. But what practical norms guarantee the sustainability of communal life according to this principle of consensus?

In Photius' model, as well as in the legislative acts elaborated by the emperors Basil and Leo, the bonds between the diverse social actors are calibrated as specific functions of each actor serving the movement of all along the path to salvation. The legal principles of distributive and retributive justice are seen as subordinate to this sublime imperative. Thus, neither a simplistic egalitarian model, nor a rigid meritocratic system could properly serve the desired communal order.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as social regulation is dependent on autonomy, special attempts are made to protect the dignity of the human person by prohibiting slavery, mutilation, and unfair treatment.

For Agapetus, inequality is an effect of injustice and injustice is caused by change.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the mission of the emperor is to keep his personal imperturbability, 'to change in response to the changes in affairs is proof of an inconstant intellect'.<sup>25</sup> The ruler upholds the position of a noetic, bodiless entity who possesses perfect knowledge, maintains societal order and endeavours to avoid change. In this model, the emperor is not an agent of change, but an agent of stability.

For Photius equality has different aspects stemming from the different theological dimensions of communality. The first one is *ισονομία*: equality before the divine law. This type of equality must

<sup>22</sup> Photius, *Eisagoge*, III, 8, 1–5 [TLG 3133.001: Pangiotis Zepos (post C.E. Zacharia von Lingenthal), ed., *Leges Imperatorum Isaurorum et Macedonum – Jus Graecoromanum* 2 (Athens: Fexis, 1931), 236–368].

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Leo VI Sapiens, *Novellae* 67 [TLG 2940.008: Alphonse Dain and Pierre Noialles, eds., *Les nouvelles de Léon VI le Sage* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1944), 5–375].

<sup>24</sup> Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* X, 3–6 (TLG 2817.001).

<sup>25</sup> Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* XIII, 1–3 (TLG 2817.001).

be constantly guaranteed on the communal level by establishing distributive justice.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there is the *ισοθυμία*. It means equality in honour and has to do with the divine plan for the salvation of everyone. A corresponding type of inequality is caused by human moral agency whenever the latter contradicts the salvific plan of God (economy). It is countered by ensuring that the sinner receives the opportunity for repentance. This opportunity does not pertain to the changing of affairs or the changing of legal frameworks; it implies the creation and maintenance of possibilities for personal repentance. The constitutional order must guarantee the transformation of the person by preserving pluralism in society and responding to change.<sup>27</sup> This dynamic reality of the self that is free to repent guarantees peace. Peace is the most radical societal manifestation of the autonomous self (*δηλονότι τὴν ἐκάστου πρὸς ἑαυτόν*), its personhood being guaranteed and brought to salvation by God.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusion

The pandemic and the sanitary measures highlighted the most problematic aspects of human bodily existence. Accepting the sanitary regulations was experienced by many Orthodox as a risk to the life of Church community, as well as a diminishment of its social interactions to mere bodily functions. But, as we have seen in the models developed by Byzantine philosophers during the ninth century, the realisation of the functional action of human corporeality does not clash with its existential activity as guarantor for hypostatic existence. Furthermore, it is the conglomerate of bodily functionalities that enables the meaningful revelation of hypostatic identity. There is a clear analogy to be made between the functional plurality of human physiology—as indicative of the dynamism of personal life—and the individual identification with the most vulnerable in a community—inherent in observing the same health precautions. Both could be seen as modes of pluralisation

<sup>26</sup> On the question of distributive justice: Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Justice. The Bampton Lectures, 2003*, (Michigan/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 31–40.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* XI, 2–5 (TLG 2817.001).

<sup>28</sup> Photius, *Bibliotheka* 222, 204a, 1–8 [TLG 4040.001: René Henry, ed., *Photius. Bibliothèque*, 8 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1:1959; 2:1960; 3:1962; 4:1965; 5:1967; 6:1971; 7:1974; 8:1977) 1:1–191; 2:8–203; 3:8–227; 4:8–174; 5:8–201; 6:8–194; 7:8–228; 8:8–214].

when it comes to our 'social personality'. In this sense, the sanitary regulations are in line with the 'philosophy of law' developed by Photius, which is centred around pluralism and equality on the common path to salvation. As demonstrated above, the forging of robust bonds through which the personal identity might be expressed in communion with other human beings is in perfect correspondence with the transformation of human nature in Christ.

# COVID-19: CRISIS, SOCIAL PANIC, RELIGIOUS AND ACADEMIC LIFE IN BULGARIA

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This paper reflects on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious life in Bulgaria, especially in the Orthodox Church, and on the sphere of academic teaching. The picture that emerges against the background of the moderate COVID-19 measures and the non-closure of churches is rather disturbing, given the aggressive attacks by non-believers against ecclesial practice. It testifies to widespread superstition and deep theological ignorance even among those who designate themselves as 'Orthodox Christians'. The compromise of university education during the COVID-19 panic and the radical changes to the social way of thinking go—as a basis of the perplexity of the social mind—hand in hand with the destruction of the democratic world order by Russia's war against Ukraine.

During the preparation for our workshop, we have entered a new, much more dangerous situation, which is defined by Russia's war against Ukraine. I ask myself whether the way of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding new ways of life in the world have engendered the background for the current and pernicious transformation of the world order, including the church order of Orthodoxy. My answer is 'yes', they have.

The brevity of my response to the issue of the COVID-19 crisis, the accompanying social panic, and religious life in Bulgaria is based on the simple fact that I have nothing extremely dramatic to report. In almost all points, it is rather about a fragile normal state in comparison with the situation before the crisis. 'Normal' is usually not attractive. However, the effects of crisis management, which indeed shape our future, look different.

The crucial point in the Bulgarian case is that, during 2020, the government decided not to close the churches and the mosques. The next



governments did not revise this policy. The result was that the worship and church life of believers turned out to be the only sphere of life in Bulgaria that was not disturbed or discontinued during the crisis. All other areas were affected. In 2020, Bulgaria experienced two months of lockdown. In the period that followed, cultural institutions, restaurants and hotels, sporting events, and travel, and especially—to a massive extent—educational institutions were restricted, disrupting their regular function, or they were completely shut down. For two years, for example, university classes were held online, which damaged university education in several ways. Church life, as mentioned above, was indeed the only exception. It should be noted that COVID-19 measures in Bulgaria were perhaps the mildest in Europe, with the people observing these measures in a rather discretionary manner, often superficially, or not at all.

Against this background, the Synod and the clergy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as well as the leaders of other denominations and religions, were prepared to follow all prescribed protective measures. They, and especially the bishops and the priests of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, showed mainly by personal example that the Church, even if not imperatively, supports vaccination and endorses further medical instructions and imperatives. I emphasize this fact because it was the background against which a notably dramatic event, which I will describe in the following, took place.

Shortly before Easter 2020, I delivered a sharp statement on the Bulgarian National Radio. I insisted, firstly, that for most of the church-attending faithful, the danger of not partaking in communion on the great feast day is much greater and more deadly than the possibility of getting infected. Secondly, I allowed myself emphatically to predict that the faithful will prove to be the most disciplined group of citizens in Bulgaria. Why should this be declared publicly?

I have experienced many things in my life, including in my life as a Christian. *Inter alia*, thirty years of my life passed under communist dictatorship. Nevertheless, what happened—and its extent—surprised even me. A huge mass of all segments of the population, especially among the intellectuals or pseudo-intellectuals, spread judgments and condemnations, accusations, free-floating fantasies, and outright lies via all kinds of media.

The main issue of criticism was the purported self-satisfied arbitrariness of the faithful, their caprices and their almost murderous irresponsibility in their purportedly irrational impulse to gather in churches and to partake in communion. The mode of transmitting communion produced an immense hysteria. Christians were declared as determined murderers of the people. These attacks were also vigorously reinforced before and during the great Christian feast days.

Of course, no medical disaster materialised due to ecclesial worship. The bishops and the priests skilfully and in disciplined manner arranged the order of the services and the distribution of the sacraments. In the last analysis, the number of infected people was not shown to increase due to ecclesial worship. Where is the drama in this situation?

If you ask the non-Muslim citizens of Bulgaria, that is, the overwhelming majority of the population, if they are Christians, more than 80% will declare that they are Eastern Orthodox Christians. By this, these devout people mean that they are baptized. For a huge number of Orthodox Bulgarians, their relations with church life concludes once and for all with this sacrament, if we exclude entering the church during the first minutes of the Easter service. Their relations with the faith do not end because they have never had such relations. What do they believe in, what is their Orthodoxy?

Nationalist propaganda, not without the assistance of a certain vulgar understanding of the Church even among the clergy, has led to a majority of Bulgarians identifying 'Bulgarian' with 'Orthodox'. This situation is further amplified by a predicament that rightfully produces quite an amount of anxiety. I am referring here to extreme theological ignorance. The theological primitiveness of the mass of Bulgarians is shocking, in spite of the efforts of a large group among Bulgarian theologians, philosophers, historians, and philologists.

No, the majority the Bulgarians are neither atheists nor agnostics. They are, however, *superstitious*. It is about an intrinsically scandalous mixture of insultingly superficial information about church doctrine, pagan and heretical views and practices, handed-down fallacies and ravings. All of this exploded in its 'sacred fury' in the course of the COVID-19 panic in the public square. This is precisely the dramatic element in our problematic when it comes to Bulgaria. Even this outburst did not cause worries and new initiatives, for example in the

circles of authority within the clergy. This is the tragic overtone in this drama.

This same mass has proven to be the actual bearer of agency in the context discussed here, assuming the role of the obedient follower of the general and generic interpretative line. They frenetically demanded the merciless censorship of different opinions concerning the medical illicitness of public worship. This was done in a way that was devoid of Christian love for fellow human beings, resulting in everybody who thought differently concerning the prioritisation of public worship being branded as a criminal, an idiot, a monster.

Thus, the word 'freedom' lost its meaning. Truth was reduced to correctness and right was only what fear and egoism would dictate. Personal human dignity was forcefully devalued. Personal volition became insignificant. The human being was reduced to a biological entity that should elevate survival to the highest and sole value. In short, the main Christian values were devalued.

It is not a coincidence that just one Bulgarian Metropolitan (of pronounced monastic ethos), Daniil of Vidin, sharply raised the question of mutual help and empathy, of the high value of the dignity of the person and personal freedom, in a special broadcast on religion by Bulgaria's National Television on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 concerning the COVID-19 situation. He firmly opposed the deliberate dissemination of fear and argued in favour of opening up space for different arguments and other opinions. He drew attention to the *a priori* argumentation by independent thinkers within society and opposed the persecution of others. He defined a politically engendered moral position without alternatives as a symptom of totalitarianism. The second symptom was the reduction of people to instruments of state policy, which results in social and spiritual negativism. The bishop opposed the propagandistic devaluation of scientific questions and arguments, as well as the mutual hatred towards each other, and declared himself in favour of rational debate within church circles and secular society.

This statement remained without any response, both from the secular sphere and from the sphere of the church-centred, who did not agree among themselves in this respect either. The growing lack of critical thinking, of empathy, human love, and human dignity found no deeper

reflection. In a typically Bulgarian way, this essentially important debate was also stilled by silence.

As I said at the beginning, even the COVID-19 crisis and its negative effects have not noticeably moved the structure of Bulgarian public opinion and inner-church attitudes. The results of this ostensibly counter-climactic normality can only be deciphered today. The conclusions are, indeed, bitter.

The conclusions concerning academic life are even more bitter. The COVID-19 crisis put at risk not only isolated moments of the functioning of the university system, but also its very principles. Wilhelm von Humboldt explained that university education is not aimed at learning this or that, but that in learning that—and how—memory should be exercised, the mind sharpened, the judgment corrected, moral feeling refined. He accentuates two indispensable conditions for the existence of the university. First, the importance of international academic exchange. The dampening of international exchange is at odds with the liberality that should prevail in all academic matters. A second point is the full lifting of censorship for ‘scientific works’.<sup>1</sup> In the 60s, Karl Jaspers explained his university ideal, which strives for a renaissance of the Humboldtian university. He understood scientific autonomy as the realisation of an internationally branched communication network that would protect the free against a totalitarian state.<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, for his part, describes the university learning processes as ‘reproductive functions of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)’.<sup>3</sup> The stress is placed on the educational, cultural-communicative, and public function, i.e., socialisation, cultural communication (through which cultural heritage is transmitted), and public discussion, which is to form and establish dialogical models of public action. Habermas defines the identity of the ‘I’ (*Ich-Identität*) as the goal of socialisation, which is to be achieved within the framework of an educational process.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘Bericht der Sektion des Kultus und Unterrichts’, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Politische Denkschriften*, vol. 1, ed. B. Gebhardt, (Berlin: B. Behr 1903): 205 and 220-221.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, Kurt Rossmann, *Die Idee der Universität* (Berlin – Heidelberg: Springer 1961): 33.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Die Idee der Universität. Lernprozesse’, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 32 (1986): 715.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Alke Eva Caris, *Jürgen Habermas’ Ich-Identität als Ziel der Sozialisation* (München: GRIN Verlag 2019).

The short answer to the question ‘What went wrong during the COVID-19 crisis?’ is: everything. Online teaching tore apart the personal relationship between teachers and students. Education was reduced to the anonymous transmission of units of information. The Humboldtian ‘education of minds and character’ perished. The three necessary components according to Habermas were almost fully annulled. Clear evidence of this are the more and more aggressive arguments and movements that imperatively demand a ruthless ignoring and abolition of forms and values established in the course of cultural history, but without arguing for a coherent alternative system. The COVID-19 crisis and the restrictive measures taken in this context have brought academic exchanges to a virtual standstill. This lack does not prevent the quantity, but the quality and intensity of innovative scientific research work. The COVID-19 situation also violated the other Humboldtian condition, that of possibility. The pressure to censor was elevated in Bulgaria to a degree almost comparable to that experienced by my generation during the period of communist dictatorship. In academia, and especially in the case of the humanities and social sciences, several factors play into this. In addition to the growing compulsion of increasingly moody political correctness, a second phenomenon is becoming dominant. In the course of the medical crisis, the humanities and social sciences were branded in a symptomatic way as incompetent as far as ‘real life’ is concerned. The pandemic situation called into question both the existence of the university system and its very nature.

If I must summarise briefly the effect of these phenomena, I must state that they have underpinned the sentiments that are at the core of the wider perplexity with regard to the aggressive destruction of the European way of life that the Russian invasion and war instigated. We find ourselves in a civilisational catastrophe.

# SCIENCE IN THE DESTINY OF THEOLOGY A DISCUSSION IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

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The experience of this ongoing pandemic has not been a common and terrifying danger only. It has also been a sign of unity of our scattered post-secular humanity, as the question of our forgotten *common nature* seems to come to the fore again.

The experience of this ongoing pandemic has not been a common and terrifying danger only. It has also been a sign of unity of our scattered post-secular humanity, as the question of our forgotten *common nature* seems to come to the fore again. This now happens as an unexpected medical problem, against our narcissistic dreams of individual prosperity, that is, beyond what Charles Taylor termed *an exclusive humanism*, as the common post-secular *self-authorization*, in Isaiah Berlin's terms, where the only transcendence accepted is Nussbaum's transcendence of an internal and human sort.

That means that nature returns as a threat and an obstacle, unifying humanity not in the glory of its 'aspiring minds', according to Marlowe, but in the misery of its corruption. And now humanity remembers God, bringing him again to the court of theodicy; now God is, again, in the minds of many, the author of this lamentable burden of necessity, which prevents our detached thinking selfhood to fulfil its destiny of dominating the universe. The Greek-Western world has always had two temptations here, which both proved to be problematic: either to surpass or to enhance this nature. Let us start from the latter.

The dream of enhancing this weak nature is not contemporary but older, brought about by post-Enlightenment thought. It followed, in my view, the re-working of Origen's and Augustine's spiritualism, through Descartes and English Empiricism, which reworking culminated both in an affirmation of biological nature *per se* and the genesis of *mathematical physics*, in the context of the Enlightenment. However, this new wisdom rather led to the rise of mechanistic science, according to Taylor, and modern ontic dualism: mind over against a mechanistic, meaning-shorn universe, without purposes, contrary to the older cosmos, which was full of such purposes. However, this mind tried to dominate this dead universe according to Remi Brague, initially through the imagination (by Eriugena, Cusanus, or Paracelse), opening the way to the domination of nature, where man becomes 'a god on earth' (according to G. Bruno); we thus reach the 'kingdom of man', according to Bacon, where man, as Descartes claims, is the 'master and possessor' of nature, while, according to Kant, the human transcendental ego is the proprietor of the world through the 'construction of concepts', and finally, as Fichte asserts, man, in his detached, almost godly intellectuality, is the lord of nature, which is his servant. *Progress* is the fundamental dogma of this new human, both theoretical and practical wisdom, which is given a scientific basis by both Darwin and Marx; the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment do away with original sin, grace, and salvation, thus culminating, through Comte, in the 'religion of humanity', while, according to Vico, history then is simply the kingdom of human creation instead of a place for the revelation of God. Humanism becomes pragmatism, materialism, empiricism, realism, and ultimately it is identified with atheism. Man becomes, in Péguy's words, 'autotheos' (*autothée*), God for himself.

Curiously enough, this also leads, finally, according to Brague, to despising the human being as an imperfect being, and, on the other hand, the supposed domination of nature turns into a domination of man over man. This leads ultimately to a 'transhumanism', the need for re-constructing or enhancing human nature, and thus correcting its inherent imperfections. Predicted by Nietzsche, this starts on the social level with Fascism, Nazism, and Communism and concludes with the temptations of modern genetic technology; man is something that must be surpassed.



Now the consequences of this evolution are noteworthy. On the one hand, it is nihilism, mainly in the form of a divorce of Being from Good. The Enlightenment protested in the name of nature, but nature thus discovered was not a paradise of harmony but a battlefield of sheer and evil antagonism and indifference. This created modern pessimism, along with an inclination towards correcting, surpassing, neglecting, disobeying, and experimenting with nature. On the other hand, since nature resists human interventions, this culminates, paradoxically, in an irresistible new domination of nature over man as instinct, pleasure, death. From humanism we ultimately reach anti-humanism, man's private surrender to the dark sides of nature. According to Sartre, human nature no longer exists, since God, the one capable of thinking of this nature, does not exist and suicide thereby becomes an 'absolute necessity' (according to Hartmann, or Dostoyevsky), since no eternity is waiting for us. The final drama of the modern Greek-Western secularized man consists in not admitting either a wise external *Physis*, which could dictate its wisdom to man, as it did for the ancient Greeks, or the Biblical God, who acts in history, transforming it into his own kingdom. Modernity destroys both the above sources of truth, claiming an unwise *autonomy* for man as a decisive and pernicious independence from both.

Thus, paradoxically, man's effort to enhance his nature goes in parallel with a deeper submission to its corruptive aspects: instinct, pleasure, pain, death. Death has always the last word, as it seems impossible to overcome corruption, due to the universal law of entropy, according to the second axiom of Thermodynamics. This is why the first temptation, the ancient temptation to surpass nature, strangely enough, still remains valid, in a way, in the modern Christian (even if it declares itself an atheist) Greek-Western world.

I mean by this the ancient Platonic temptation, so strongly resisted by Aristotle, although the former finally won the game in the adventurous field of ancient Greek metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Plato initiated philosophical metaphysics of *representation* and *transcendence*, where the truth abides in heaven and it is reached only through the *ex-carnation* (the opposite of *in-carnation*) of man, that is, man's stripping of his psycho-biolog-

<sup>1</sup> For what follows see my *Unseen Harmony: A Metaphysical History of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, (Athens: Armos 2021), 143–156 (in Greek).

ical nature. Aristotle tried to understand the idea as the *ένυλον είδος*, that is, the idea inherent in beings, giving them concrete substance and real existence. However, the fatal thinker in the history of Platonism is, undoubtedly, Plotinus, precisely because he tried to cut the Platonic Gordian knot of the impossible participation, by identifying human individual *nous* with the One.

In this way, Plotinus created a gnosiology aiming at solving, as we said, the difficult problem of the meaning of participation in Plato's thought, since participation precluded the real psycho-biological existence, on the one hand, but also the problem of the nature of scientific knowledge, on the other. Now, the soul tries to catch a glimpse of the *logoi* of beings that fall from the Nous in the Psyche, and finally they are spoiled by falling in material creation. However, what is of interest for us here is how this gnosiology was transferred in Christian theology by Evagrius Ponticus.

I deal with Evagrius' theology in a forthcoming book of mine, but it is necessary to say a few words here for the needs of this paper. From the Evagrian corpus I chose only one passage from his *Epistula ad Melaniam*, which reveals some of his principles:

Once, the mind was one in nature, person, and rank with God. But it fell from that rank, through its own free will, and thus it became a soul. Sinking down even further, it became a body. But in the end, body and soul will change their wills and become one with the mind, just as before. At present, there is only one being whose nature, person and name are unknown, since he is a 'naked mind': Christ. In being united with God the Father, the rational beings will also be one nature in three persons. Just as into the sea many rivers with their various properties mix, thus God the Father will contain all minds, and these will then be one in nature with him, yes, they will all be one. The minds will be united with God who is and remains one in nature and three in persons. Before the creation, the waters were one (cp. Gen.1). After the creation, there were many different rivers. Just so, before sin had separated the minds from God, they were at one with him. But in the end, the earth will be taken out of the

sea and the waters will be one again. In the same way, sin will be taken away from the minds and they will be one with God again.<sup>2</sup>

Here, Evagrius seems to imply that the mind was initially equal in nature to God's essence, and after its fall it became, in the beginning, soul, and then, it sunk down ever further and was transformed into a body. Those three things have separate wills, and, if they finally agree, they will return to the mental state, becoming again 'naked mind', thus following the only 'naked mind', which is Christ; in the end, they will be assimilated into God's nature, just as the many rivers join the sea by losing their individuality.

What is extremely important here is that the spiritual way of doing this is, for Evagrius, the contemplation of the *logoi* of things.<sup>3</sup> As created nature must finally be surpassed and abolished, we need a way to start doing this from now on; and the way of this overcoming/abolition of nature is precisely the contemplation of the *logoi* of creation, since this reveals to us the divine primordial reality, which is the only true reality. Thus, the contemplation of the *logoi* of nature does not lead to the affirmation of nature and its natural characteristics, as Maximus the Confessor would have put it,<sup>4</sup> but to its eschatological rejection, as nature does not exist in the Kingdom of God.

But what are these *logoi* of things in this different perspective? I have found more than twenty different meanings of the term *logos* in the ancient Greek literature.<sup>5</sup> Word, story, narrative, description, discussion, a maxim, agreement, a written piece, account, worth, value, internal thought, cause, argument, to be right, measure, dialogue, relation, analogy, principle, rationality, definition, are some of them. By identifying *logos* with God's loving will, Maximus, following and developing the Areopagite, understands it not simply as a cause or principle, but also as a personal relation, analogy, and dialogue at the same time: that is, as a radical loving intention of God to create another freedom outside him, that is, another free intention that could precisely

<sup>2</sup> *Ad Melaniam*, 301.

<sup>3</sup> See Sinkewitz, R.E., *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), xxxv.

<sup>4</sup> See my *Analogical Identities. The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*, (Turnhout: Brepols 2019), 308–310, 331–333.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Unseen Harmony...op.cit*, 248–251.

make this divine principle or cause real also as relation, analogy, and dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it more accurately, God creates not only some passive *logikoteta* (λογικότητα), consisting of non-human creatures, but also an active *λογικότητα*, which gives life and meaning, and, indeed, it activates, in this way, the passive *λογικότητα* of the non-human part of creation. The spiritual basis of science is thus present: the *tropoi* of the created, passive *λογικότης* of creation being images of the divine *logoi* behind it can be deciphered by man.

God, according to a long Patristic tradition that starts from Irenaeus and culminates in Gregory Palamas, seems to create precisely what was unthinkable and impossible for ancient Greek philosophy: an *intention* incredibly and absolutely independent of his own. That means that he does not create a senseless cosmos but an absolutely God-like image of his own freedom, as an equal partner for an eternal, adventurous discussion. God the Logos creates his Dia-logos, an analogical syn-ergy, i.e., the human world, full of intentions/logoi/energies, culminating and assumed manifoldly in human logos/intention/energy (or act, if you prefer). This anthropological cosmology and gnosiology is thus expressed as a constant dialogue/synergy of two equal freedoms. Creation is an unexpected and contingent intention of God's loving will, an intention to somehow risk his absoluteness out of love by surrendering it to the created intentionality of a God-like creature. That means that what is given by the divine logoi/acts energies to beings is not just a concrete and immutable essence but, fundamentally, the possibility of an abyssal free response; what is thus established is not just a hierarchy of beings but a free discussion/synergy concerning what each essence *could finally be*: *eschatology is thus introduced in ontology as a new Biblical dimension of it*. Created being can be fallen or restored, distorted or resurrected, annihilated or fulfilled, in dependence on this eschatological dialogue where God is or is not given the possibility to become *a God for his creation*.

Paradoxically, the uncreated logoi or energies are thus deeply connected but, at the same time, also independent from creatures; they are not meant to express God in his own essence, but only in his essential movement within creation. In this way, the logoi are, according

<sup>6</sup> For what follows, see my *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Dialogical Reciprocity*, (Boston: Holy Cross Sem. Press, 2010).

to the Confessor's expression (and we can find similar expressions in Palamas), 'the fire existing in the essences of creatures'. But curiously enough for any Platonizing mentality, these essences, although full of divine glory, are also independent from their burning, divine source, as they are *created* results of the latter's *uncreated* activities: for a typically Western mind nourished by Thomist doctrines that means, perhaps, a real danger of losing participation because of this self-positing freedom of creation. On the other hand, the typically Western theological mind will also probably search for seeds of semi-Pelagianism in any expression of this kind of freedom. But, for Maximus, as well as for the Areopagite, or for Gregory Palamas, we need precisely an *analogical synergy*, as a *dialogical reciprocity* between man and God in order to achieve participation (and, in parenthesis, the Christ-event is, precisely, the culmination of this synergetic/dialogical reciprocity—this dialogical reciprocity finally is expressed, in its utmost form, in the undivided and unconfused hypostatic union of the two natures, created and uncreated, with the whole of their natural wills and energies, in the one person of the incarnated Logos).

What is most important for this Conference is that, in this way, science has a place in eternity, as it forms a necessary part of *God's language* (as Francis Collins called it), and of the human response to it. As I said above, through science the *tropoi* of the created, passive λογικότης of creation, being images of the divine logoi behind it can be deciphered by man. Science assists, in this way, this process of dialogical reciprocity between man and God. In a way, we need Science in order to fully understand *what it means to be in the world and in God, at the same time*. And we of course need Theology in order to understand the scientific experience of the world as a divine dialogical suggestion, revealing the meaning and the purpose of this world in a future where freedom meets wisdom. This connection is not only possible, but also necessary in the universe of Denys the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, or Gregory Palamas, while it is almost impossible in the universe of Evagrius. In this perspective, theology can help science not simply to dominate nature, but, first of all, to *listen* to its hidden God-like wisdom, and thus enlarge the very range of human knowledge, making it holistic, existential, spiritual, as it reveals not only

the structures of beings but also the hidden divine intentions, vocations and suggestions concerning them and lying behind them.

Concerning the present pandemic, this way of approaching reality can perhaps help us think that beyond the dialectic between causality and randomness, or even beyond the terrifying dialectic between Providence and Godforsakeness, there possibly exists an emerging harmony between the silent and passive divine rationality (in the sense always of *logikoteta* ) of creation, and the active, *dialogically divinized* rationality of human beings. The latter can *dialogically/synergetically* activate the former, and thus it can transform its seemingly chaotic freedom, again, into divine wise words and realities. Here science becomes a way of theological devotion, helping us discern the spiritual meaning of the *language of God*, as this is articulated in and through creatures...

And, perhaps most of all, this theological understanding of science can help us solve the thorniest problem of our post-secular Greek-Western world, which I call *closed history*, along with the *velvet totalitarianism* that derives from it.<sup>7</sup> I call ‘closed history’ modernity’s fundamental understanding of the philosophy of history, stemming from the failure of Western philosophy to solve the problem of Natural Law, initially between Grotius and Hobbes, on the one hand, and the way Hegel understood Thomas Aquinas, on the other. It has to do with an understanding of history as self-explained and self-justified, through the Thomist Created Grace, which finally becomes the Hegelian Logos/Spirit, incarnating itself in nature and history, and acquiring self-consciousness in and through the human mind. History, in this way, contains the fullness of being, and the only logoi and energies found in it are decisively created, needing no uncreated intention behind them. Moreover, Western Enlightenment and Post- Enlightenment thought never managed to solve the thorny problem concerning the priority between objective and subjective aspects of nature, and, subsequently, the problem of whether nature can dictate to humanity a general and commonly accepted natural law, or the content of the latter is decided, in a dominant way, by each human subject. Unfortunately, this is a concept of history (and, consequently, a concept of State) that can

<sup>7</sup> See my *The Open History and its Enemies: The Rise of the Velvet Totalitarianism* (Athens: Armos, 2020), in Greek.



generate forms of totalitarianism, with ‘velvet totalitarianism’, which has already, in a way, started, at their final consummation. This ‘velvet totalitarianism’ is perhaps the most desirable form of totalitarianism, deriving from the happiest possible surrender of individual desire to its almost unconditional fulfilment.

The possible explanation of events such as the pandemic, or the present war, or the threat of starvation and nuclear contamination, or even the possible partial catastrophe of the planet through the inadequate conceptual tools of such a totalitarian mentality of unconditional self-fulfillment leads societies to a deeper and deeper submission to a desperate intra-worldly self-reference, which objectifies and instrumentalizes human beings, forever closed in their pan-phobic strictly biological condition. Unless we re-instate a forgotten spiritual hermeneutics as that described above, all these calamities cannot teach us ways out from this collective desperate and ineffective self-closedness; on the contrary, they can even be weaponized against *open history*, which sees God, through his creative act, and the nature-created-by-him, as the ultimate source of meaning, Providence and life of the world—since people tend to take the above misfortunes as simple natural inadequacies, just needing some necessary psycho-biological enhancement. But, again, who gives this enhancement justification and purpose?

At the same time, all this enhancement, when it is theologically and philosophically blind, can, at the same time, abolish our God-like *open nature* that expresses the image of God upon us, as an *analogical identity*,<sup>8</sup> which can transfer, through our free synergy, divine consubstantiality in this turbulent world...

<sup>8</sup> See my *Analogical Identities...op.cit.*, 264–270.





## REVIEW ESSAY

*Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ,*

BY ALEXIS TORRANCE,

Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020.

According to the author of this ambitious book, today Orthodox anthropology has given up with Christology. As he claims, ‘several tendencies in modern Orthodox theology have risked unmooring their claims about anthropology from this primary Christological imperative, thereby leaving open the possibility of theological shipwreck’ (p. 1). On the other hand, the Orthodox theology of deification has also become totally misleading, since it is usually ‘tightly combined, with little discussion, with concepts of continual growth and development for all eternity’ (p. 2). Something like this would mean, for the author, that theosis is ‘inherently unattainable as such’, and it should perhaps ‘be re-named one of perpetually deferred deification’ (*ibid*).

Although he starts by defending Florovsky’s neo-patristic synthesis, Torrance complains against authors such as Lossky and Zizioulas, who, however, would place themselves in the wider context of this sort of synthesis, as lacking a Christological ‘entry point’ in their theology (p. 8)—and it is unfortunately true that even Florovsky himself was somehow excessive in his criticism of Lossky’s *Mystical Theology*, on this point. However, the fact that a systematic theologian starts his discussion of the Christian doctrine from Trinitarian theology, does not necessarily mean that he tends to undermine Christology—otherwise St John Damascene himself would be the first to be blamed for not having an immediate Christological entry point, since he starts his treatment of Christology only in the third part of his classic work on the *Orthodox Faith*. It is thus difficult for the reader to realize why and where precisely this lack of Christological centripetal impetus appears in a so dramatic way, in modern Orthodox theology.

In order to start the discussion, Torrance feels obliged to deal with modern Orthodox personalism first. Again, his assessment of the

relevant debate within Orthodox theology, over at least the last two Orthodox theological generations, seems to be surprisingly poor in insights: the author finally truly believes that the thorny problem of the relation between person and nature simply ‘evaporates’, as he characteristically asserts, ‘when the terms ‘nature’ and ‘person’ are understood in the sense of the Pauline ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’” (p. 30); however, both ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’, according, at least, to the Greek Patristic tradition, belong both to human nature, not to person/hypostasis—St John Damascene’s book is, again, a good source. Moreover, in this way, the author seems also to be unable to realize that the nature-person debate was, at depth, precisely a Christological and not simply an anthropological debate.

Thus, he suggests that we leave aside such pointless and futile discussions and start our investigation of what deification in Christ is, scrutinizing the writings of Maximus the Confessor, Theodore the Studite, Symeon the New Theologian, and Gregory Palamas. I will mainly focus on his interpretation of the Maximian understanding of deification, since in my view it represents a serious misunderstanding of Maximus’ thought.

Torrance’s initial target is St Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of *epektasis* and the subsequent *epektatic eschatology* as he calls it. By charging John McGuckin and Kallistos Ware (along with C. Yannaras and Jean Daniélou) for introducing it as a permanent characteristic of the modern understanding of Patristic theology, the author uses Paul Griffith’s dialectic distinction between *novissima* (novelty-free last things) and *epektasies*, as almost normative: in this case ‘if future novelty without end, then no *novissimum*; if a *novissimum* then no future novelty without end’ (p. 45).

Griffith’s dialectic juxtaposition is clumsy and superficial and it can easily be doubted, as we are going to see: the existence of *novissima* does not imply any automatic and ‘instantaneous’ assimilation of them; in a similar way, St Sophrony’s question to Florovsky concerning the ‘immediate’ fulness of deification of Christ’s humanity, along with Florovsky’s positive response (as they are used by the author in order to strengthen his position that *epektasis* serves precisely to deny the desired identity between the divinized person and God (p.47)), are both incomplete and misleading, if they are not treated in the light of St Maximus the Confessor’s thought.

Thus, for Torrance, the epektatic eschatological model, as derived mainly from Gregory of Nyssa's thought is inadequate and misleading: now he struggles to show that Maximus the Confessor says precisely the opposite—however, Maximus seems to be much deeper than the author can suspect, since he has given to Nyssa's thought a bright new theological boost, which must be carefully examined.

Torrance's struggle is somehow sterile since he tries to prove that Maximus did not say what he said, and thus he tends to misread his texts, or read them selectively. First, he has a serious problem with the reality of motion in the end times, since he connects motion with change, and change always means imperfection for him. Thus, based upon a text from *Ad Thalassium* 22, he assumes that for Maximus there exists a sharp and absolute juxtaposition between the 'age of activity' (our present age) and the 'age of passivity' (the future age); in the latter age no motion or 'change' takes place, even absolutely and constantly positive (p. 59). However, the meaning given by Maximus to these terms is totally different, and it does not prevent him from asserting, on the contrary, that 'οὐ λήγομεν θεουργούμενοι. Ὑπὲρ φύσιν γὰρ τότε τὸ πάθος ἐστί, καὶ μηδένα λόγον ἔχον ὀριστικὸν τῆς ἐπ' ἄπειρον τῶν τοῦτο πασχόντων θεουργίας' (We never stop being deified [...] Because then this passion [of deification] is above nature, and it has no sense of limit concerning the deification of those who thus suffer it by being deified infinitely). In this way, we practice virtues in this life, but in the next life we are in a certain passivity (πάσχομεν) only 'ἐπειδὴ τοῦ ὑπὲρ φύσιν ἢ φύσιν καταληπτικὴν οὐ κέκτηται δύναμιν' (only because nature does not have a power of comprehension of what lies beyond nature) (PG90, 320ff). These crystal-clear texts assert, first, that motion remains a constant ontological characteristic of the logical creature forever—the positive quality of motion is, for Maximus, one of his foremost anti-Origenistic conceptual weapons. Second, that deification *has necessarily to do with a deified motion* ('around God' as we are going to see later on), which *never stops in eternity*. Third, that this deification is a non-stopping and never-ending event (as it is even more explicitly asserted in 320B, where Maximus clearly inserts an eternal and sanctified time in the event of theosis: '[...] πάσχων τῷ γενέσθαι τῇ χάριτι Θεός, ὅτι τοῦ αἰεὶ τοῦτο γένεσθαι πέρας οὐ λήψεται'—(man's) passion of becoming God through grace, because this [that is, deification] will never stop

taking place in eternity). Fourth, that when we speak of deification we use the term ‘passivity’ only in the sense that we do not acquire ‘comprehension’ of the *hyper physin* through our limited natural powers, but we are given this ‘comprehension’ from above, through grace—and this, again, does not mean that we stop moving, precisely because all this ‘comprehension’ needs synergy, dialogue, assimilation. So, does anyone since Aristotle have ever met any concept of motion without change? Unless we get totally rid of space and time in the final Kingdom of God, in Origen’s fashion, we cannot but admit a positive and deified change, in a sanctified space and time, as the *very core* of our motion-in-God—and this is precisely what Maximus, following the whole of the Greek Patristic tradition, did. It remains of course to examine what sort of change this is.

Another mistake committed by the author is his miscomprehension of the concept of human ἀτρεψία (immutability), in the Confessor, which leads him to a serious misunderstanding of the function of human will. So, he thinks that Maximus finally rejects the presence of human will/γνώμη, initially in Christ, because this sort of will ‘represents a mutability and malleability of the will which is liable to moral vacillation and hesitation’ (p.61, n. 69). However, Maximus says precisely the opposite, as I strove to show in my *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*.<sup>1</sup> The Confessor insisted, against the Monothelites, that, on the contrary, Christ’s human will, as the sinful inclination is not present in Christ, is not in natural opposition, but in a certain convergence with his divine will. That means that Christ’s ‘human and blameless passions’ do not mean ‘moral vacillation and hesitation’, needing the abolition of their gnostic expression. Christ does not have a human personal/hypostatic/ gnostic will only because his Person/Hypostasis is that of the Logos: so, the willing one is the Logos (which means one natural will of the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit) *as man*, that is through his two natural wills (since, moreover, in the Trinity, we do not have separate gnostic wills). But Torrance applies this quasi-monothelite concept of will also to the humans. Thus, he claims that ‘this implies that the deified human will of the saints is similarly incapable of “delib-

<sup>1</sup> (Turnhout: Brepols), 2019, p. 325ff.

eration” or “choosing” and thus is no longer “gnomic”, the will having by grace attained a state of ‘immoveable rest’ in likeness to Christ’ (*ibid*). However, without an active gnostic will, being absolutely capable of synergy and dialogue, in this life or the next, humans are not saved but simply flooded by divinity; as I strove to show elsewhere, even when Maximus speaks of the ‘ἐκχώρησιν τοῦ ἀντεξουσίου’ (concession of the autexousion) to God by the saints, he strongly emphasizes that this is done through a total symphony/agreement of the two wills, Divine and human, and not through the abolition of the latter. This is the Maximian ‘unchanging *hexis* of virtue’ (which the author understands as the ‘unchanging *state* of virtue’, p. 62 – which is something different), which takes place as a *dialogical reciprocity*, in constant freedom. Torrance understands this as a passive ‘reaching of Sabbath’, where no motion is admitted, again. But for Maximus this is also an active state. Thus, in his *Theological and Economical Chapters* (I, 40, PG90BC) he asserts that Sabbath is a state where ‘each being by receiving analogically the divine energy, orientates its own energy around God’—one can hardly find room for Torrance’s passivity in the Confessor. Maximus’ ‘cessation of all movement’ refers only to our reaching our most desirable divine goal, but this does not seem to entail any interruption of the movement itself.

And, of course, the stumbling block for our author’s method is the Maximian concept of ‘ever-moving rest’. Thus, he tries to convince his readers that, in a way, since the Confessor refers to this concept only a few times in his work, this reference is a result of a sort of ... *lapsus calami* on his part, without any real sense for our understanding of his work. First of all, it is a pity that the term ‘ever-moving rest’ (ἀεικίνητος στάσις) is always mentioned alone, that is, without the term that Maximus considers as its synonym, which term explains the meaning of this concept even better: it is the term ‘στάσιμος ταυτοκίνησις’, which can perhaps be rendered in English as ‘fixed motion-in-sameness’, or ‘stable motion in what is same with itself’ – and here Maximus means of course God. So, according to his words, our nature will finally ‘come to be in God [...], and have an ever-moving rest, and a fixed motion-in-sameness, as it is eternally centered on that which is the same and one and only’ (PG90,760A). And when he wants to further clarify himself concerning this ‘ever-moving rest’ he describes it as ‘fixed motion-in-same-

ness, that is the unquenchable appetite of the divine things' (*Ad Thal.* PG90, 781BC). He further explains it as 'ever-moving rest around the desired (my emphasis), as the perpetual and inseparable enjoyment of the desired' (ibid 608D). So, by using the term *στάσιμος παντοκίνησις* Maximus clearly puts the emphasis upon motion: it is a motion fixed around the one and only desired object, which is God. Rest comprising motion, or motion comprising fixing upon the one and same desired are thus synonyms, according to Maximus, and this totally contradicts Torrance's view that is an immovable rest that interests Maximus most of all—the latter does not even exist, according to Maximus.

Because what Torrance seems to forget is that, for Maximus, all these descriptions of the end-times express nothing different than his deep and decisive conviction that the absolute mystery of all of the Divine Economia, along with the hidden mystery of the age to come, is precisely the mystery of divine love and its human active and conscious reception, the *dialogical reciprocity* between God and man, as I have called it in the past.<sup>2</sup> It is because of the simultaneously uncreated and created ineffable mystery of this eternal mutual love that motion does not mean imperfection anymore, but affective and eternal exploration of God's infinite beauty—and thus we have a sort of, I would say, *change within sameness*. And it is precisely this *dialogical reciprocity*, explicitly deriving from Maximus' doctrine of the logoi of beings, explained in the light of its Eucharistic meaning, which forms Maximus' main 'correction' of Gregory of Nyssa's *epektasis*. Maximus takes a concept that still perhaps smacks—at least for some—of Platonic contemplation (although it is also Biblically inspired) and makes it, as dialogical ever-moving rest/fixed motion-in-the-same, absolutely Biblical, an ontological and eschatological concept expressing the eternal active and loving dialogical reciprocity between God and man. And this is a true reciprocity of dialogical inter-penetration, where the one becomes the other, because both parts keep their nature, will, energy, and love intact. This is Chalcedon, according to Maximus...

Last but not least: Torrance surprises us further by inserting a sort of ontological gap ('a tension and discontinuity', as he writes, p. 65) between our life and our nature as they are now, and life and nature

<sup>2</sup> See my *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Dialogical Reciprocity*, (Boston: Holy Cross Seminary Press, 2010).



as they will be in God's Kingdom, and attributes this gap to Maximus. Thus, he asserts that 'this however might be worth emphasizing, given that lying behind many popular expressions of epektatic eschatology is a strong sense of the continuity not only of human nature as such throughout the "process", but of the person's mode of existence as well: what begins as a fervent "stretching out" of desire towards God in this life simply continues unabated in the next and without end [...]. An eschatological model of epektasis rises minimizing or trivializing the distinction between what is proper to this age and what is proper to the age to come, and in so doing also risks blurring the lines between what Byzantine theology would label as being "of the world", and what is of God'.

This is then what I call an *ecstatic or transcendental eschatology*. Torrance is not the only representative of this sort of eschatology—he is rather the pupil of those who first formed it, that is, the Orthodox personalists with their obsession against nature, which is for them a burden of necessity, pure and absolute negativity that some of them simply want to get rid of. It is, however, utterly surprising that this is attributed to Maximus, who dedicated numerous texts to the opposite, that is, to an effort to convince us that there exists a deep ontological and existential continuity between our nature, will, desire as they are now, and our nature, etc, in the life to come. The Confessor is precisely the thinker who, more than anyone else showed off the absolute positivity of the Biblical concept of nature and its divine source, along with its existential meaning, precisely because of the divine uncreated logoi that lie behind it. I will give one of those texts only, which is more than enough to demolish such dangerously clumsy understandings of Maximus:

'Those who keep their gnome [personal choice and deliberation] by any means in agreement with nature, and they make it receptive to the energy of the logoi of nature, regarding the logos of ever well-being, they shall participate completely in goodness, according to divine life, which shines over humans or angels because of the sensitivity of their gnome to divine will. But those who kept their gnome in complete disagreement with nature and have damaged the logoi of nature through their gnome's activity regarding the logos of ever-being, shall loose all goodness because of the antipathy of their gnome to divine will, due to

the obvious kinship of their gnome with eternal ill-being' (*Ad Thal.* 61, PG90, 645AB).

It is, I think, plainly evident that an absolute continuity of nature, personhood, deliberation and desire exists between this life and the next, according to St Maximus. Any other interpretation would make our fathoming of his thought blindly Platonic. Nature is our existential way to God's Kingdom through the agreement of our personal will/desire with the uncreated logoi of nature that give it existence: every word of the above text seems, unfortunately, to contradict Torrance's interpretations. So, there exists indeed a big difference between this life and the Kingdom of God, that is, the Biblical relation between the seed and the tree, but, anthropologically speaking, this process is not another nature, but it mainly concerns the absolute and unshakable fixity of our motion around God, or the decisive loss of it; however, there also exists a deep continuity between these two lives, concerning precisely nature and mode of existence.

It is perhaps noteworthy to investigate the possible consequences of such a *transcendental eschatology*. First, spiritual life down here, or, better, our life in Christ, loses its ontological character, since, instead of a (synergetic and dialogical) participation in God's uncreating energies, in Christ and in the Spirit, starting here and continuing, as fixed motion around the one and same, in eternity, it becomes a desperate ethics for this life only—by losing its continuity with the end times, through the life in Christ and the Sacraments, moreover, we totally lose sight of the Kingdom, according to both Maximus and Symeon the New Theologian. Second, both anthropology and theology of history become almost impossible, since whatever we say here about them is, due to the ontological gap, according to Torrance, totally invalid in the Kingdom of God (this would be a perfect Origenistic account of both of them). And third, we completely lose dialogue with science, psychology (and neuro-psychology), and philosophy, since such a dialogue has no real meaning for us, as beings have nothing to reveal that has meaning for eternity: as I have claimed in the past, all this *neo-conservatism* finally concludes, usually, with a wrong and sterile interpretation of Hesychasm, cutting itself off from its human reality.

Despite his inadequate interpretation of Maximus, Torrance is a promising young scholar, and his book, concerning specifically the

chapters on Theodore Studite, Symeon and Palamas, has many important things to say; his main concern, regarding the need of a modern retrieval of Christology is also invaluable for all of us. Maximus is a very difficult author and many good theological minds, starting from von Balthasar himself, failed to reach fully the depth of his thought; thus, in a way, we all participate in an ongoing discussion in order to decipher it, for the common good of Christian theology today.

*Nikolaos Loudovikos*  
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