

# 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.