

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

SMILEN MARKOV

University of Veliko Tarnovo & Regent's Park College, Oxford

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.¹ 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

¹ 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'.² 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,

² *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.³ 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.⁴ 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.⁵ 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*⁶ Krastev states that for

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

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

what he calls the ‘nativist political views’,⁷ 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.⁸

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-

⁷ These views are popular in Bulgarian society.

⁸ 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.⁹

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

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ This participation is immanent to the existence of the single human hypostasis.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Meletius, *De natura hominis*, 145, 9 (TLG 0730,001).

¹³ 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*).¹⁴ 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*),¹⁵ the intelligible knowledge of the soul remains hidden for us (*φεύγει τὴν γνῶσιν ἡμῶν τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς ἢ κατάληψις*).¹⁶ 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*)¹⁷ 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

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

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

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

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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,¹⁹ 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?

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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

²⁰ 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 Ερεῦνης 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.

²¹ 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'.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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'.²⁵ 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

²² 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].

²³ 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].

²⁴ Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* X, 3–6 (TLG 2817.001).

²⁵ Agapetus, *Capitula admonitoria* XIII, 1–3 (TLG 2817.001).

be constantly guaranteed on the communal level by establishing distributive justice.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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

²⁶ 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.

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

²⁸ 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.