

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.¹ The press release was instantly denounced on social media by lay conservatives and conservative members of the lower clergy² 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.³

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

¹ ‘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/>.

² 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.

³ ‘Patriarhul Daniel revine cu precizări despre regula împărțirii’, *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-griji-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’.⁴

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.

⁴ ‘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.⁵

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',⁶ 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

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

⁶ *Ibid.*

to stop the pandemic;⁷ 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;⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 2020.¹¹

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

⁷ 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>.

⁸ 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.

⁹ '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>.

¹⁰ '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/>.

¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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’.¹⁴

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

¹² ‘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>.

¹³ 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/>.

¹⁴ ‘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’.¹⁵

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

¹⁵ ‘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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁶ '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.¹⁷

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

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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

²⁰ '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’.²¹

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

²¹ 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-
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-
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’.²²

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.²³ 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’,²⁴ 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-

²² ‘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/>.

²³ ‘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>.

²⁴ ‘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.²⁵

²⁵ 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.²⁶ Although up until this point, with the exception of

²⁶ '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,²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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>.

²⁷ '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>.

²⁸ 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.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>.

²⁹ '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.³⁰

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>.

³⁰ 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,³¹ 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’.³² 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

³¹ ‘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>.

³² 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’.³³

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,³⁴ 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;³⁵ 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

³³ ‘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>.

³⁴ 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>.

³⁵ 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’³⁶ 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

³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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;³⁸ but because they did not believe Covid was real or because

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

³⁸ 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, ‘IPS 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.³⁹ 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’,⁴⁰ 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

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ 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 media⁴¹—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.⁴²

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

⁴¹ 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).

⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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:

⁴³ 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).

⁴⁴ 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.