



*Routledge Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe
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ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Edited by
Tornike Metreveli



Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This book probes into the dynamics between Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 pandemic, unravelling a profound transformation at institutional and grassroot levels. Employing a multidisciplinary approach and drawing upon varied data sources, including surveys, digital ethnography, and process tracing, it presents unprecedented insights into church-state relations, religious practices, and theological traditions during this crisis. The chapters in this book analyse divergent responses across countries, underscore religious-political interplay, and expose tensions between formal and informal power networks. Through case studies, the book highlights the innovative adaptability within the faith, demonstrated by new religious practices and the active role of local priests in responding to the pandemic. It critically examines how the actions of religious and political figures influenced public health outcomes. Offering a fresh perspective, the book suggests that the pandemic may have permanently influenced the relationship between Orthodox Christianity, public health, and society.

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3 **Conspiracies, Anxieties, and Ritual Arrhythmia**

Exploring Orthodox Discourses and Practices in Greece and Cyprus during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Vasilios N. Makrides and Eleni Sotiriou

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes the coronavirus disease that first appeared in 2019 (COVID-19), to be a global pandemic. Certainly, pandemics (e.g., plague/‘Black Death’, smallpox) are not a novel phenomenon, having occurred in the past with various political, religious, and social repercussions. Looking at pandemics through a historical lens is useful,¹ for it reveals that Orthodox churches, with some exceptions, were not necessarily against any kind of protective measures (including vaccination), but on the contrary supported such measures officially through encyclicals or by assisting state policies. Although there is a traditional and dominant Christian discourse about diseases as allowed by God for disciplinary or punitive reasons, the Orthodox church hierarchy and the faithful did not necessarily turn against medicine and its use in combatting diseases and pandemics at large. After all, several well-known saints in the Orthodox church calendar were (or are reported to have been) medical practitioners (e.g., Luke the Evangelist, Cosmas and Damianos), a fact further demonstrating that the church did not oppose the medical profession as such. More importantly, there is also evidence that the church was even ready to temporarily ‘deviate’ from its traditional ritual practice in order to protect its flock in periods of pandemics. The above data are important in examining Orthodox Christianity in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, since many Orthodox Christians, mainly at the grassroots level, maintained a different stance on the matter by questioning medical authorities, showing hesitancy, or even refusing hygienic measures, medical treatment, vaccination, or hospitalisation, and exhibiting what some might call ‘irrational behaviour’ by solely and exclusively trusting God and supernatural powers in order to overcome related infections or the pandemic as a whole.

Our intention in this chapter is to examine the impact and the diverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic within the realm of ‘Greek Orthodoxy’ at various levels by focusing especially on the Orthodox churches of Greece and Cyprus (with some occasional references to the policies of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople). What we attempt to highlight are common patterns of Orthodox responses and reactions towards the recent pandemic. Although the size and the

respective socio-political contexts of the two countries are not identical, and the role of the Orthodox church of Cyprus is more significant and visible in politics, society, and culture than that of the Orthodox church of Greece, there are constant contacts between these churches and the respective Orthodox cultures in general, not least because of the common language, history, and interests.²

Our procedure in tackling this issue is as follows: we take into consideration the main problems and contested issues chronologically, as they were unfolding in relation to one another during the long pandemic. In fact, the repercussions of the pandemic were polymorphous. Whereas a much-debated issue in 2020 concerned the obligatory use of facemasks as a means of protecting oneself and others from transmitting the virus, one of the main discourses in 2021 revolved around the necessity and the legitimacy of obligatory vaccination and the ethical and other issues connected to it.

First, we focus on the attitudes, responses, and reactions of the involved churches on the basis of their respective official discourses related to the various facets and phases of the pandemic. Given the dependence of both churches on the respective states, we often observed that, by and large, both of them came to terms with government measures, albeit at times expressing their dissatisfaction with them. In any event, the appearance of individual disobedient bishops and clerics, who preferred a rather frontal collision with both church and state, was not uncommon. The phenomenon of bishops, clerics, and monks expressing ambiguous and hesitant views on the pandemic or mildly disagreeing with official church stances was also not out of the ordinary. We shall also reflect on various changes effected by the pandemic (e.g., the question of reforming rituals) as well as on the potential post-pandemic changes, which may endure and become part of Orthodox tradition and practice in the future.

Second, our research also covers the area of 'lived religion' by examining the religious practices of active believers and their responses to the transformations and innovations in their religious habits and practices due to the pandemic and towards official church policies. Our observations here are based on interviews conducted via Zoom during the summer of 2021 and during two months of fieldwork carried out between September and November 2021 in three Greek cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, and Larissa. Our interlocutors were four men and six women from these three cities, whom we met both virtually and in person. Their ages ranged from 39 to 85, and they were all of middle-class background. In order to protect their identity, we use pseudonyms and avoid pointing out the exact location and names of their parish churches. Using Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' and in particular his concept of 'arrhythmia',³ we examine the impact of the pandemic on materialities and the emergence of new forms of ritual behaviour. We argue that 'pandemic temporality'⁴ is characterised by what we term 'ritual arrhythmia' that resulted not only in disruption, tension, scepticism, and conflict, but also in ritual transformation and innovation, and the blurring of boundaries between official and unofficial, clergy and laity, secular and sacred, public and private, as well as the physical and the virtual. By combining, therefore, these two different strands of research, namely an analysis of Orthodox discourses and

events juxtaposed with ethnographic data on religious practices, we attempt to provide a more holistic picture of what ‘pandemic Orthodoxy’ looks like in our specific contexts.

Conspiracy Theories and Their Orthodox Versions

A recurrent issue that permeated almost all the debates surrounding the pandemic from the very beginning was its constant contextualisation within a broader conspiracy canvas, to which an ‘Orthodox twist’ was always given. This pertained to both Greece⁵ and Cyprus,⁶ including their Orthodox milieus, respectively. Generally speaking, conspiracy theories exist far beyond the religious domain and comprise any conceivable elements from all possible areas, including both the extreme right and left political spectrums, as well as anarchist and anti-systemic milieus. In our context, conspiracy mentality certainly became a sweeping, global phenomenon, immensely facilitated by the modern electronic media and the constant construction and dissemination of fake or fabricated news. As was to be expected, all this fuelled heated reactions and polarisations of all kinds. Thus, it is not accidental that the WHO used the term ‘infodemic’ to describe this unprecedented cataclysm of misinformation. Yet, it is not amiss to argue that Orthodox cultures in general have a particular penchant towards religiously coloured conspiracy scenarios. These precede by far the recent pandemic, as they have abundantly flourished in past centuries as well—for instance, apocalyptic scenarios and prophetic discourses about the Antichrist and the coming end of the world. This is mainly due to the ‘enemy’ and ‘fortress syndrome’ that has historically developed among Orthodox Christians following tensions with Western Christianity and the Western world as a whole. The pervasive and multifaceted Orthodox anti-Westernism, which lingers on until today, clearly attests to this. In recent years, there has also been a significant upsurge of interest among Greek and Cypriot Orthodox circles in prophecies, oracles, and legends, of all kinds related to the future of Orthodoxy and Hellenism as well as their lurking enemies, as these prophetic discourses usually serve conservative socio-ethical values and nationalistic aspirations.⁷ These phenomena are mostly prominent among those in Orthodox rigorist/fundamentalist circles, who have become more vocal in the last decades due to growing secularisation and globalisation. Yet, they are also able to influence the official church hierarchy to a growing extent.

Given this background, it occasions no surprise that Greece very quickly became a prime location of conspiracy scenarios. In a survey of 16 European countries (plus Israel) examining the role of social media in the dissemination of conspiracy theories, Greece was found to belong to the top group—together with ex-communist East European countries.⁸ Similar findings were reported for Cyprus.⁹ With regard to Orthodoxy specifically, the whole pandemic in its individual aspects was often portrayed, though not coherently, as part of an internationalist plan aimed at creating a global government and a global religion, connected to the restriction of national sovereignty, personal freedom, and Orthodox identity. WHO was also implicated in this plan. Various foreign intellectuals, such as the Israeli historian

and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, who spoke about the future radical changes for humankind through the advancement of digital technology and biotechnology, were adduced as further proofs of this forthcoming ‘new world order’. Such conspiracies also included a fake dialogue between Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management Nikos Chardalias about a ‘secret plan’, financed by the well-known businessman George Soros, concerning microchips to be injected into all Greeks through vaccination, which would mean, among other things, the end of Orthodoxy. In such conspiracy scenarios, anybody and anything could be potentially criminalised: the Rockefeller Foundation, WHO, 5G technology in telecommunications, and the global electronic media. This also concerned Sotiris Tsiodras, professor of medicine and infectious diseases at the University of Athens Medical School and an internationally respected scholar. He was the chief scientific advisor to the Greek government on COVID-19, and became widely known in the country due to his televised briefings on the progress of the pandemic. Although a religious person who attended church regularly, he was often accused of being a surreptitious tool of the above internationalist order aimed at capturing Orthodoxy ‘from the inside’.

In Cyprus, a bishop who made headlines with such conspiracy scenarios was Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, whose influence could also be observed among many believers in Greece as well. For him, the pandemic was part of such a ‘new world order’ aimed at controlling especially Orthodox Christians. He claimed that the virus had been artificially created decades earlier and was scheduled to be released in 2020. The vaccines, attributed to businessman and software developer Bill Gates, were also portrayed as part of this plan aimed at eliminating large numbers of the world population, curtailing human freedom, and creating a new elite-ruled, submissive human race. These and similar views were also echoed by metropolitans in Greece, such as Nektarios of Corfu.

This enhanced conspiracy constellation becomes even clearer if we ponder the fact that other unrelated events during the same period have been unduly suspected and criminalised by numerous Greek citizens. This concerns the population and housing census of 2021, officially conducted by the Greek Statistical Service every ten years. In the midst of the pandemic, though, and especially the growing opposition to vaccination, the whole issue became very complicated, as many individuals and families did not allow census workers to enter their homes and collect information. The latter could be used—according to conspiracy scenarios—against them in the future (e.g., to identify the unvaccinated persons). Similar fears, but to a lesser degree, also appeared in Cyprus, where a population and housing census was conducted in 2021 too. Here we are not simply referring to Orthodox believers reacting against the census, but to a broad group of citizens with low degrees of trust in the state and in both national (e.g., the judicial system, the police) and international institutions, especially with regard to the collection of private data and their potential harmful use. Orthodox reactions were also motivated by the alleged ‘double standards’ applied by the state and the perceived unjust treatment of the Orthodox, despite being the overwhelming majority in both countries. This is because Gay Pride parades and gatherings of foreign immigrants were not strictly prohibited

by state authorities, whereas more severe and allegedly unjustified measures were mainly imposed on Orthodox believers.

The Outbreak of the Pandemic as Fake News

An early reaction to the extremely sudden and unforeseen pandemic, which caught everybody off guard, in the first months after its eruption (March–April 2020) in Greece was its full negation. Due to the lack of secure epidemiological data and reliable information on the nature of the pandemic and its consequences, there was general perplexity among the public as to the new virus and the viability of protection measures. In this context, the whole issue was presented by many as ‘fake news’ with ulterior hidden aims, such as disorienting the people by making them susceptible to central control, manipulation, and submissiveness. The early strict measures taken by the government regarding Orthodox worship affected especially Holy Week and Easter services, a development that was deemed by numerous believers as a camouflaged attempt to alter the Orthodox character of the country. In addition, the fact that the official church finally complied with the state measures was often interpreted as a betrayal of its prophetic mission in society and its authentic identity.

A first reaction, therefore, was to underestimate the danger of the new virus and even to completely negate its existence. The parish priest of St Nicholas (Pefkakia, Exarcheia) in central Athens, for example, reacted against the closed doors of church buildings as having been caused by a ‘mere flu’, which was overdramatised by the media for spurious reasons and with ulterior motives. He thus criticised sharply both state and church for attempting such scandalous measures, especially during Holy Week and Easter, and prohibiting believers from taking part in the related services. This would result, he predicted, in God’s punishment. In his view, watching policemen driving believers away from closed church buildings instead of chasing and arresting criminals was simply outrageous. The fundamentalist priest-monk Ignatios from the Monastery of Agia Paraskevi (Eordaia) also considered the whole pandemic to be a plot for the global establishment of the dictatorship of the Antichrist through WHO. He also claimed that the whole discourse about the new virus was a lie and that many doctors were in fact bribed to publicly attribute numerous deaths to the coronavirus and create general anxiety and turmoil. Interestingly enough, the same evaluation of the new virus as being a mere flu was also supported by non-religious actors, such as the Greek ex-deputy Rachel Makri, who was known both for her unconventional positions and Orthodox convictions. Similar positions were also expressed in Cyprus, such as by Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou. However, as the pandemic soon entered a more critical phase, other issues came to prominence and attracted greater attention.

Lockdown and Restriction Measures as Anti-Orthodox Plots

In Greece, significant opposition was directed against the state decision about mandatory confinement and restriction rules nationwide (e.g., shutdowns, lockdowns,

exit strategies, isolation, social distancing, limited social meetings). The government decided to implement a very strict lockdown from the very beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, which has been regarded as instrumental in effectively curbing it. This also gave rise internationally to a discourse about a ‘Greek success’, presenting the related strategy as a model to be imitated.¹⁰

As was to be expected, the lockdown was also applied to church buildings and services, a measure that created turmoil within the church hierarchy and among numerous believers. This is because such imposed restrictions were not assumed to impinge solely upon religious freedom and basic human rights—they were also regarded as exhibiting a clear anti-Orthodox spirit, given that church services experienced dramatic changes during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter.¹¹ These services took place behind closed doors solely with the presence of a few clergy and personnel without any members of the public. Instead, it was suggested that people could celebrate Easter at home, either by following the services digitally or by performing rituals symbolically (e.g., holding candles during the Easter service on the balconies and in the yards of their homes). It is characteristic that the Holy Synod showed reluctance at the beginning in complying with state measures and sought ambiguous exemptions from these rules—for example, keeping church buildings accessible for a few hours during Holy Week and relying upon the individual discretion of believers to go or to stay away from church services. This happened not only because of internal disagreements within the church hierarchy, but also because of the fear of reactions on the part of believers. In fact, it was the prime minister, in consultation with the minister of education and religious affairs, who publicly announced that the strict lockdown measures would also apply to the Orthodox church (and to all other religions in the country), thus putting an end to the matter. This decision also applied to monasteries, including Holy Mount Athos.

As a result, the church was criticised several times by secular actors for failing to respond quickly and drastically to the multiple dangers posed by the pandemic and for putting public health in jeopardy at the beginning. Afterwards, however, the church appeared to be fully on board with the government’s measures, thanked all those who helped alleviate the crisis, and promised to assist the state in curbing the pandemic. It also urged everyone to strictly observe the instructions of the health authorities and experts and not to be led astray by those who suggested disobedience. The latter, it argued, was not justified even in the name of the Christian faith. Despite restrictions, the multiple charitable works of the church could be continued. Praying at home under lockdown measures was regarded not only as an understandable temporary restriction, but also as an ancient tradition which had been practised under exceptional circumstances since early Christian times. Finally, the church defended itself against those who, due to ignorance, misinformation, or misunderstanding, resorted to the popular and easy way of slander and insults against the church and its stance. More specifically, Archbishop Hieronymos II emphasised that the church had temporarily suspended or adapted various rituals and practices according the principle of *oikonomia* several times in the past (e.g., in 1854 on the islands of Syros and Tinos due to an epidemic). If deemed necessary, it could also

do the same during the coronavirus pandemic, even with very popular rituals, such as the transfer of the 'Holy Light' from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to various dioceses in Greece for the Easter service. Generally, the measures to celebrate 'behind closed doors' were also supported by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in its dioceses around the globe, which was generally in favour of all protective measures against the pandemic.¹² The spiritual handling of the pandemic and the revival of the ancient concept of 'domestic church' with maturity, mindfulness, faith, and prayer were also promoted by the church discourse.

Such sudden and radical changes in Orthodox ritual life (including funerals, which were allowed to include solely a narrow circle of the deceased person's relatives) triggered local protests. The curfew and the concomitant strict measures were regarded as unnecessary, given that many considered the new virus to be a mere flu. True, there had been similar lockdowns in the past, and there was actually a law in 1828 by the highly esteemed first governor of modern Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias (1776–1831), stopping all religious activities and prohibiting the ringing of church bells during a pandemic.¹³ Even so, the consequences of the pandemic on ritual life, which was seriously disrupted to the extent of causing a 'ritual arrhythmia' among believers, were hard to bear. This also included popular pilgrimage places that are regularly visited by thousands of pilgrims.¹⁴ The possibility for a short-stay individual prayer and the lighting of a candle in a church building (one person per ten square meters) under sanitary protection were permitted outside normal services, but it was hardly sufficient to appease the majority of believers. Thus, there were protests outside closed church buildings guarded by the police, while many believers either attempted to enter them by force or barricaded themselves inside the buildings. Priests who disobeyed and opened the churches to perform 'secret liturgies' faced arrest by the police and disciplinary measures by the church hierarchy. There was a lot of improvisation and ingenuity in bypassing laws and restrictions. Such actions were perceived as a cause of pride and as establishing a link with the early Christians celebrating services secretly in catacombs due to persecutions in the Roman Empire.

It is worth mentioning that several bishops also expressed their disagreement in various ways with the church hierarchy's readiness to succumb to state pressure about a very strict lockdown, and especially with the closure of church buildings. Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki expressed himself more diplomatically and suggested the selective closure of some church buildings, but not the strict application of rules everywhere and with no exceptions. Even the spokesman of the Holy Synod, the learned Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and Hagios Vlasios, disagreed with the state's decision. He also argued that the church has a 2,000-year-old tradition and cannot be treated by the state in a manner worse than a supermarket or a hairdresser's salon. In a letter sent to the prime minister, the retired Metropolitan Ambrosios of Kalavryta and Aigialeia, who was well known because of his militant and uncompromising positions, stressed that he had no right to close the church buildings and that he thereby became an enemy of the church and Christ, drawing upon him the wrath of God. The church as a holy place and the abode of God could not transmit the virus, he argued. On the

contrary, it was therapy for the soul and body of every Christian, if one considered the therapeutic miracles that were taking place constantly in church buildings and pilgrimage places. Beyond this, Metropolitan Nektarios of Corfu suggested that believers ignore what he considered absurd and insensitive state restrictions and come to church to partake in Holy Communion. People, he argued, were allowed under lockdown to take their dogs out for a walk or to go out for physical exercise, but not to go to church to pray or for receiving Holy Communion. In addition, Metropolitan Makarios of Sidirokastron sent a letter to deputy ministers Stelios Petsas and Nikos Chardalias, as well as to professor Tsiordas, urging them to ask for forgiveness for having closed church buildings, given that viable alternatives surely existed. He emphasised that nobody, not even the highest authority, had the right to deny Holy Communion to believers, who fasted all through Lent in order to receive it. In his diocese, he wrote, these measures were amounting to a war against the Orthodox faith and tradition.

Reactions came also from outside the church domain. The previously mentioned ex-deputy Makri rejected the lockdown of church buildings as being part of an anti-Christian plan to destroy Orthodoxy. The left politician Alekos Alavanos suggested that at least the popular *Epitaphios* procession on Good Friday should not have been prohibited, due to its long tradition. A small procession could have been allowed, while believers could chant and pray from their homes or balconies, a step that would strengthen their morale during the lockdown. Similar reactions, although not necessarily out of Orthodox convictions, came from all possible sides, ranging from the far-right party 'Golden Dawn' to prominent personalities in various domains in the country. There were also initiatives of various Orthodox associations collecting signatures in order to open church buildings on Easter and criticising the selective state policy concerning lockdowns. Some believers even appealed to the Council of State in order to 'freeze' the state measures banning religious services as unconstitutional, but this highest judicial body rejected these appeals for reasons of public health protection. The anti-lockdown arguments varied: some stressed the fact that church buildings were not even closed during the centuries-long Ottoman rule, while others pointed to the situation in other predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, in which such strict lockdowns were not implemented.

Nevertheless, the majority of Greek bishops maintained a more pragmatic agenda and were ready to provide reasonable explanations for these state measures. Metropolitan Ignatios of Volos and Dimitrias found it far-fetched to argue that the measures, which he fully endorsed, amounted to a persecution of Christianity and the church. In fact, he expected reasonable stances from both the church and the state, in order to avoid 'forms of crypto-Christianity' or an exploitation of the whole situation by various people causing tensions and problems. Given that the pandemic situation ameliorated in the summer of 2020, church buildings became again accessible, albeit under loose hygienic conditions. Nevertheless, from late autumn 2020, the overall pandemic situation deteriorated again, due to repeated neglect of protective measures in church buildings. Even Archbishop Hieronymos II was infected and spent several days in intensive care in November 2020. Yet, the

new restrictions imposed were not as strict as at the beginning. This situation lasted throughout the winter of 2020-2021 until the spring of 2022, with various disruptions and restructurings of ritual life (e.g., the legislative prohibition of religious processions), which affected the major feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. The latter was even celebrated at 9 p.m. (instead of the traditional midnight), so that churchgoers might return home earlier and avoid large gatherings and overcrowding. However, given the importance of every detail in the Orthodox ritual tradition, such measures were deemed by many believers to be serious deviations from the sacred tradition, a disturbance that fuelled once more all kinds of reactions against imposed measures.

In this period, the state diplomatically sought the dialogue with more 'progressive' church hierarchs and tried to isolate the hardliners, yet the latter were quite vocal in their reactions and had wider influence, given that even many moderate bishops expressed dissatisfaction with the state policies. Thus, opposition to state measures grew stronger, not only because these measures were regarded as ineffective in battling and potentially ending the pandemic, but also because they were implicated in various conspiracy scenarios. The discourse was now about an imposed 'new form of dictatorship' aimed at curtailing human will and freedom. More importantly, these measures were controversially discussed at the higher echelons of the church, so that the church leadership started expressing openly its dissatisfaction with them as being disproportionately harsh and unnecessary. Although in the end the church in its majority opted for a compromise, there were bishops who took a more radical stance, performing church services without protections or defying state and church decisions (e.g., Metropolitan Serapheim of Kythera and Antikythera, Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania, and Metropolitan Nektarios of Corfu). Such cases of disobedience led to police investigations and hearings before the Holy Synod, although ultimately without repercussions for the disobedient bishops.

The situation in the church of Cyprus evolved similarly in many respects, given that its Holy Synod supported the state-imposed strict lockdown in March 2020, which resulted in the disruption of churchgoing. The church legitimised this decision by reference to the urgent need to combat the spread of the virus through drastic measures, albeit appealing simultaneously to divine power in curbing the pandemic. As painful as such a decision might have been for many believers, it was still deemed an absolutely necessary one. Most importantly, according to the church, it did not impinge at all upon the Orthodox faith and tradition. Attending church services digitally through modern electronic media was presented as a quite acceptable alternative under these circumstances. However, there were various reactions, the most prominent being that of the aforementioned Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, who often and openly defied the rules and held religious services with large attendance. Even if the police intervened to stop such assemblies, he assumed full responsibility and insisted on their legitimacy by arguing that divine law is above any human law. In his view, what mattered in this transient life was not simply following earthly concerns, but paying attention to things that would guarantee eternal life after death.

In another interesting case, 152 doctors and nursing personnel signed a petition to the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nikos Anastasiadis, asking him to reopen church buildings under specific protective conditions. It was argued that they were put in an unjust position as potential spreaders of the virus, when—epidemiologically speaking—the same applied (even to a greater degree) to all businesses supplying food, which did not face such harsh restriction measures. This initiative annoyed Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus, who took the side of the government and advised medical experts and practitioners to do their own jobs and not interfere in the affairs of the church. This was not the time, he argued, for populist reactions, and the church always attempted to serve the people of God responsibly. Protesters should have first contacted the Archbishop to hear his intentions before sending such a petition directly to the president.¹⁵ This incident characteristically shows that, in many instances, lay Orthodox appeared to be more annoyed by the state decisions, whereas the church leadership was prone to come to an agreement with the state and support its restrictive policies.

Digitalisation/Virtualisation as an Alienating Mode of Existence

Another issue that was discussed in this broader context concerned the tremendous consequences of anti-pandemic measures in society at large, especially due to radical changes in the traditional patterns of life and work. These included, for example, the disruption of the work-school-private life balance, home offices, overexposure to digital media, as well as the lack of physical contact and in-person communication. This extensively pervasive yet unavoidable digitalisation of the entire spectrum of human life during the pandemic, albeit preceding it in various forms, enhanced anxieties about unknown and unprecedented negative consequences in the future. Truth be told, many Orthodox actors had already been worried for decades about the growing significance of new electronic media, even if they often benefitted from using them. As a result, they were highly disturbed by this novel, abrupt, and more massive onslaught of digitalisation. These fears were also extended to the potential of a virtual church life and its multiple repercussions for ‘embodied religion’, which is a key feature of Orthodox Christianity. The potential digital transformation of Orthodox worship was thus a cause for concern. Another one was the replacement of the God-created human person by an impersonal electronic human identity, which could lead to the degradation of the living church community and transform physical participation into a mere numerical electronic collective without true interpersonal relations. The fact that the church had earlier accepted such digital innovations to a considerable extent was interpreted as a sign of its growing self-secularisation, which was much more intensified during the pandemic.¹⁶

Taking into consideration that the start of the pandemic affected Holy Week services in general and the Easter service in particular, things became very quickly quite complicated. This is because the Easter tradition in Orthodoxy feeds on the sense of community and interpersonal relations, which had always taken place in the past in a physical form. The existence of a related virtual community could

not, of course, match the experiential advantages and the emotional significance of celebrating Easter in person in a church building with all the ritual richness and festivities. It is well known from statistical surveys that even atheists or religiously indifferent people go to church on Easter, a fact demonstrating the broader social and cultural significance of this ritual for the public. This ritual is also connected to previous life experiences, especially during childhood, of many involved persons, and conveys a strong sense of belonging. The same pertains to rituals that have an equally strong and communal appeal, such as baptisms and weddings. All these were significantly reduced during the pandemic, causing an overall disruption of habitual ritual life, a 'ritual arrhythmia', to which we shall return below.

From the church's perspective, the enforced digitalisation of ecclesiastical life, especially through the online transmission of religious services, was regarded as a temporary measure in times of need, which did not really affect true ecclesial identity. It could be allowed according to the principle of ecclesiastical *oikonomia*, yet should not result in a permanent situation, because that would signify the secularisation of the church. It was acknowledged that these changes affected the living church community, which authentically and ideally exists and operates mainly through physical presence and interpersonal exchange. But it was deemed an unavoidable measure in the harsh times of lockdown that could offer useful and practical alternatives. After all, the use of new electronic media in general was not perceived as an evil development, but as an inescapable technological step, from which the church could eventually draw considerable profit for its own purposes. In fact, online worship was already an aspect of church media, as liturgies and other services were broadcast live on various channels. Other forms of Orthodox communal life (sermons, study groups, consultations, curricula, etc.) were also available virtually in the past as well.

Concerning the digitalisation of Orthodox worship and its relation to the church sacraments, it is well known that these issues are sometimes theologically controversial, and this concerns especially the Eucharist. Yet, for the church, there was no need to discuss more seriously such questions, simply because there was no thought of organising a digital Holy Communion in restriction times. This particular ritual had to remain completely traditional, hence there was no conflict here. While the theological discussion of all aspects of digitalisation of church life may not have been developed thoroughly so far, there is a sense that most aspects can be treated in a satisfactory and constructive way. However, a lot depends on the historical experiences of the involved churches. In Orthodox ex-communist countries in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, where church buildings had been closed or destroyed and religious services had been seriously interrupted under communism, things were somehow different. The enforced new closure of church buildings due to the pandemic created various negative associations with the past and consequently more critical stances towards the attempted digitalisation of church services. However, this was not the case with Greece and Cyprus, which had not experienced communism as such in their history.

In our context, most reactions related mainly to the overall context of the pandemic and had largely to do with the forcible character of the imposed protection

measures, the curtailment of personal freedom of choice, and the massive reduction of public life. These measures were often implicated in conspiracy scenarios about forthcoming radical changes in the wake of the ongoing globalisation process, especially by Orthodox fundamentalists, as already highlighted. Reactions to globalisation are found among many groups and cultures worldwide, far beyond the domain of religion. New digital possibilities, from electronic collection of personal data to the control of digital identities, have created numerous insecurities, uncertainties, and fears about a massive restriction of personal freedom and a pending ‘global dictatorship’. The coronavirus pandemic triggered pre-existing fears and doomsday scenarios and culminated in them. This is no doubt an issue that will seriously concern Orthodox cultures in years to come. This is because continuous new developments in natural and human sciences lead to a more sophisticated and reflective understanding of how human identities are articulated and invite a discussion of what it means to be a human person. All this presents severe challenges to Orthodox anthropology, which is conventionally based on the relational, communitarian, and transcendent character of human personhood.

Protection Measures and Their Ambiguous Acceptance

The hygienic and other protection measures mandated by the Greek and the Cypriot states, when church buildings started reopening in May 2020 after the first lockdown under restrictions, also caused varied Orthodox reactions. These measures included the obligatory use of facemasks; antiseptics for hand disinfection; controlled waiting of worshippers at the entrance; safety distances and maximum occupancy limits in every church building; good natural ventilation of church buildings; refraining for shaking hands; frequent and meticulous cleaning of icons, other religious objects, and surfaces; the distribution of the consecrated bread with rubber gloves; and many other related prescriptions. Anyone showing symptoms of a cold was admonished to stay at home. In general, the church officially supported these new rules, and there is evidence that many believers seemed to accept them too.¹⁷ However, the sensitive issue of Holy Communion and the traditional way of its distribution, to which we shall return later on, were not touched upon by the state in the framework of these obligatory protective measures, a development that generally pleased the church leadership.

In fact, sanitary and other protection measures were applied throughout the pandemic period, although perhaps not as strictly as at the beginning. Especially in late 2020 and in 2021, when there was growing dissatisfaction among many believers regarding state restrictions on church services, the application of such measures was lax and negligent. Parish priests professing dissident views allowed parishioners to bypass them or did not apply them at all. Certainly, this was not the most debated issue during the pandemic, yet opposition to such measures usually emerged within the following discourse: the church building is a holy place as the abode of God, the heavenly powers, and the saints; hence, no physical harm

can ever happen there to a true believer. In principle, kissing icons, representations of the cross, and the priest's hand could never hurt a believer or transmit the virus. Following this logic of transcendence, under the protection of God, sanitary measures in a church building were often deemed trivial and perhaps unnecessary during the pandemic.

Such ideas gave rise to ambiguous evaluations of 'human protection' measures as distinct from 'divine protection' due to the grace of God, which was thought to be by far superior. The aforementioned Metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, originally a physicist with noteworthy postgraduate degrees in science (from Harvard and MIT), emphasised the need to follow the prescribed hygienic measures, yet argued that they should not be overestimated in their efficacy, because there also exists the protection provided by God and the Virgin Mary, which should not be neglected. The new 'flu virus' was causing global turmoil and had to be treated pragmatically by scientific means. However, he asserted, aside from diseases, pandemics, viruses, and germs, there exists also the 'virus' of unbelief, atheism, and the rejection of God, which he characterised as the endemic problem of our era. In his view, the coronavirus pandemic was the consequence of the human morbid eudemonism and immanentism, and thus could become a trigger to rediscover the presence of God in human life; and God is actually the best medicine for every infection and disease.¹⁸

There were, however, other theological elaborations on the significance of ritual practice in Orthodoxy that supported its preeminent 'spiritual character'. External and visible demonstrations of faith and piety were not considered so important to God. Far more crucial was the inner and genuine faith of every believer, which does not depend on ostentatious acts of worship. One could thus fulfil his/her Christian duties of love towards neighbours by responsibly protecting oneself and others from the coronavirus, following the hygienic rules. This would be more significant than a pretentious ritual life. Even so, coronavirus protection measures did not remain uncontested. Hence, some fundamentalist Orthodox criticised the rather extensive application of such measures by Archbishop Elpidophoros of America (under the Patriarchate of Constantinople) with regard to the distribution of Holy Communion, a development that they deemed untraditional following the above logic of 'divine protection'.

Be that as it may, the pandemic crisis entered a phase of deterioration due to various deadlier mutations of the virus (especially the Delta variant) from early autumn 2020 until spring 2021. Given that protection measures had been largely neglected along the way, there was a rising number of infections in church buildings with dramatic results. Such a case took place in Thessaloniki in the context of the celebrations of the feast of its patron saint Demetrios (26 October 2020), which was massively attended without any protection measures. This consequently led to the massive spread of the virus among bishops, clerics, and monks, some of whom later died (e.g., Metropolitan Ioannis of Langadas). Aside from this, there was an (often implicit) ambiguous reception of protection measures by specific Orthodox circles, which became openly evident in 2021 through the growing and vehement opposition to (obligatory) vaccination.

Facemasks as a Curtailment of the Human Person

In connection to the above point, the obligatory use of masks covering parts of the human face created a lot of discussions and debates from many interrelated points of view. The whole issue became quite complicated due to the long duration of the pandemic, in which protective facemasks became an established, everyday practise and a reality with which everyone had to cope, either wearing them obligatorily or refusing. The issue was extensively discussed on a medical level in terms of the real protection provided by such masks, given that there were medical experts who considered masks (cloth, surgical, and even the N95) to be ultimately non-effective and thus unnecessary in protecting from the spread of the virus.

However, the whole issue had additional religious dimensions, which became of concern to the Orthodox people involved, not least within a conspiracy theory framework. The main pro-mask argument of the church referred to its potential for protecting oneself and the others from the virus. This action was thought to be based on Christian responsibility and the love of one's own neighbour. Yet, opinions did vary on this matter considerably. Facemasks and their obligatory imposition were generally interpreted by many Orthodox as a means to curtail the very characteristics of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. They were thought to hide and constrain human emotions, sentiments, individuality, and freedom. The latter elements are considered indispensable in the context of multi-sensory Orthodox worship. For example, the absolutely necessary visual interaction between icons and believers in a church building could be seriously disturbed and constrained through the intermediary medium of a facemask. Such masks were viewed as a non-natural, artificial disruption of the divine-human communion and communication, which is extremely central to Orthodox worship. There were many other interruptions of Orthodox ritual life due to facemasks, such as the impossibility of kissing icons and the hand of a priest.

This concerns a specific 'sensorial arrhythmia' that was widely felt during the pandemic. As we have already observed, many such practices were changed or adapted during the pandemic. Instead of kissing icons, believers were admonished, for example, to simply bow their head in front of an icon without touching it. However, the problem was particularly visible in the context of Holy Communion, which could not be received when wearing a facemask. This and other similar interruptions of the Orthodox sensorial experience during a church service were perceived by many believers as an abrupt and externally imposed alienation from their traditional ritual practise, with which they had been very well accustomed without problems. In addition, wearers of masks were perceived as not having a 'strong faith', thus compensating for their ineptitude to fully trust God during the pandemic through the use of facemasks. Wearing such masks especially in the holy place of a church building, which by definition stays under God's full protection, was regarded as documenting a false and distorted view of Christian faith.

Given all these objections, it was not unusual to observe a variety of reactions to mask-wearing by Orthodox clerics, monks, and lay people, pre-eminently within a church building, but at times elsewhere too. During the Divine Liturgy, there were incidents of priests interrupting the service to ask individual believers or the body

of the faithful to take off their facemasks. At times, people were instructed to do so before even entering the church building. There were cases of monasteries placing signs at their entrances prohibiting people wearing masks from entering the monastery premises. Those afraid of the virus had to stay at home or sit outside instead of entering the church building with a facemask. It was argued that there should be no fear in God's presence. Ironically, such views were openly expressed by Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania, who in early January 2022 died from coronavirus. Among the fundamentalist Orthodox, such reactions were even stronger, as the case of the aforementioned priest-monk Ignatios in Eordaia shows. He once ordered a 74-year-old woman to take off her mask, comparing facemasks to carnival festivities that have no place in a church building. In his view, the church is the body of Christ, and Christ wants the faces of his people to be clean and free of obstructions, so that they can look at him directly and without any constraints. This story reached the Facebook community, which was critical of the priest's actions.

However, there have been repercussions for disobedient priests going against the state and the church's orders. In February 2021, Metropolitan Paisios of Leros, Kalymnos, and Astypalaia put the priest of Saint Athanasios Church in Kalymnos on mandatory leave for two months because he allowed believers to enter the church without facemasks and made exhortations via the Internet defying the anti-pandemic measures. Even before that the mayor of Kalymnos had held the local diocese responsible for the rising number of infections because of the systematic disregard for protection measures. Another priest in Thessaloniki involved in similar practices was investigated in October 2021 by the police for the offence of incitement to disobedience. The situation in Cyprus was similar, not only with Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou, who denied all such measures from the very beginning, but also with some other hierarchs (e.g., Metropolitan Athanasios of Lemesos), who expressed ambiguous opinions on certain aspects, including facemasks and the appropriateness of their use.

Once more, we should keep in mind that the entire facemask opposition movement was much broader and included protesters of all sorts, who made their demands clear through public demonstrations and other actions, putting forth various arguments—not only that masks curtailed human freedom and were an imposed muzzle, but also that they were unhealthy due to the destruction of the human immune system. All this took place within the usual conspiracy framework about the 'new world order' aimed at eliminating the majority of people and creating a new and genetically perfect human race of a few elect persons. Interestingly enough, such positions were often reproduced by idiosyncratic politicians in the Greek Parliament, such as by Kyriakos Velopoulos, president of a small right-wing populist party. As the moderate Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis once remarked:

The mask-denial movement is a complex social phenomenon with strong anti-systemic characteristics ... It is not a Greek particularity, and in no way should we underestimate or ignore it. In two months, however, we shall find it in front of us when it transforms itself into an anti-vax movement. We need national unity in order to deal with it.¹⁹

In fact, his above utterance was more than prophetic.

The Sensitive Issue of Holy Communion

The sacrament of Orthodox Holy Communion was a central issue from the beginning of the pandemic because of the way the Holy Gifts (the bread and wine of the Eucharist changed through the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ) are traditionally distributed to the believers, using a common chalice and a shared spoon. As expected, this practice had caused suspicions or fears in the past about the potential for transmission of viruses (such as AIDS) due to the unavoidable mixing of human saliva. Yet, in practical terms, this was never an issue, and no measures were ever planned or taken by the state, as the medical world did not provide any evidence that there was an epidemiological problem involved. After all, it was considered an internal and non-negotiable matter for the church, since no higher mortality cases were ever reported for priests, who partake more often than anybody else in Holy Communion and always consume its remains after the end of the Divine Liturgy.

What is more, Holy Communion was a ritual that was always considered proof of the ‘supernatural’ and ‘miraculous’ nature of Orthodox worship, given that this centuries-old practice had never led to the eruption of a pandemic or the spread of contagious diseases in the past. Seen in this way, it was a ‘miracle’ that was performed every time a Divine Liturgy took place. After all, it was a matter of faith, and whoever had true faith in God should never be afraid of any lurking danger. It is a common Christian belief that God can simply change the natural cause and order of things in this earthly world. Nobody has appeared to have been infected by any contagious disease through this ritual practice that has been taking place for centuries regularly and without interruption. Hence, according to the church, Holy Communion is a ‘miracle’ that cannot be subjected to the logic of mundane science (medicine) and state policies. Aside from this, the entire sacrament of the Eucharist has been a contentious one historically, not least from an inward theological point of view regarding its interpretation and significance for church life in general. Differences between Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Protestants have lasted for centuries, especially because of the Protestant-flavoured modernisation of the Eucharist on the basis of its symbolic, abstract understanding and the concomitant aversion towards embodied, material religion.

As was to be expected, this issue took prominence during the pandemic. When some medical experts and practitioners expressed doubts about public health security due to this ritual, the church was keen to categorically discard all questioning and doubts. In the period of the early strict lockdown, when churches remained closed, the sacrament was unavoidably suspended and was available only to a small number of believers. But afterwards, it was regularly performed in the traditional way without any deviation. There was never a complete disruption of this practice, and its suspension was never part of the sanitary/protective measures imposed by the state. Cases of government officials and politicians partaking (at times ostentatiously) in Holy Communion during the pandemic attests to the fact that this sacrament was not regarded as a major problem.

Having accepted the list of protective, anti-pandemic state measures, the Greek church made officially clear from the outset that the way this ritual was traditionally performed was not going to change. Holy Communion was portrayed as no threat at all for the spread of diseases, but rather as a source of eternal life. For the church, the whole matter was *a priori* non-negotiable. The church believed that, in the Eucharist, with the intervention of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become truly the body and blood of Christ. Some clergymen pointed additionally to the alcohol content in the wine as an antimicrobial. Whether this is sufficient to kill the COVID-19 virus is of course disputed.

The same stance was kept initially by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but in June 2020 it came to finally adopt a more lenient and adaptable policy, especially because of its numerous dioceses spread around the globe, which had to obey local state decisions. The Patriarchate made clear that the church respected medical science and urged all believers to conform to the health directives of WHO and the relevant recommendations and local legislation of respective states. It reiterated that it would always remain the guardian of the traditions handed down by the Holy Church Fathers. At the same time, it also clearly acknowledged that the manner of distributing Holy Communion could be adapted according to local state prescriptions due to the pandemic.²⁰ This gave leeway to follow the various policies and strategies in each different country.

For example, in Germany the Greek Orthodox Metropolis (under Constantinople) during the early lockdown had to completely suspend this ritual for believers due to the general federal prohibitions to stop the spread of the virus.²¹ Thus, only priests could partake in Holy Communion, and no alternative ways of distributing it were introduced. On the other hand, in New Hampshire (USA), the use of multiple (plastic) spoons and private vessels was prescribed by the authorities, thus prohibiting Holy Communion from a common cup and handle. Some Orthodox parish churches did not follow this rule, and this was connected to a rising number of infections in one parish church, which was subsequently closed through the intervention of the Public Attorney in September 2020. In another case, Metropolitan Alexandros of Nigeria kept the traditional ritual intact, but chose the method of pouring the Holy Gifts with a spoon directly into the mouths of the communicants without touching them. Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, instead, approved the use of separate disposable spoons for Holy Communion; yet out of the eight dioceses under his jurisdiction only one widely accepted this change. These examples demonstrate the great variety in approaches to this sensitive issue.

In Greece, although Holy Communion was left practically untouched, there were plenty of controversial discussions about its character and the potential dangers epidemiologically. Theologians and other scholars pointed to the historically documented variety in ways of partaking in Holy Communion. It was also pointed out that a well-known Orthodox canonist, Nikodimos Hagioreitis (1749–1809), had allowed provisional adaptations in its distribution during periods of pandemics.²² In exceptional times, the faithful were temporarily allowed to bring their own spoons in order to be protected against infection. Historically speaking, in the early church, Holy Communion was practised differently, in all probability with bare

hands, while the ‘spoon’ (the cochlea) was generally introduced from at least the eleventh or twelfth century onwards.²³ Hence, it was argued that the whole issue was not a canonical or dogmatic one, but simply a ritual custom, which could be of course changed or accordingly adapted in case of need.

Yet, things were not as straightforward as they appeared to be. Interestingly enough, some medical experts from the Athens University Medical School (the epidemiologists Eleni Giamarellou and Athina Linou) publicly claimed that the Holy Communion does not pose a public health threat, because it is a mystery and a miracle performed by God. Similar opinions were formulated by other medical experts, even with the support of medical arguments.²⁴ Such judgements were deemed to be at odds with the medical profession as such, a fact that caused outrage among their more secular colleagues. Thus, Greek geneticist Manolis Dermitzakis from the University of Geneva disagreed and asked for a state intervention to change the way Holy Communion was distributed to the faithful. The Federation of Hospital Doctors’ Associations of Greece, the Greek National Public Health Agency, and the Panhellenic Medical Association also expressed their strong concern and disagreement with the ‘unscientific’ public statements of some medical experts regarding the impossibility of COVID-19 transmission through Holy Communion. In turn, this caused heightened reactions from the church and especially from the aforementioned militant Metropolitan Ambrosios of Kalavryta and Aigialeia, who brought theological and historical arguments in favour of the traditional practice.

Be that as it may, the Greek Professor of Public Health at the London School of Economics and advisor to the Greek government on the pandemic, Elias Mosialos, took the following position: being secular himself and critical towards religion, he initially suggested changing the manner of distributing Holy Communion until a safe and effective vaccine could be found. But later on, he argued that there were no reliable epidemiological data about the potential transmission of diseases through Holy Communion. In fact, there has been only one serious study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which did not provide any data that this specific ritual runs the risk of transmitting infectious diseases.²⁵ Mosialos argued that, if it is scientifically proven that communion from a common cup is contagious, then there could be a modification of this entire ritual. There are some further medical studies pointing to the theoretical yet still unproven and undocumented risk of contamination of healthy people through a common communion cup.²⁶ Germ exposure might be possible using such a cup, but no outbreaks of diseases were reported linked to this practice.

The blurring of the boundaries between religion and science was quite often evident in such debates; the sheer ambiguity surrounding this ritual kept dividing and even polarising the two opposite camps. Critics of the ritual in Greece included comedians (Radio Arvyla), public intellectuals (Stelios Ramfos), well-known writers (Petros Tatsopoulos), and the left ex-minister and doctor Pavlos Polakis. The left opposition party ‘Syriza’ also raised the topic, probably out of political motives, asking the prime minister about Holy Communion as a potential danger for public health; but the whole issue was not discussed any longer on this political level. On the other hand, prominent media persons (e.g., actors, singers) and many

others openly disclosed their Orthodox convictions and their constant partaking in Holy Communion without any fear or second thoughts. In any event, as previously noted, the state did not dare to intervene on this sensitive issue and kept its distance, so that up until now there has been no interruption, prohibition, or change in this important Orthodox ritual, which has been continuously performed unchanged.

What is worth mentioning is that the Greek church did not consider various alternative changes or adaptations of the ritual, even if temporarily, although introducing single-use/disposable spoons was allowed under certain circumstances in some other Orthodox churches on a local basis without generalising the novelty or rendering it permanent. This attachment to tradition was often interpreted in 'national terms', that is, as an indication that Greek Orthodoxy, the oldest one historically, is the guarantor of Orthodox authenticity and genuineness and the historical bastion of Orthodox truth. However, some clerics and theologians criticised the emphasis put on the miraculous character of this sacrament, namely in the sense that one expects thereby a 'miracle' from God every time Holy Communion takes place. This is tantamount to putting God under constant temptation to perform miracles, which is not the real meaning of the sacrament. Hence, its 'modernisation' as a contactless process (e.g., without the spoon coming into contact with the mouth of the communicant) has also been suggested, putting emphasis on the 'essential' and not the 'contingent' elements (e.g., the way of transmission) of the sacrament.

Similar issues were raised, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Cypriot Orthodox context, given that during the first strict lockdown an abstinence from religious services and Holy Communion was suggested by the Holy Synod to the faithful. This measure was justified by reference to the seriousness of the epidemiological crisis and as a way of contributing to the common public good. Thus, this harsh measure was not considered to impinge upon the conscience of the faithful. However, as stated earlier, the petition of 152 doctors and nursing personnel to the Cypriot President to allow the reopening of church buildings under protective measures touched explicitly upon the issue of Holy Communion. There it was argued that, for Orthodox Christians, it is not just about a religious ritualistic duty, but about the very foundation of their faith, as well as their inalienable right and a 'gift of eternal life'. It was also claimed that no viruses or germs could be transmitted by or through it, and that no scientific article, study, or research proved the opposite. The fact that there exist no such data, particularly for priests, who have been partaking in Holy Communion for centuries, was taken as proof that the latter is not and cannot be a source of infections. Infectious diseases of various sizes and conditions have always existed and will always exist in the world. However, at no time in the 2,000-year history of Orthodoxy in Cyprus has there ever been a question of interrupting the possibility for the faithful to come to church and receive Holy Communion. Various sanitary and protective measures were suggested as a way of guaranteeing the safety of the faithful while in the church building, but Holy Communion had still to be distributed in the traditional Orthodox manner. The whole argumentation here reveals once more the blurring of the boundaries between religious faith and science, a constant characteristic of the whole debate during the pandemic.

(Compulsory) Vaccination as a Threat and New Totalitarianism

The last controversial point that monopolised most reactions throughout 2021 and partly until the spring of 2022 involved vaccination, a development that since the start of its application in December 2020 has decisively shaped the later course of the pandemic and the stances towards it. Needless to say, the multifaceted anti-vaccine movement has a global dimension, and its purveyors are far beyond the religious domain, including members of the medical profession. The same pertains to Greece and Cyprus, where anti-vaccine protestors came from quite diverse areas.

Yet, a significant part of them were Orthodox actors of varied provenance, who were quite loud in supporting or disseminating their views through electronic media and regularly organised protests. In Greece, there has been a huge amount of misinformation and rumours about the various vaccines in use, especially those using the mRNA technique. For example, this sort of vaccination was connected to the philosophico-scientific movement of 'transhumanism' that supports the enhancement of human capacities and the improvement of the human condition through the use of modern technologies (e.g., a new and genetically perfect human race). Generally, transhumanism has been discussed critically from an Orthodox point of view,²⁷ but in our context reactions against it followed the line of conspiracy theories that predicted hard times for the Orthodox in the 'new world order'. There was a large array of anti-vaccine opinions; for example, that only Holy Communion is better protection from the virus than vaccination; that medicine against the virus had already been discovered, but was purposely kept secret so that vaccination would prevail among the largest majority of humans; or anti-scientific arguments claiming that humans should trust solely in God and not modern science. Finally, many Orthodox explained that they were not against vaccination as such, but that they simply reacted against the imposition of obligatory vaccination by the state, which was regarded as a new form of totalitarianism restricting human freedom. They also claimed that the new vaccines did not fulfil all the necessary criteria to be allowed for use and that there were other ways to effectively protect oneself from the virus.

All of the above created quite a few tensions within the church and led to serious debates, given that a considerable number of clerics, including bishops, monks, and lay people, were not persuaded by the necessity of vaccination. However, the official church hierarchy issued an encyclical²⁸ that was distributed widely throughout the country and which tried to offer extensive persuasive answers to all queries and doubts about vaccines. Even so, it does not seem to have had a huge impact upon the faithful. Metropolitan Hieronymos of Larissa and Tyrnavos even ordered (October 2021) a mobile vaccination centre to be present on Sundays outside the city's cathedral as a way of persuading believers to be vaccinated—this despite various reactions from a group of anti-vaccine supporters. In his opinion, the church does not deny technology, but uses it pertinently for the sake of people.²⁹ Similar initiatives were undertaken by other dioceses as a way to promote vaccination and neutralise the resistance and suspicions of many Orthodox.

There have also been various surveys to chart the entire field of anti-vaccine reactions—their initiators and their followers. These have revealed that the percentage of unvaccinated persons was particularly high in church milieus, monasteries, ecclesiastical academies, and university schools of theology, a fact showing that Orthodox persuasions and motivations did play a significant role in this domain. Considerable differences between East and West were also observed in this context, which are not unrelated to the influence of Orthodox Christianity in the East.³⁰ In spite of official church support for medical and state measures (especially vaccination) against the pandemic, various Orthodox milieus, both within the hierarchy and in local contexts, became a matrix of questions and reactions against these measures throughout 2021. In October 2021, this prompted Archbishop Hieronymos II, who had been vaccinated on 12 May 2021, to officially and publicly castigate those clerics of all ranks who openly or secretly disagreed with and opposed the decisions of the church hierarchy on the pandemic. He even asked them to leave the church and find another profession elsewhere or isolate themselves in monasteries.³¹ Most importantly, he was not only referring to Orthodox hardliners of all sorts, but also to members of the church hierarchy, who kept following their own individual dictates on the matter and were influencing churchgoers, believers, and other people in their respective dioceses—often in collaboration with a wide spectrum of non-religious protesters against vaccination and anti-pandemic measures.

The result of all these tensions and conflicts was dramatic in many instances. Numerous unvaccinated priests, both older and younger, caught the virus, were hospitalised (sometimes with members of their families), and finally died. Ironically, most of them had been quite vocal earlier, preaching against vaccines and medical protective measures while urging their flocks to trust only God and the Orthodox faith as the sole way to overcome the crisis—a recurrent phenomenon throughout the pandemic. There were also cases of infected clerics, who refused medical help and hospitalisation and died of coronavirus complications. A most prominent case was the previously mentioned Metropolitan Kosmas of Aitolia and Akarnania. He refused to be vaccinated and was brought to hospital involuntarily by others when his condition seriously deteriorated, yet to no avail. His unvaccinated sister died as well. Others, such as Metropolitan Seraphim of Kythera and Antikythera, repeatedly spread conspiracy theories about the vaccines as being a product of abortions. There were also cases when ‘spiritual fathers’ (from different Orthodox milieus, including Old Calendarists) advised their spiritual children to avoid vaccinating themselves, which sometimes led to tragic results with the loss of entire families. As stated above, monasteries have been key places for spreading the virus, and the same holds true for students in ecclesiastical schools—in both cases, with low rates of vaccination. In other instances, if an unvaccinated cleric caught the virus and was finally healed after hospitalisation, he attributed his rescue mostly to God while underestimating the role of scientific medicine. A prominent case was the abbot Ephraim of the Vatopedi Monastery (Holy Mount Athos), who was seriously ill with coronavirus, had additional underlying conditions, and was hospitalised for 51 days in an intensive care unit, followed by a longer rehabilitation period.

Despite all this, the majority of the Greek clergy were in favour of vaccination. The same positive attitude characterised the bishops of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In Greece, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Dodoni and Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Messinia even supported the obligatory vaccination for all Orthodox clerics, given that they were all being paid by the Greek state. There were vaccination centres even on Holy Mount Athos due to the initiatives of monks who came from the medical profession and undertook to enlighten other monks; they were also at the female convent at Ormylia (Chalkidiki), which operates its own health centre with nuns who come from the medical profession. Some bishops, such as Metropolitan Dionysios of Zakynthos, threatened the unvaccinated priests in their dioceses with canonical repercussions. In his view, spiritual fathers were not allowed to have a say in medical matters, let alone to cause social dramas and become moral instigators in the deaths of innocent and unsuspecting believers. Hence, 14 priests in the diocese of Metropolitan Dionysios, who refused to be vaccinated, were placed on mandatory leave, a decision that was rejected by anti-vaccine supporters, who spoke of a ‘satanic’ act on the part of the metropolitan.

The whole matter became even more complicated from the late fall of 2021 and during the winter of 2021–2022, as cases of infected people were once more on the rise. As effective vaccines from different biopharmaceutical companies became available, along with boosters, basic protection from the coronavirus was considered possible through vaccination. Albeit highly controversial, the Greek state decided to make vaccination obligatory for some categories of citizens and to put enhanced restrictions on the unvaccinated. In the end, two groups of people were formed: the ‘privileged’ vaccinated ones, who had access everywhere, and the ‘unprivileged’ unvaccinated, whose public life was significantly constrained, as they had to undergo constant tests to prove that they were not infected with coronavirus. Not least, this also had an impact on access to church buildings as public places. However, when the state decided in November 2021 to implement a prohibition against unvaccinated people entering a church building, the Holy Synod declared its inability to enforce this measure and transposed the responsibility back to the state, despite its basic endorsement of other protective measures.

In Cyprus, the previously mentioned Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou continued his opposition to the measures taken against the coronavirus by focusing on the issue of vaccination in his conspiracy framework. He repeatedly expressed his vociferous opposition to vaccination, which, in his opinion, would transform people into a genetically modified product of the ‘new world order’, despite the fact that the Holy Synod encouraged the faithful to receive it. However, being unvaccinated himself, he tested positive for coronavirus in August 2021 and showed mild symptoms. He simply received medical treatment in isolation, emphasising again that he did not intend to be vaccinated. He also issued a statement in support of a doctor arrested by the police in connection with a large anti-vaccination protest.

There have been rumours about other Cypriot bishops opposing vaccination, such as Athanasios of Lemesos, yet not so radically as Metropolitan Neophytos. However, it does seem that Athanasios was against obligatory vaccination. He also tested positive for coronavirus, but managed to overcome it with various

repercussions, although he left open the possibility he could be vaccinated in the future. In general, the phenomenon of priests being hospitalised or dying because of the virus was not unusual in Cyprus, as in Greece. Given that Metropolitan Neophytos was extremely vocal and popular, his reactionary influence went far beyond the Cypriot borders and reached Greece as well. Thus, it was no surprise that the church of Greece officially called on its Cypriot counterpart to ask the outspoken Neophytos to tone down his conspiracy-driven, anti-vaccine rhetoric and criticism in sermons and public statements, which were interfering with the affairs of another church and creating serious problems there.³² Neophytos became ‘quieter’ following a meeting held between President Nikos Anastasiadis and the Holy Synod of the Cypriot church in September 2021. This was probably because the Holy Synod agreed that bishops would not voice public dissent whenever they disagreed with a decision of the majority.

Even in early 2022, despite Archbishop Chrysostomos II’s tough stance on vaccination, almost half of Cyprus’s priests had yet to receive a vaccine. As a result, he decided to send 12 unvaccinated priests on mandatory leave, warning those and others of tougher potential measures (e.g., long suspension of duties and even defrocking) if they continued to defy church rules. The Archbishop mentioned that 27 out of 123 priests in his jurisdiction remained unvaccinated, whereas 15 were exempted for medical reasons. Despite vaccination remaining optional, the Archbishop issued strong guidelines for priests and theologians to get vaccinated. After all, he had backed the government’s campaign to vaccinate the population from the very start, being one of the first people to be vaccinated in December 2020.

Uncertainty, Scepticism, and Ritual Arrhythmia: Pandemic Implications for Lived Orthodoxy

The pandemic consequences reached their apex in Greece, as already indicated, in March 2020 during Great Lent, one of the most intensified periods of fasting and prayer in the Orthodox liturgical calendar, leading to Holy Week and to Easter Sunday. The government’s imposition of the first lockdown in mid-March (16 March–5 May 2020) saw the suspension of all church services for about two months. Churchgoers were deprived of the possibility of being present in the third and fourth services of Salutations—the well-attended hymns sung to the Virgin Mary during the five Fridays of Great Lent—as well as the important liturgies, rituals, and celebrations of Holy Week and Easter.

While most of our Greek interlocutors opposed this measure that was foisted on their parish churches, they could ‘see the logic’ behind it, as some of them often told us. According to George, a 47-year-old icon painter living in Athens:

The church is a sanitised space by the grace of God, yet I can understand that for non-believers, who unfortunately are the majority, it was perceived as the breeding ground of microbes and viruses. It would have been scandalous for them to see large gatherings, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and many did blame us, the churchgoers and the priests, for spreading the virus.

Indeed, the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in Greece, in February 2020, opened a window of opportunity for accusations against the Orthodox faith, the church leaders, and their followers on social media—particularly on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Coming from a variety of societal groups, there were manifestations of extreme forms of anticlericalism, atheistic views, ideologies, and political contentions, demanding a greater separation of church and state and the complete closure of the churches.³³ Many Greeks, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, were against Orthodox hardliners as well as people who were exhibiting extreme forms of piety and were not flexible enough to adapt their religious observances to the situation and prioritise health matters. Together with their ecclesiastical hierarchs, as many of our interlocutors revealed in our discussions, they were often labelled ‘murderers’, ‘criminals’, and ‘spreaders of death’. Such hostile language, coupled with the language of warfare used by the government and the mass media to describe the virus and the efforts to contain it, contributed to the dissemination of fear that coloured everyone’s decisions concerning their religious behaviour during the pandemic. More importantly here, it also resulted in an increased disunity of the general population, the faithful, and the church hierarchy, dividing them into ‘enemies’ vs ‘heroes’, ‘egotistical’ vs ‘caring’, ‘immoral’ vs ‘moral’, ‘responsible’ vs ‘irresponsible’, and ‘bad’ vs ‘good’ Christians.

It is in this context of dichotomising attitudes and comparisons that the government’s protective measures against COVID-19 and the official church’s responses were judged. In particular, some measures that were not directly connected with the containment of the virus were perceived as ‘unnecessary’ and ‘alarming’ by many of our interlocutors. Such measures enhanced their anxiety and scepticism and persuaded some of them that they were devised as part of a greater scheme of things that would ultimately bring about the persecution and elimination of the church and Greek Orthodoxy.

One such practice was the enforced silence of the church bells during the first lockdown, with the exception of Good Friday and the following Saturday midnight for the celebration of Easter. Despina, a 54-year-old bank clerk from Larissa and regular churchgoer, described intense feelings of anxiety and anger about both the silence experienced during lockdown and the ‘silencing’ of the church bells:

I felt very nervous by all the silence that surrounded us during the lockdown. It was like waiting for something to happen but without knowing what. I was used to hearing the bells of my parish church, as I live close by. They reminded me of major festivities, of sad occurrences, of the passing of the time when they rang for vespers or for the Sunday liturgy. When they stopped, I felt strange. As an Orthodox believer, I felt unheard. Like being on mute. But most of all, I felt angry because it was like they were silencing God. I remember when I was young in the Sunday school, they taught us that the church bells symbolised God’s mouth calling us to his home. This was not a protective measure against the virus. It was a totally unnecessary one. We all understood that we could not go to church, but at least the church bells ringing would have reminded us that we could watch the liturgy on our television or computer screens.

These criticisms voiced by our interlocutors reflect their need to reclaim the rhythm of ritual life, resisting the silence that might result in the complete annihilation of their Orthodox identity. The significance of that rhythm and the manner in which it permeated the religious lives of our interlocutors can perhaps only be fully acknowledged once it was disrupted, giving rise to what Lefebvre described as ‘arrhythmia’: rhythms that are discordant and pathological.³⁴ Lefebvre considers society to be made up of different clusters of routinised and repetitive behaviour patterns that can be analysed as ‘rhythms’, through which he highlights the interconnections between time and space and how these are dynamically produced categories in the life worlds of people. Drawing on Lefebvre’s ‘rhythmanalysis’ and applying the concept of rhythm to religious practices and rituals, which already have a rhythmic character, our research has revealed that, in the duration of pandemic temporality, Greek Orthodox religious practices and rituals were characterised by what we will term as ‘ritual arrhythmia’, namely a breakdown of the usual time-space structures of religious experience and its effects on the lives of Greek Orthodox believers. Pandemic temporality involved new timings, suspensions, and postponements, as well as prolonged or shortened durations that caused both temporal and spatial abnormalities and established a restructuring of an ever changing ‘normality’, both in church rituals and the everyday religious practices and experiences of the laity. Arrhythmia is symptomatic of a pathology that creates uncertainty and has unsettling and disturbing psychological and social consequences. We argue that, on the one hand, ritual arrhythmia during the pandemic produced a crisis of the collective Orthodox identity exemplified in fears, violent reactions, and discord within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and between the clergy, the laity, and the state. On the other hand, it also allowed for agency and strategies of adaptation and innovation in Orthodox rituals, beliefs, and practices. As we will see, the end result of ritual arrhythmia, which lasted for most of the pandemic, was not so much a coherent scheme of action, but rather a multitude of religious responses and practices, on the part of both the official church and the laity.

The ritual arrhythmia caused by the government’s health regulations was almost never welcomed by our interlocutors, but, as previously indicated, was treated as either ‘necessary’ and understandable or, as Despina pointed out for the silencing of the bells, as ‘unnecessary’ and devoid of logic. This is also the way that Maria, a 64-year-old retired teacher from Thessaloniki, described the earlier celebration of Easter liturgy in 2021, due to the government-imposed curfew:

Because of the curfew, we had to celebrate Christ’s Resurrection at nine o’clock in the evening instead of twelve o’clock. I remember thinking, is this a logical decision? Is the virus becoming more infectious at midnight than it is at 9 p.m.? This decision is based on a complete ignorance of Orthodox rituals. True Orthodox know that no two divine liturgies can be performed on the same day. The priest in our church did not go fully against the state’s decision, but he decided to split the Easter service in two. We attended the Holy Saturday Resurrection Service on Saturday evening and the Divine Liturgy on the morning of Easter Sunday, so we could all receive Holy Communion.

Other priests, however, who defied the state's decision and started the Easter service at 11 p.m. according to tradition, like Father Antonios, the priest of the Church of Saint Athanasios here in Thessaloniki, were put on mandatory leave from the local metropolitan, Anthimos.

Maria also revealed that, during the Holy Week of 2020, the priest of her parish church defied the government-imposed ban on congregational gatherings and liturgies by secretly allowing people to come in the church on Good Friday in order to venerate the *Epitaphios*: 'I got a call from a friend that the church doors would be unlocked for a few hours on Good Friday. I was so happy that I could go and kiss the *Epitaphios*. On my way there I felt like I was going to *kryfó scholió*'. *Kryfó scholió* is often featured in Greek national imagery as a 'secret, underground school' where Orthodox priests or monks taught the Greek language and Orthodox doctrine to pupils under Ottoman rule, contributing thus to the preservation of the Greek religious and ethnic identity. During the lockdown when priests defied the official law by secretly performing certain rituals or opening the church building for their parishioners, they assumed for most zealous churchgoers a quasi-ethnomartyr status. This feeling of preserving faith in secrecy was also voiced by two of our other interlocutors when visiting churches or monasteries that surreptitiously celebrated the important religious services not 'at the normal time', as they put it, but much earlier, before dawn, so that they would avoid the repercussions of being caught and having to face disciplinary measures and fines. They often referred to their experience as analogous not only to that of the Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule, but also as similar to that 'of the early Christians in catacombs'. The ritual arrhythmia of pandemic temporality, marked here by the asynchronous celebrations of liturgical services, contributed, therefore, to a sense of ritual continuity and religious belonging bringing about a synchronicity with imagined experiences of the past.

The above experiences, however, were not those of the majority of our interlocutors. Most of them opined against the closure of churches and the prohibitions on their religious practices. They argued that the church should be treated as a provider of 'essential services' and not be relegated to the sphere of non-essential services, like the hair salons that were allowed to open even before the churches. However, in spite of finding this measure against the virus 'sad', 'painful', and even 'unnecessary', they did not actively resist it. Instead, they described 'a different reality' of having to live-stream or watch liturgical services, especially those of Holy Week and Easter, on their computer or television screens. They all commented on the vast empty space of the church buildings—some noting different architectural features that they had never noticed before due to the crowds that filled them—which now were sadly reduced to the presence of maybe a religious leader, one or two priests, the cantors, the helper, and the media team. Some were lucky enough to live-stream the liturgical services of their own parish churches, which created a greater affective experience for them. During the first lockdown, four of our interlocutors remembered experiencing 'a religious awakening' as a result of the absence of their taken-for-granted in-person religious participation. It

was manifested in the need for more intense prayer, as well as in re-enacting some of the church rituals and creating in their home 'a domestic church' (κατ' οἶκον ἐκκλησία).

Niki, a 57-year-old Athenian shop owner, proudly showed us photographs of her dining table, which for the whole period that the churches remained closed was turned into a 'Holy Altar'. The table was covered with a white lace cloth, and Niki had transferred some of the icons from the family's icon stand to the table, placing at the centre of it the icon of Christ. The icons were adorned with garlands of white and red carnations. In front of them an oil lamp was burning, while to its left and right, there were two big candlesticks with lit church candles. On the table, there was also an incense burner and a book of prayers. Niki recounted how during Holy Week the whole family sat in front of the table and live-streamed the liturgical services. In her own words:

Just watching the liturgy on a computer screen, somehow, was not enough. We missed the smell of incense, the light of the candles, the touching and kissing of the icons, the whole atmosphere of the church. I thought that creating a Holy Altar and making a little sacred space for our family's gathering for worship, lighting the candles, burning some incense and kneeling in front of the icons will bring us in these hard times a little closer to God.

In the pandemic, 'the liveness' of the church, both as a space filled with sacred objects that produce specific embodied experiences of the divine and as a space for the congregation of the faithful, was ruptured. Live-streaming the liturgical services was not enough to transport 'the liveness' of the church into the private sphere. To compensate for this loss, Niki supplemented the disembodied and technologically mediated presence in the liturgical services with embodied haptic, visual, and olfactory practices in order to emulate the sensory experience of in-person worship. At the same time, Niki's inventive creation of an altar, the central and most sacred feature in the church located behind the iconostasis, in the sanctuary from which women are excluded, is significant. It points to the symbolic relocation of the church into the domestic sphere, to a reversal of the hierarchical positions existing in the church, and also manifests more private and informal religious experiences and practices, centred on individual and familial needs and concerns. The reinvigoration of the institution of the 'domestic church' was, as we have seen, encouraged by several church hierarchs, who transferred the responsibility for the enactment of certain religious rituals to individual believers and particularly to women, who have always been the virtuosi of 'domestic religion' and everyday Orthodox religious practices.

The sensuous character of Orthodoxy and the importance of Orthodoxy's materiality in shaping the religious experience of the laity³⁵ became also clearly visible in the creation in both Greece and Cyprus of homemade *Epitaphioi* for the commemoration of Christ's Passion and death on Good Friday of 2020. According to our interlocutors, in the absence of the usual parish churches' processions of *Epitaphioi* through town, small family processions of homemade *Epitaphioi* were

taking place on the private balconies or in people's yards. Photographs of such laboriously decorated *Epitaphioi* were displayed in mass media, exhibiting not only the piety of their owners, but also their inventiveness and individual talent. In particular, a family in Larissa created its own *Epitaphios* using a cardboard box and decorated it with 5,000 pearls.³⁶ Later on, they donated it to their parish church, expanding, as Papantoniou and Vionis rightly observed, its ritual life and 'sacralising' it even further,³⁷ thus making the distinction between the 'numinous' and the 'secular' less clear.³⁸ The physical absence from the church buildings caused the disruption of the ritual rhythm of the congregational 'body'. The resulting ritual arrhythmia facilitated the creation of new temporalities and spatialities by blurring the boundaries between secular and sacred, public and private, physical and virtual, as well as clergy and laity. In this way, new opportunities were generated for the maintenance of Greek Orthodox identity, but also—as the case of Maria has revealed—for contestation and refusal to adopt new ways of 'being Orthodox'.

Although the official church recognised its complete reliance on technology during the pandemic for its continuing existence, it had always maintained a minimal presence in the digital world, which it now saw as a necessity rather than as a choice. The same attitude held true for all our interlocutors, even those who were not avid churchgoers. They all missed going to church and had feelings of 'homesickness', albeit each one of them for diverse reasons that emphasised different aspects of their religious and spiritual lives. Yet, three of our interlocutors also commented on how emotional they became when they realised that by using the 'comments' section underneath the liturgy's live-stream they could interact with other Greek Orthodox Christians all over the globe. Furthermore, they used this section for much needed prayers for their dead ones and the health of the members of their close family and friends, thus being in charge of a religious service previously reserved only for priests.³⁹

Furthermore, social distancing not only transferred the building of community into the digital domain, but also resulted in the collapse of the inside/outside boundary and the extension of physical space for the communal worship of the sacred. In 2020, the celebration of the Holy Saturday Resurrection Service, which culminated in the singing of 'Christos Anesti' (Christ is Risen), was watched via social media or heard on the radio by Greek Orthodox Christians all over the world. In many Greek and Cypriot cities, however, Orthodox faithful, urged by their religious leaders, gathered at midnight with lit candles on their balconies, gardens, and yards and sang the 'Christos Anesti' together with their neighbours. Alkis, a 53-year-old doctor from Larissa, narrated his own experience of that night as follows:

The 'Holy Light' that year came not from Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem, but from our domestic oil lamp. Me and my family lit our candles and went to our balcony to sing 'Christ is Risen', and exchanged wishes with our neighbours. That was a very moving scene that will remain with me forever. I felt the true meaning of Easter and a kind of connection with the people around me that I never felt before. In the end, maybe it was good that the churches were closed, because we took everything for granted and in the process we forgot the real meaning of our rituals.

In the pandemic, therefore, balconies, gardens, and yards as in-between, liminal spaces unofficially became ‘spaces of religion’ where individual bodies could keep safe and ‘alive’, while at the same time allowing the ‘liveness’ of communal worship from a safe distance. The same role was assumed by the yards of churches when they finally opened in May 2020. Instead of being the locus of the informal gatherings of the faithful after the liturgical services, they became formal places of worship just like the inner space of the church. Perhaps the only protective measure against the virus that was maintained by all of our interlocutors’ parish churches was that of social distancing. That was ensured to a great extent by the use of the outside space around the church. All of our interlocutors reported that the number of chairs provided for the faithful inside the church was halved according to the required distance imposed by the state measures. Outside the church, social distancing was secured by placing individual stools at a distance of two meters from one another. Some parish churches even marked the surrounding space with circles painted in yellow for the standing faithful, making sure that order and the right distance were maintained. The liturgy was either watched on a projector placed outside the church building or heard from the speakers. The number of faithful, who could congregate inside the church building, was determined, as we have already seen, by its size.

The reopening of churches took place under the condition that the collective ‘body’ of the congregation should be protected not only by God, as several zealous believers maintained, but also by following the sanitary measures imposed by both the state and the official church. These generally included the use of facemasks within the church, the cleaning of the icons with antiseptic, the distribution of the ‘antidoron’ (consecrated bread) either by the priest who was wearing plastic gloves or in canisters individually wrapped for the faithful to take, and an array of other measures that guaranteed either a ‘contactless’ worship⁴⁰ or the sanitisation of anything that was touched. However, these measures were not followed in all of the parish churches. In the end, it turned out to be the priest’s decision as to how many of these measures would be applied and in what way. Two of our interlocutors remarked that, apart from social distancing, no other sanitary measures were applied in their parish churches. In Maria’s words:

In our church, very few of the faithful were wearing a facemask and most of us were taking the antidoron from the priest’s hand after kissing it. We also all touched and kissed the icons. The only measure that was observed in our church was keeping the distance from one another by sitting in pews marked by a small icon of a saint that was put there for protection. Our priest, however, urged each one of us alone to decide if we wanted to use a facemask or to kiss the icons or his hand, and never to judge the others whatever they decided to do, but to try above all to keep the unity of the congregation.

In the summer of 2020, immediately after the first lockdown, many controls were imposed on the parish churches by the health authorities and the police to make sure that sanitary measures, in particular the use of facemasks and social distancing,

were observed. Fines were often imposed for breaking the rules, but in the case of Maria's parish church, such controls were never followed.

When we asked our interlocutors if they received Holy Communion during the pandemic and what they thought about the use of a common spoon, all but two stated that they did and that they had absolute faith that Holy Communion would protect and heal them rather than expose them to the virus. Some of our interlocutors justified their decision by also referring to a few aforementioned immunologists claiming that there was no danger of contracting or transmitting the virus through the mystery of Holy Communion. Fotini, a 39-year-old civil servant from Athens, however, answered laughingly: 'I have not received Holy Communion during the pandemic and I do not intend to do so for a long time. I am religious, but not suicidal'. Finally, Penelope, a 45-year-old archaeologist from Thessaloniki, stated:

I am not so sure if by receiving Holy Communion one can contract the virus. The truth is that I am afraid to receive it from the same spoon as others or to use the same red cloth given by the priest to wipe my lips. Maybe my faith is not so strong. In the summer of 2021, we held a private liturgy, so that only me and my close family can take Holy Communion, thus minimising any existing risk.

The great majority of our interlocutors believed that religious behaviour during the pandemic was very much dependent on the 'degree of one's faith'. Most considered themselves as religious, but they were unsure if their faith was 'strong enough' to fully entrust their protection to the hands of God. The same narrative pertaining to Holy Communion was also used by our interlocutors to explain their attitudes towards vaccination. Only one remained unvaccinated, while the rest were fully vaccinated, despite being sceptical as to whether it was the right thing to do, not only for their bodily but also for their spiritual health. A few of them reported that even their priests were unwilling to give any advice on the matter. As George stated, his confessor's advice was that, 'for the vaccination you should consult the doctors, for your faith the priests'. Yet, many of the faithful and of the clergy believed that vaccination was 'an anti-Christian measure'. Maria was the only one of our interlocutors who was openly anti-vaccine. She believed:

Vaccines contain cells from aborted human embryos, and I heard that with the seventh vaccine against COVID-19 one will have the mark of the Antichrist. So, what we need is a vaccine against evil and not a vaccine against the virus.

Maria explained her attitude against vaccines also in terms of preserving her bodily health, since vaccines, especially the genetic ones, were new, and no one yet knew their side effects. Thus, for her the vaccine not only endangered her physical health, but more importantly her eternal salvation. Maria demonstrated many times against the government's vaccination policy that made the vaccine mandatory for certain groups of civil servants and especially for health professionals. Such

demonstrations blended, as we have already stated, different political, social, and religious groups. Maria joined these demonstrations with some of her friends from her parish church. She was keen to point out that both she and her friends were different from the ‘religious fundamentalists’, who usually joined such demonstrations, and that it was better to think of her more as a ‘traditionalist’ who wanted ‘to keep the traditions of Orthodoxy intact and transmit them to the next generation’. She further explained that both she and her friends believed that ‘the state is a fascist regime controlled by those who want to rule the world. They spread only fear; this is what we are now experiencing, the pandemic of fear’.

As already explained, conspiracy theories against vaccines abounded among Greek Orthodox believers and many times were unofficially supported by quite a few members of the clergy. Alkis even commented on the regional differences concerning the rate of vaccinations between the two biggest cities in Greece: Athens, the capital, and Thessaloniki, the second biggest city in Greece, lying in the north. According to him:

They reveal the differences in the degrees of faith. Northern Greece is the lighthouse of Orthodoxy. Holy Mount Athos is there, and people have close relations with priests or some monasteries that are against vaccinations. Thessaloniki, for example, has many priests that unofficially are taking a stance against vaccinations.

Indeed, Alkis was ‘right’ about this regional difference concerning the vaccination rate.⁴¹ More importantly, however, his statement reveals the position that Holy Mount Athos held in the Greek religious imagination and its influence on Orthodox believers in determining religious attitudes during the pandemic. While the official church supported the government’s vaccination programme, in Greece many monasteries—not only the Athonite ones—and cloisters had low rates of vaccination and were unofficially supporting anti-vaccine attitudes and beliefs based on conspiracy theories. Given that Greek monastics often act as role models for the rest of the believers, the influence of the monastic culture on ‘lived religion’ cannot be ignored.

One should note, finally, that what we provided here is only a sketch of the life of Orthodox believers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Urgent investigation is needed on the transformation and adaptation of Orthodox rites of passage, particularly of funeral rites, as well as more nuanced research on gendered religious experiences and on mass media during the period under study.

Concluding Remarks

The stance of the Greek and Cypriot churches during the pandemic has been both praised⁴² and criticised,⁴³ using different criteria and perspectives. In our view, the COVID-19 pandemic again made clear the deep cleavage between a reactionary, radical, conspiracy-driven and fundamentalist-oriented Orthodoxy and another one, which is more moderate, pragmatic, reasonable, and even liberal to a

considerable degree. These trends and the concomitant polarisations between them can be observed both at the grassroots level and within the church hierarchy, a development with far-reaching consequences for the entire Orthodox body, which could not ‘speak in a single voice’ and did not generate a unanimous response vis-à-vis the challenges of the pandemic. This becomes quite evident if we compare the Greek and the Cypriot Orthodox contexts with other Orthodox ones in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, given that all of them produced very different evaluations of and responses towards the pandemic. In both the Greek and the Cypriot cases, this ‘Orthodox polyphony’ was further accentuated by the constant blurring of the boundaries between the scientific medical and the religious discourses, and became particularly evident in the diverse evaluations of the role of Holy Communion in potentially transmitting the virus. In connection with this, there were several contradictory stances towards scientific medicine on the part of many Orthodox actors. These included, on the one hand, a staunch opposition towards vaccination, and, on the other, the implementation of a scientific treatment of infections, particularly when ‘Orthodox sacral antidotes’ and ‘strong faith’ did not appear to work. In general, it was a pick-and-mix approach endorsing either all, few, or none of the protective measures against the pandemic.

The same ambiguity can also be observed at another level, namely in the relations between fidelity to tradition and in both changes and adaptations in perspectives and practices. This is a crucial issue due to Orthodox Christianity’s strong attachment to tradition, which in many cases in the past has evolved into traditionalism. Yet, an interesting question remains as to whether the pandemic acted as a catalyst for changes within Orthodoxy. The answer reveals once more the previously mentioned ‘Orthodox polyphony’, considering the example of the various options of distributing Holy Communion adopted by local Orthodox churches and communities. However, both the Greek and the Cypriot churches kept an uncompromising position on this matter and refused to consider alternative solutions of temporary validity. Orthodox theologians reflected systematically on all these aspects,⁴⁴ and some even spoke of a ‘missed chance’ for the church to introduce important changes without jeopardising the ‘essence’ of the Orthodox faith.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to approach this apparent ‘inflexibility’ in a more nuanced way, given that, at the level of ‘lived religion’, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes in the ways that Orthodoxy was enacted, performed, and embodied. Here it became clear, on the one hand, that the pandemic disturbed the ‘normal rhythm’ of religious life and produced a pathology of uncertainty, anxiety, and scepticism. But on the other hand, we could also observe how this ‘ritual arrhythmia’ brought about new forms of ‘sacral individualism’,⁴⁵ since it promoted individual rather than communitarian worship for the sake of keeping the congregational ‘body’ healthy. Yet, at the same time, it also created new forms of ‘sacral communitarianism’ by generating new ‘spaces of religion’, both in the digital and in the physical domain and in the interplay of both, where community worship could take place. In some cases, it also bred disunity and contestation since it went against the traditional way of doing things. Finally, during the pandemic the locus of religious worship completely shifted to the domestic church, formally

acknowledging the religious expertise of women, and this somewhat upset old hierarchies. Which of these changes will endure in the post-pandemic era remains to be seen. What the above examples make clear is not only the enduring Orthodox polyformity, but also the constant oscillation between tradition-boundedness and change that characterises the Orthodox churches of Greece and Cyprus, a phenomenon that the recent pandemic has brought abundantly to the surface.

Notes

- 1 Kostis 1995.
- 2 Leustean 2014, 161–209.
- 3 Lefebvre 2004.
- 4 Mukherjee 2022.
- 5 Theofilopoulos 2021.
- 6 Kourou, Papa, Ioannou and Kapnisis 2022.
- 7 Kessareas 2023.
- 8 Theocharis et al. 2021.
- 9 Constantinou, Kagalidis and Karekla 2021.
- 10 Moris and Schizas 2020; Kousi, Mitsi and Simos 2021.
- 11 Androutsopoulos 2021.
- 12 Grigoriadis 2021.
- 13 Filistor 2020.
- 14 Papazoglou et al. 2021.
- 15 Kalatzis 2020.
- 16 Elsner 2020.
- 17 Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021.
- 18 Nicholas 2020.
- 19 Lakasas 2020.
- 20 Bartholomew 2020.
- 21 Trantas 2022.
- 22 Andriopoulos 2020.
- 23 Taft 1996.
- 24 Anyfantakis 2020.
- 25 Manangan, Schulster, Chiarello, Simonds and Jarvis 1998.
- 26 Spantideas, Drosou, Barsoum and Bougea 2020.
- 27 Gallaher 2019.
- 28 Holy Synod 2021.
- 29 Danikas 2021.
- 30 Papasrantopoulos 2021.
- 31 Hieronymos 2021.
- 32 Orthodox Times 2021.
- 33 For a discussion of such groups in social media, see Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021.
- 34 Lefebvre 2004, 16.
- 35 Cf. Carroll, Lackenby and Gorbanenko 2022.
- 36 See www.onlarissa.gr/2020/04/17/sygkinitiki-protovoylia-oikogeneias-sti-larisa-eftiaxe-ton-diko-tis-epitafio-kai-ton-dorise-se-ekklisia-tis-polis-foto-vinteo/ (All websites cited were last accessed in November 2022).
- 37 Papantoniou and Vionis 2021, 98–99.
- 38 Ibid., 85.
- 39 In the offline realm, the members of the congregation will give the names of the living and the dead ones whom they want to commemorate to be read by the priest during the liturgy or other church services.

- 40 Winiger 2020, 245.
- 41 For instance, on the 12 April 2022, 73 per cent were fully vaccinated in Athens, while in Thessaloniki only 62 per cent were fully vaccinated. See <https://covid19.gov.gr/covid-map-en/>.
- 42 Chrysostomos 2020; Panagiotidis 2020; Hierotheos 2021; Hiera Mitropolis Dimitriadis 2022.
- 43 Sakellariou 2020; Kordas 2021.
- 44 Asproulis and Wood 2020; Kosmidis 2020; Vassiliadis and Demacopoulos 2020; Orthodox Academy of Crete 2021; Kaminis 2021; Theologiki Scholi 2022.
- 45 Mitrofanova 2020, 62.

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