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Holy Communion in Greek Orthodoxy in the Time of Coronavirus: Ideological Perspectives in Conflict

Efstathios Kessareas 

Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Erfurt, 99089 Erfurt, Germany; efstathios.kessareas@uni-erfurt.de

Abstract: This article examines the controversy over the mode of distribution of Holy Communion that surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on debates that took place in the Greek Orthodox community. After describing and evaluating the role of secular and religious experts in the context of the pandemic, the paper analyzes three main perspectives on the issue of the Eucharist: (1) the secularist-rationalist viewpoint; (2) the religious-traditionalist outlook; and (3) the “Third Way” perspective. The paper argues that the Church’s Holy Communion controversy is indicative of a deeper struggle between religious and secular thinkers and among various voices in the Greek Orthodox Church concerning the latter’s place in, and influence over, the modern secular socio-political order.

Keywords: Greek Orthodoxy; Holy Communion; COVID-19; ideology; tradition; modernity; secularization

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many spheres of human life, including individual and community religious belief and practice. In the early days and for reasons of public health, a number of restrictions were imposed on religious life, ranging from strict social distancing and masking measures to the closure of places of worship. Given its complexity—competing traditions and theological perspectives, as well as different policy responses to the virus globally—there has been little agreement among religious voices on the necessity, scope, and implications of these measures. In Greek Orthodox communities, encompassing the hierarchy, theologians, and the laity, the debate in the early days of the pandemic focused on the mode of distribution of Holy Communion. Various religious and secular actors participated in the public discussion, either in favor of or against the existing practice of giving Communion from the same spoon. The issue acquired the character of an ideological struggle between the proponents of “scientific reason” and the guardians of the “genuine” Greek Orthodox tradition. Various religious agents and voices sought to overcome this polarization by forging a middle path framed in terms of a necessary reconciliation between tradition and modernity.

There is diverse and still-growing literature on the responses of the disparate voices in the Greek Orthodox churches on the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kosmidis was one of the first to discuss, from a theological perspective, the impact of the pandemic on Greek Orthodoxy’s ecclesiastical life, highlighting what he saw as the spread and affirmation of irrational religiosity in confronting the virus (Kosmidis 2020). Mitrofanova analyzed the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church and of various fundamentalist groups that exist within its ranks during the pandemic (Mitrofanova 2021). Hovorun demonstrated that the distribution of the Eucharist during the viral pandemic provoked an intense polarization between fundamentalists and “Eucharist realists”, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Russian Orthodox Church (Hovorun 2021). Various publications of collected essays were produced (e.g., Vassiliadis 2020; Asproulis and Wood 2020; Zorbas 2021), rich in



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theological and pastoral perspectives, which explored the effects of the pandemic on ecclesiastical life. While they ably analyzed and critiqued opposing perspectives, they were less attentive to contextualizing their own theological points of view and the important place and established voice that they occupy within the Greek Orthodox Community (Bourdieu 1977, 1991).

Theological analysis is important to this debate, but it is not an exclusive or sufficient perspective that can shed light on the issues of concern to this faith community. My efforts in this article might best be understood as interpretive sociology. It is a position that attempts to examine, in a systematic way, the ideological struggle that takes place among different groups within Greek Orthodoxy. What I hope to accomplish is to present in a Weberian ideal-typical manner modes of thought that represent these different ideological orientations. To this end, my work critically and comparatively analyzes three conflicting perspectives on a specific concrete issue, namely, the distribution of Holy Communion during the pandemic: (a) the secularist–rationalist viewpoint, (b) the religious–traditionalist outlook, and (c) what I call the “Third Way” perspective. The voices that represent these three perspectives envision the positions and roles of the Greek Orthodox Church in the context of secular modernity quite differently, not only with regard to issues surrounding Holy Communion during a pandemic, but around other controversial and contested issues that sporadically occupy believers and others in the public sphere.

The fierce debate surrounding the praxis of Holy Communion that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic offers fertile ground both for an ideological confrontation and for deeper analysis. From a strictly scientific and public health perspective, viruses can be potentially transmitted between individuals via contact with contaminated objects, such as communion utensils. However, from the standpoint of those who perceive Holy Communion *literally* as “medicine of immortality,” it is impossible for the liturgical spoon to transmit an illness (see Section 3.2 below). The Eucharist stands unequivocally at the heart of Greek Orthodox Christianity, carrying deep but also competing and conflicting meanings for its adherents. By engaging in the sort of comparative and interpretive sociological analysis I am suggesting, I try to show that we can better comprehend the deeper reasons and justifications for these various positions and gain a deeper appreciation of why the Church as an institution and so many individual religious actors are hesitant or refuse to change established beliefs and ritual practices.

My study focuses on primary sources of the most varied kinds produced by Greek Orthodox clerics and lay persons during the COVID-19 pandemic, including encyclicals, announcements, articles, interviews, and sermons. My focus lies on Greek Orthodoxy, and particularly on the Church of Greece, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and on the Orthodox diaspora. For comparative reasons, I also provide an elaboration of the views of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church in America, and of various other Orthodox intellectuals, without claiming to give a complete picture of the complex Orthodox world.¹ Since the material is vast, I selected discourses that reveal the distinctive character and orientation of these three perspectives. Additionally, I examined actors who hold different positions within and outside the organized religious community (e.g., bishops, priests, monks, lay theologians, journalists, health professionals). Methodologically, I applied a multi-dimensional discourse analysis (Thompson 1984). First, I comparatively analyzed the content of the primary sources. In doing so, it was possible to distinguish subtle differences concerning the perception of the Holy Communion and corresponding proposals about the method of its distribution in the age of COVID-19. Additionally, borrowing theoretical insights from framing analysis (Benford and Snow 2000), I gave attention to the symbolic vocabulary and framing strategies that these actors employed in an attempt to justify their arguments and delegitimize antagonistic ones. Finally, I attempted to associate the different viewpoints with the institutional position and ideological preferences of their promoters, taking into consideration the various social contexts in which the pandemic crisis arose.

Weber rightly observes that real life is much more chaotic than ideal-types (Weber 2012, p. 125). Frequently, the ideal-typical categories that the researcher constructs manifest

in complex, overlapping, and contradictory ways in a given individual or institution. This tendency is evident in the subject under discussion here. A progressive religious actor, who, for instance, might support a new method of giving of Holy Communion, might simultaneously agree on other church issues with individuals who are characterized by a conservative mindset.²

2. Secular and Religious Specialists: Scientific versus Sacred Knowledge

In the contemporary world of health, medicine, and increasing public policy development, the value, priority, and decisiveness of scientific knowledge is axiomatic. This principle is elaborated in systems of practical and functional reasoning, which affirm that the ultimate criterion for evaluating the various socio-political and economic proposals is whether they are capable of producing practical, enduring solutions to existing problems. Proposals that do not comply with the criterion of effectiveness are rejected, often after being defamed as ideologically informed, metaphysically asserted with no empirically verifiable justification, or as just “magical thinking”.

Even the purveyors of positions based on science and pragmatism, specialists who hold privileged status as problem solvers for various professions and who serve an important role in the public sphere as representatives of their fields, often come under similar criticism and disapprobation. To take an example, in the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, it was initially epidemiologists globally who held the public’s attention, as their research findings were translated into concrete policy measures that were taken to be the best chance of stemming the spread of the virus. Historically, epidemiologists have enjoyed significant public acceptance because of the perceived objectivity of medical science and their willingness to pursue their research in an “objective” and unbiased way. As the pandemic crisis deepened, however, the public role and expert knowledge of the epidemiologist, and that of public health professionals who were dependent on epidemiology as the baseline for their policy decisions, grew to be contested. This reality invites a situation where multiple authorities simultaneously bear on policy-making.

In addition to these secular experts, in the context of the pandemic traditional specialists in religious communities exert influence on believers’ schemes of thought. The Greek Orthodox priest is one such figure, standing at the center of the community’s religious life. Not only does that figure have a great knowledge of theological issues, but also possesses technical expertise on the so-called salvific rituals of the church. Bishops have supreme power within the religious field legitimized by reference to the special identity and role that occupies “in the place” and as a “type” of Christ (Zizioulas 1997, p. 229). Still, because the clergy must also be preoccupied with the “mundane”, various worldly, administrative, and pastoral concerns, the community’s ultimate ideal type of religious expertise is the *saint*. The latter comes close to God through charismatic experience, not through the intellect nor the physical performance of either ritual or other responsibilities. It is not accidental that spiritual elders who have acquired reputations as holy men and women are often idolized in a manner that cultivates attitudes of radicalism, especially in monastic milieus (Kessareas 2022a). Lay theologians form another influential group within the constellation of religious professionals and experts, since they formulate and disseminate schemes of thought and practical proposals, legitimizing them as the product of deep theological knowledge ratified by the tradition.

The various and incommensurable secular and religious values do not, in principle, need to lead to conflict and confrontation as long as the representative actors or experts from each remains and functions within the walls or limitations of their own field. However, the social world, though complex, differentiated, specialized, and dispersed, is hyper-connected. The possibility of conflict on many levels, and between arenas of knowledge and expertise, arises during periods of crises, when issues of individual, broader social interests, and national identities are at stake. Specialists readily engage in public controversies justifying or delegitimizing proposals that have an *ideological* or *utopian* character,

namely proposals that aim either to preserve or transform established social relations (Mannheim 2015).

To understand the prestige and appeal of religious actors in the context of the pandemic, we should also take into account the traditional connection that has been established over centuries, even millennia, between religion, sickness, care, and healing (Larchet 2002). Significant religious rituals emerged that were deeply connected to the experience and trauma of human suffering and the care of the sick and dying, even before the efficacy of much medical care became a reality in the modern period. For instance, prophets became famous for their healing skills (Weber 1978, p. 441), the pastor playing a significant role over time in keeping with the needs of local communities dealing with the challenges of illness and infirmity, while the provision of hospital and other medical services by religious organizations themselves evolved as central activities of ministry. The coming of modernity has not diminished the impetus for medical and spiritual intervention by religious organizations on behalf of those who suffer. The Greek Orthodox faith, in this way, does not oppose or underestimate the efficacy of science (Knight 2020). Seeking the care of a physician is fully compatible with the teachings of the church. But the point is that this religious tradition retains a strong sense of mystery, which in certain circumstances can bring the believer into conflict with the tenets, claims, and aspirations of scientific rationality. In the eyes of the faithful, church rituals are both real and useful, even in situations where the interventions of modern medicine are accepted. However, when modern medicine fails to provide therapy, then the road to miraculous salvation opens more broadly as an avenue to be explored and embraced by the believer.

3. Holy Communion: Ideological Perspectives in Conflict

Having considered the important role of secular and religious specialists in the public sphere, I want now to explore the narrow issue of how Holy Communion is viewed and practiced in the Greek Orthodox Church in the context of the pressures brought on religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of various primary sources allows us to establish and elaborate in a quasi ideal-typical manner three distinct perspectives that appear in the emerging literature and the life of Greek Orthodox communities and the larger societies of which they are a part.

3.1. *The Secularist–Rationalist Viewpoint: Holy Communion as “Religious Obscurantism”*

Speaking in ideal-typical terms, social agents who hold to a secular, rational morality and a liberal or progressive political orientation are critical towards religious values and practices, especially when the latter exert influence in the public, secular sphere. This perspective is driven in large part by an attitude shared by these agents that considers religion as a private issue that must concern only the existential–spiritual needs of the believers and avoid incursions into the public affairs of the culture in domains, such as politics, education, law, or, in the case at hand, health policy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that on the issue of Holy Communion, secular–rationalists establish a clear line of demarcation between faith and science, urging the Church to restrict its sphere of activity to the care of the human soul and leave the treatment of body and related public policy decisions to science (Tountas 2020). By extension, they call for a broader scope of justified health policy interventions into religious communities with the argument that the common good (public health) must precede the particular commitments and ritual practices of the religious subsystem. With respect to the current pandemic crisis and the challenge of viral transmission, secularists have argued that with respect to social policy implementation, there are no “exceptions for religious, liturgical or metaphysical reasons”³ (Federation of Hospital Unions Doctors of Greece 2020).

In this context, the use of a common liturgical spoon during the pandemic was presented as a public health threat. Labeling opposing views as “unacceptable, obscurantist, and DANGEROUS!” (Imerodromos 2020), the secularists framed the issue as a battle between the proponents of “scientific truth” and the forces of “obscurantism” and “meta-

physics" (Federation of Hospital Unions Doctors of Greece 2020; Imerodromos 2020). At the same time, they urged scientific associations to take a clear position against the current method of Holy Communion. The implication is that the state must, for reasons of public health, impose restrictions over this religious practice as long as such practice is construed as a pandemic risk, or until Church officials opt for safer modes of distributing Holy Communion.

The case in point concerns the imposition by The Federal Republic of Germany of a temporary ban on the distribution of Holy Communion from a common spoon. Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Augoustinos of Germany abided by this measure, albeit stating that this was the "most painful and difficult decision" he has ever taken (Augoustinos 2020). Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew's response on this issue appeals to a classic balance of power to set limits. Drawing on Jesus' famous saying: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's", the Patriarch recognized the authority of the state to regulate its own affairs, but at the same time, he highlighted the "holy and indestructible right" of the Church to "organize its ecclesiastical life and to celebrate the Holy Sacraments (Mysteries) according to its canonical and ecclesiological tradition" (Augoustinos 2020). In various respects, the modern, secular state has the power to impose restrictions, even on core aspects of religious life, as this ban clearly proves. However, in predominantly Orthodox majority countries, such as Greece, such strict restrictions were not entertained by the church leadership and not pushed unflinchingly by the government because of competing religious commitments of the majority of its population and the high political cost such a position would have exacted on politicians and church leaders.

3.2. *The Religious–Traditionalist Outlook: Holy Communion as the "Medicine of Immortality"*

The official ecclesiastical hierarchies largely complied with the preponderance of temporal restrictions on religious life and practice, issuing statements in favor of medical protective measures and public health restrictions, including on worship life. However, nearly all hesitated or even categorically refused to alter the method of receiving Communion from a common spoon. For instance, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church claimed that "well-known anti-church and anti-Serbian circles" question its "most important and sacred" ritual. It thus depicted secular and critical voices within the Church as being a threat not only to religion but also to the nation itself. At the same time, it stressed the historic practice of long duration of this method of Communion ("two thousand years"). This reference had a specific aim: historical time adds more weight and prestige to ritual, for it is implied that it is not something ephemeral that can or should be changed according to the spirit of the times. The Holy Synod deployed two types of argument in this regard. First, it asserted that the state has no right to "deal with the content and manner of conducting the Divine Liturgy", for it is a "sole matter of internal or autonomous church order and legislation". Second, it framed the issue decisively in terms of individual freedom by invoking the voluntary character of the Eucharist (Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church 2020).

The Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church also categorically rejected any change in the administration of Holy Communion, declaring that the latter "certainly cannot become a source of transmission of diseases", because the "Body and Blood of Christ becomes the 'medicine of immortality'" (Holy Synod 2020a). The former Metropolitan of Kalavryta depicted the Church as a "hospital for both soul and body ... [which] heals and does not make one sick!" (Amvrosios 2020). The use of such medical metaphors justified the continuation of the ritual during the pandemic and, additionally, highlighted the special role of the priests who offer the precious medicine of immortality to the faithful. This medicine is asserted to be superior to the various drugs of science developed against illnesses. Framed in this way, a restriction or temporary ban of this ritual endangers the ultimate goal of people's eternal salvation. The threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of public health are not ignored, but they are ranked hierarchically: at the

very top of the hierarchy stands the holistic—and for this reason more important—value of eternal life, which encompasses that of human health (for the concept of hierarchy, see [Dumont 1980](#)). From the standpoint of modern secular thought, such a way of thinking is irrational. However, from within the community of faith, believers orient their action according to a reframed rationality that facilitates the achievement of ultimate religious ends ([Weber 1978](#), pp. 85–86). Keeping this in mind, it comes as no surprise that bishops offered the following explanation as self-evident: “the Body and the Blood of Christ cannot become a bearer of infection and death, *because* the Lord of Life cannot bequeath decay and death” ([Hierotheos 2020](#), p. 9, my emphasis).

In order to appeal to the skeptics, members of the hierarchy invoked the additional authoritative source of the “experience of centuries”, which was used to establish the non-contagious character of Holy Communion ([Hierotheos 2020](#), p. 1; [Holy Synod 2020a](#)). The challenge of addressing infections among believers of course persists and creates significant challenges. If a believer gets infected, will that endanger the whole system of belief? To prevent this, religious intellectuals implicitly leave open the possibility of an infection, attributing it either to a lack of appropriate preparation or to weak belief on behalf of the believer. For instance, the hieromonk Koutloumousianos emphasized that the body and blood of Christ becomes a “‘safeguard’ . . . ‘for strength, healing and health of soul and body’”, adding the caveat, “to those that receive communion with faith and true repentance” ([Koutloumousianos 2020](#)). Similarly, he highlighted that “although immortality is an eschatological condition . . . ‘doses’ of incorruption are given in this mortal life according to the measure of each one’s faith, longing, godly fear and love” ([Koutloumousianos 2020](#)). We notice, therefore, a transfer of causal responsibility for infection to the individual believer. In any case, the latter is advised not to be preoccupied with such a “totally dead-end scholastic preciosity”, behaving like a “deeply neurotic and compulsive person obsessed with germs in front of the biggest miracle of creation” ([Hierotheos 2020](#)). Since “everything is in the hands of God”, the faithful are advised to “carry out God’s will and trust all the rest to the absolute goodness of Lord, who works everyone’s salvation with the best possible way” ([Hierotheos 2020](#)).

Such arguments cannot appeal to secular-minded actors. Church officials denounced the criticism of the latter as “blasphemy” that “brutally offend[s] the sacred and the holy, the dogmas and the holy canons of our faith” ([Holy Synod 2020b](#)). By contrast, they portrayed themselves as “vigilant guardians of the boundaries set by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles, the Fathers and the Holy Synods”, reassuring the faithful that the “red lines neither have been nor will be surpassed” ([Holy Synod 2020c](#); [Gabriel 2020](#); [Athenagoras 2020](#)). Further, they labeled adversarial and critical voices as advancing a discourse of “division” that aims at “torpedoing the national consensus and unanimity needed by our homeland at these moments” ([Ieronymos 2020](#)). The frequent references to the nation reveal a specific perception of the Church as an “ark” that preserves national identity in the context of our globalized world.

Orthodox fundamentalists who are drawn to conspiracy theories, ethno-religious nationalism, and dualistic thinking ([Kessareas 2018](#); [Makrides 2016](#)), expressed this point more explicitly. They cast restrictive COVID-19 policy measures as a threat to religion and nation, using not only a pre-modern religious discourse but also a modern, secular one. Specifically, they depicted the public health mandates and measures as works of the devil and as a violation of the constitutional rights of religious freedom and freedom of assembly (e.g., see [Amvrosios 2020](#); [Neophytos 2020](#); [Stylianakis 2020](#)). For instance, former Metropolitan Amvrosios in his letter to the current Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, stressed that the “dark, demonic organizations of globalization” manufactured COVID-19 and that the Church and the Greek nation are under attack. A member of the church hierarchy, he acquires here the role of a prophet who warns the evil collaborators that “God’s curse” will fall upon them, exclaiming: “Hands off the Orthodox Church, the Mother and wet nurse of the Greek Nation” ([Amvrosios 2020](#)). Likewise, Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou in Cyprus attacked the earthly “representatives of devil”, those

“secretive men of the New Order of Things”, who promote the “vaccines of Bill Gates”, but hinder the salvific practice of Holy Communion. In his public speeches, churches are equated with hospitals; however, their own medicine is considered to be more precious: “the best medicine, both for this illness and for the other that is coming, is the Body and Blood of Christ . . . when we close the churches and we restrict the Holy Communion . . . it is like we close the hospitals, like we shut down the pharmacies” (Neophytos 2020).

One should not conclude that only Church leaders, and particularly ultra-conservative ones, believe that Holy Communion is the “medicine of immortality.” No doubt, clerics have legitimate interest in the dissemination of this belief. The laity, too, shares this fundamental conviction. Otherwise, they would not have continued to receive Holy Communion during the pandemic. One Greek priest praised his congregation for continuing to receive Holy Communion, admitting that after the end of the liturgy, he provided Communion to infected persons. He portrayed his own negative corona test as a “proof that the Holy Communion does not transmit [illnesses], because it is Christ” (Kantanis 2021). Such beliefs even appeal to professionals, whose specialization in medicine one might have expected to inculcate in them a secular habitus, to use Bourdieu’s (1977) term. The public interventions of well-known Greek epidemiologists in favor of the mystical effect of Holy Communion are illustrative cases. For instance, Eleni Giamarellou, Professor of Internal Medicine and an infectious disease specialist, specified her viewpoint on the issue as follows:

“The Holy Communion is a sacrament . . . you do not receive it out of habit [but] . . . because it is the Body and Blood of Christ. Either you believe it and you receive Holy Communion in the normal manner, or you do not believe it. There are no compromise solutions, spoons, etc. . . . If I believe that this can infect me, then I do not believe in the greatest mystery. People who want to receive communion must not be afraid that bacteria can ever be transmitted via the Holy Communion.” (Giamarellou 2020)

Similarly, Athina Linou, Professor of Epidemiology, declared in the Greek state-operated television station:

“I am a faithful Orthodox Christian . . . there is no epidemiological study that proves that the disease is transmitted through ingestion not only of saliva but also of the virus itself . . . We cannot solve issues of spirituality and Orthodox faith with logic; the metaphysical . . . is not proven [question by journalist: ‘would you receive Holy Communion at this time in the usual way?’. Of course! Of course! ” (Linou 2020)

Such cases demonstrate the penetration and appropriation of traditional religious ideas into broader segments of advanced secular societies, including Greece, in which Orthodoxy is a strong cultural force that contributes to the formation of people’s identity. This tendency appears frequently among contemporary medical experts who have strong conservative religious commitments. They accept, without hesitation, the existing method of Communion, disdaining “compromise solutions” as a lack of genuine belief.

3.3. A “Third Way”: Reconciliation between Tradition and Modernity

Between the secularists and the traditionalists, there are those who seek a compromise or middle ground between faith and science, between “receiving Christ in the Eucharist and taking a reasonable and ‘worldly’ precaution”, as they put it (Cohen 2020). These actors, mostly of a younger generation of theologians, possess significant intellectual capital evidenced in academic titles, positions in universities, and publications in well-regarded journals. They hold progressive positions on various theological and church issues, motivated by a desire to bring Orthodoxy into a constructive relationship with the multicultural, global, and democratic contexts of modernity (Kessareas 2022b, pp. 133–37; Makrides 2020). As Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece and representative of this current, describes it, they seek to “contextualize the message of the Gospel in our time, to ensure the constructive role of Orthodoxy in the

public sphere, and to highlight the prophetic and eschatological dynamic of the Orthodox Christian tradition in the dialogue with the anthropological, political, and other parameters of (Western) modernity” (Kalaitzidis 2022). These religious actors reject both the so-called “ethnodoxy” (Karpov et al. 2012) that is the identification of religion with a particular nation, and the equation of secularization with the privatization of religion; for them, the Church can play a productive role in civil society by supporting core values of Christianity and of liberal democracy (e.g., justice, freedom) without violating the alterity of the “Other” (Kessareas 2022c).

On the controversy over the method of distribution of Holy Communion during the pandemic, individuals representative of “the third way” attempted to offer a compromise solution between the traditional “medicine of immortality” perspective and the medical logic underlying the imposition of health measures. More precisely, they distinguished between the inner essence and the external method of the Holy Communion ritual. The first component is construed as sacred and unchangeable, functioning as “medicine of immortality”. The second sees Holy Communion as an historical element and event that can be changed. To justify this interpretation, these thinkers employed a set of arguments from theology, physics, and history. Specifically, they argued that since both the bread and the wine continue to retain their material qualities in the Eucharist, they could become pathways of transmission for pathogenic bacteria (Hovorun 2020; Cohen 2020). They refuted opposing viewpoints by labeling them as “distortions/heresies”, “myth and superstition”, “idolatry”, “magical understandings of religious life”, and “Manichaeism” (Arida 2020; Papathanasiou 2020; Hovorun 2020). Advocates of “the Third Way” thus accused their opponents of transforming religion into pure magic by spiritualizing the Eucharist. In sharp contrast, they invoked core values of modern thought, including “freedom of choice” and the physical “laws of nature” to ground their claims (Hovorun 2020).

From the standpoint of the traditionalists, the real heretics are the liberal theologians who downgrade the mystical meaning of the Eucharist. Although the bread and wine retain their physical qualities—as the traditional argument goes—their “mode of being” changes during the Mystery, becoming the actual Body and Blood of Christ (Koutlounousianos 2020; Hierotheos 2020). The fear is that the denial of this fundamental axiom of faith calls into question the saving power of Christ and so must be emphatically condemned as a “blasphemous theological virus” (Hierotheos 2020, p. 2). To conservative traditionalists, religious reformers pose a more serious threat than secularists, because they attribute to their ends the same theological concepts that are recognized by and can appeal to the faithful. Speaking sociologically, they are direct antagonists within the religious field.

The proponents of “the third way” also employed church history and historical practices as useful resources in constructing their position, highlighting the “dynamic nature of historical Eucharistic practices”, namely, various ways of offering Communion throughout history, and the evidence of embracing “flexibility and adaptability” during times of crisis (Armanios 2020). For these moderates, the non-core elements of tradition can change according to historical conditions and contextual needs of the faithful. The call is for a method of Holy Communion that respects its theological integrity but is consistent as well with the medical instructions and the basic hygienic rules of modern society. In order to rebut charges of implementing changes under pressure from secular modernity, they framed their proposals in overtly theological language. For instance, they presented the use of disposable bamboo spoons or even the deprivation of Holy Communion during the pandemic as serving the most fundamental Christian values of “sacrifice” and of “love” for the fellow Christian, who will thereby be able to participate without any fear in or risk from the Eucharist (Roosien 2020; Cohen 2020).

The question must then be asked: does this middle-ground or “Third Way” approach manage to balance the commitments and interests of the two opposing sides? No doubt, it combines elements from both sides. Still, the basic aim of these moderating actors, which is to bring the Orthodox Church into a constructive relationship with modernity, moves the terms of the debate towards the side of secular-minded agents, even though these

church moderates do not share with the secularists the vision of a privatized faith. This is also the reason why religious hardliners oppose liberal theologians so strongly. Liberal theologians critically reflect on tradition, embracing fundamental values and structural transformations of the modern world (e.g., human rights, civil society, multiculturalism). Of course, when they also hold an ecclesiastical office in the Church, the tensions between traditional beliefs and the spirit of intellectualist criticism inherent in any reform agenda increases significantly. Overall, therefore, we can interpret the middle way identified here as an attempt at reaching a compromise between the competing views and goals of the two opposing sides.

4. Sacred Tradition vs. Profane Worldliness

Despite the seriousness of the pandemic, which resulted in significant deaths among clerics and monks, Church authorities were hesitant to implement changes in the procedure for the reception of Holy Communion. As noted earlier, the Orthodox Church of Greece excluded *a priori* the possibility of any change by declaring the issue a “red line”. The Orthodox Church of Serbia even banned a priest and theologian from speaking publicly after his critical remarks on the current mode of distribution (Kubat 2020). Yet, there were a few exceptions, mostly by Churches that operate in multicultural environments, where the pressure for a change in the existing practice of Holy Communion seems to have been significant. Even in such cases, however, the relevant decision was taken very carefully and in an ambiguous manner. Let me give some examples.

The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Austria decided, for a “limited period”, to offer the Eucharistic bread in the hand of the believers. It framed this decision as an act of “philanthropy” towards the “expectations of the outsiders” who have weak faith. Moreover, it presented this change to be within the boundaries of tradition, for it follows the old liturgical tradition of Saint James (Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Austria 2020). Archbishop Melchisedek of Pittsburgh of the Orthodox Church in America offered a double justification for the use of individual spoons: first, there was the need to avoid accusations “from those outside of the church” who do not understand the holy character of its rituals. Second, it was important to be able to “ease the conscience of those in the church” who are anxious about receiving Holy Communion from a common spoon during a pandemic. He, too, was cautious enough to highlight that this change was “not to be understood as a declaration about the possibility of the Body and Blood of Christ spreading disease” (Melchisedek 2020).

Archbishop Elpidophoros of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America justified the implementation in the Church of various public health measures against the COVID-19 with reference to “science and our God-given reason” as well as to theology: “the same material elements that can convey the blessings of God are also subject to the broken nature of our fallen world”. In an attempt to rebut accusations of modernism, he stressed that the protective measures are “temporary precautions” that “do not change the traditions of the church” (Elpidophoros 2020a). The restrictive COVID-19 measures were presented as an “act of love and responsibility” and not as “a sin” (Holy Eparchial Synod 2020). Despite Elpidophoros’ emphasis on exercising the “rational, scientific knowledge that we possess through our God-given intelligence” (Elpidophoros 2020b), the clergy were instructed to distribute the Eucharist in the usual way (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America 2020). The theological argument was that the “sacrament of sacraments, the Holy Eucharist, is not simply a material element but the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Elpidophoros 2020a).

How can we best understand the difficulty faced by Orthodox Churches to accept changes to how the Eucharist is administered in the face of the risks manifest in the COVID-19? The answer to this question must account for the central position and role of tradition in Greek Orthodox Christianity, in which the Church has developed a strong tradition-bound culture through its centuries of existence. It is a product of history that, when perceived in an essentialist and static manner, provides fertile ground for attitudes of traditionalism and

invariant liturgical practices (Makrides 2012a). Tradition consists both of dogmatic beliefs and practices, whose alleged sacred origin and repetition in the lifetime of the faithful makes them appear as unchanging entities. For the traditionalists, the institutional Church has legitimate responsibility to observe the adherence to the “right” beliefs (orthodoxy) and “correct” practices (orthopraxy) that shape its identity. However, you cannot have “orthodoxy” without “heresy”, and vice versa. Since Orthodoxy is equated with the maintenance of tradition, any change runs the risk of being considered as heterodoxy or heresy. This attitude characterizes especially zealous monastic circles who believe in the absolute and timeless essence of tradition: “the dogmas, the holy canons and traditions of the church . . . by no means change with the passing of time, but they remain valid and unchanged until the end of the ages” (Agios Agathaggelos *Esfigmenitis* 2003, p. 4).

Of course, renewal and innovation are not unknown within the Greek Orthodox tradition (Willert and Molokotos-Liederman 2012; Makrides 2012a). The evolving economic activities and modernization of the Greek Orthodox churches currently taking place in even the most important symbolic contexts of the tradition, including among monastic communities of Mount Athos, are prime examples of this trend. However, in religious environments customarily characterized by dogma and repetition of the familiar, change occurs in a slower rhythm and always must be framed in the language of tradition in order to avoid the specter of heresy. Moreover, in this community, changes are more easily accepted when they concern external matters (e.g., technological ones) rather than issues of religious belief and practice.

The Eucharist is one such fundamental ritual. It remains “the sacrament of sacraments” for most Greek Orthodox Christians, a pivotal moment during which the individual believers *become* a community, experiencing “here and now” the relational essence of God (Elpidophoros 2020a; Zizioulas 1997, p. 115). From this perspective, the congregation does not merely come in contact “with the supreme source of its spiritual life” (Durkheim 1995, p. 30), but—by receiving the body and blood of Christ—it partakes of the sacred life that comes from the otherworld. Thus, in the critical moment of eucharistic celebration, the realms of “the immanent” and “the transcendent” meet but not on equal terms; it is transcendence that charismatically raises the elements of the mundane world to a higher level.

For conservative religious agents, the transformation of the common bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is not merely a symbolic act, but a real event. It is considered to stand above reason, for it perceived as a product of miraculous action:

“It is clearly a matter of faith and metaphysical inductive proof [ἀναγωγῆς]. Is it possible to contract a psychosomatic disease from partaking of the Holy Communion? This is not possible. The believer, who comes to Holy Communion, believes that he/she comes to God, who has the power to heal, anticipate, and intervene miraculously. There is no need for someone to receive communion if s/he has not the faith that this is the blood and body of Christ. This cannot be a cause of disease and transmit any microbe!” (Seraphim 2020)

This mode of religious thought classifies the various microbes and diseases as part of a profane realm. We occupy a world of decay, corruption, and death. By complete contrast, the sacred realm is believed to be the source of eternal life. Any extraordinary action that brings the two realms into contact with each other—a divine intervention into the profane world that transfigures its natural laws, including the conditions of human existence (illnesses etc.)—is recognized to be a miracle. Recognizing such miracles when they present themselves presupposes human faith *and* participation in the ecclesiastical life. The church thus emerges as the *locus* of the manifestation of the divine itself, the place where miracles, healing, and salvation happen. For this reason, it is difficult for deeply traditional Greek Orthodox believers to accept that their churches can be sources of infection, particularly during the eucharistic ritual. For them, such transmission can certainly occur “outside”, in the profane space of everyday life, but not “inside” the temple of God, which is consecrated ground and where the faithful participate in the eternal life

of God. Metropolitan of Aitolia and Akarnania Kosmas, who died in early January 2022 from COVID-19, declared in a sermon: “My fellow men, God does not permit you to be infected within the church. God does not infect! . . . [The church] is a holy place; ‘the church is sky’, says saint Kosmas Aitolos. It is God’s sanctuary” (Kosmas 2020). Likewise, a Greek archimandrite-psychiatrist expressed this spatial demarcation in his own sermon:

“Our people are imprisoned *outside* the church [building] . . . We even put dis-infectants *inside* the church . . . There are priests who offer Holy Communion *out of* the church, the antidoron [blessed bread] *outside* the church. We have exiled the blessings of the church, namely we have taken them *out of* the church as if the church is a dangerous and contaminated place . . . We reached a point where in our country, in Greece, our belief, our religion is persecuted. This is not a coronavirus; it is a devil-virus . . . The person who is talking to you at the moment is a doctor; we also know something about medicine.” (Stylianakis 2020, italics mine)

This last reference would not have seemed at all odd to Stylianakis’s religious audience, even if the priest had not studied medicine. Just as the church is considered to be a “hospital” for the soul and for the body, providing the “medicine of immortality”, the priest is a “doctor” and an agent of God’s spiritual healing. For the religious conservatives, even wearing a mask inside the church is inevitably construed as a sinful act; it signifies a lack of trust in the sacredness of the church’s space. It is only through religious means (e.g., faith, prayer, sacraments), and not through human created technologies such as masks, that genuine protection is assured:

“It is wrong and a lie what some people say: ‘wear the mask, because you have to protect others’. I pray for others to protect them. When a person enters the church and does not respect the holy things of the church, then s/he is not protected no matter how many masks s/he wears. When you come and fear the Holy Communion, [or] you are afraid of the spoon, when you go to worship the icon and you are afraid of getting infected, it is then that you get infected.” (Stylianakis 2020)

For conservatives, it is God and the saints, as bearers of authentic charisma, who define this space, not specialists of other fields, such as politicians or doctors. Thus, the real power of the priests is concealed behind the mantle of God and the saints. Since, following Weber, the prophetic charisma is transformed into office charisma it is the priest who defines and controls the sacred space (Weber 1978, pp. 1139–41, 1164–66):

“Specialists of all kinds can provide an opinion only for the narrow domain of their specialization. As to the existential matters of human vindication and salvation, only the saints are competent to respond. Due to their personal struggle, they enjoy already from this life the eternity through the communion and unity with Christ.” (Damaskinos 2021)

It is important to note that for these religious actors, faith and science are not viewed in opposition to each other. Rather, the two are related hierarchically. Faith is the broader category (for it leads to eternal life), *encompassing* the truth claims of human science. The principles and axioms of the latter are accepted *as long as* they do not attempt to usurp or question the fundamental assumptions of faith. Any attempt of reversing this hierarchy is condemned as blasphemy, for the partiality and imperfectness of human knowledge (science) cannot replace the catholicity of the sacred (mystical revelation). This is perceived as a “red line”, a sacred prohibition.

The proponents of the middle-path have elaborated an alternative proposal based on the distinction between the inner essence and the external form of the ritual. In this way, they have attempted to reconcile faith with modernity, which historically has been a point of grave difficulty for Orthodox Christianity (Makrides 2012b). Their proposal is in accordance with what they perceive to be the demands of contemporary life. Casting such contemporary claims as a necessary guide for shaping the religious life of the Orthodox

communion is also its weak point, and one that hinders its acceptance by the traditionalists. This is mainly because the proposed middle way is itself a product of modernity, asserting a licit version of Orthodoxy that has already come to terms with western modernity (e.g., functional differentiation, pluralism, individualism). However, Orthodoxy's constructive engagement with modernity has not yet been fully achieved. Many religious actors view the Greek Orthodox tradition at once as holistic and a reality in which there is an organic unity between nation and faith and between form and content. By contrast, secularists and religious reformers criticize the nationalization of religion as a heresy and the mechanistic adherence to the existing method of distributing Holy Communion as a mere formalism that fails to respond to the anxieties—and the authentic needs—of modern believers. To strengthen their attack against an essentialist perception of tradition, these actors highlight that, historically, there have been various ways of receiving Communion approved by the traditional Church. But from the perspective of the religious conservatives, any alteration of this "religious formalism" would endanger the "efficacy" of the ceremony (Durkheim 1995, p. 33). While conceding that historically there may have been alternative traditional practices, their counter-argument is that what matters most in the present situation is adherence to the mode that has prevailed as holy tradition in the collective conscience of the faithful.

Church leaders at many levels reject a change in the method of distributing Holy Communion because they fear that it will destabilize the essential and nonnegotiable belief in the divine presence during the ritual. Speaking sociologically, the fear is that such a change will destroy the "absolute heterogeneity" between the sacred and the profane in favor of the second realm (Durkheim 1995, p. 36). The rational spirit of this worldly life will impose its logic even upon the "sacrament of the sacraments", restricting in this way the "Lebensraum" of the sacred. The mystical character of the sacred will thus be accepted *only* as a general religious belief under the presupposition that its mode of practice does not contradict the dominant scientific logic and assertions of modernity. Allow for such changes, and the hierarchy of values is thus reversed with allegedly fatal consequences: such a change would function as a "kerkopoporta" (backdoor) of worldliness that will inevitably cause the fall of "genuine" Orthodoxy.⁴ The fear is that Orthodoxy will lose its distinctive identity transformed into an Orthodox version of Protestantism.

5. Conclusions

The Greek Orthodox Church is not monolithic or uniform. It is comprised of various agents (e.g., bishops, priests, monks, lay theologians) who hold different positions in the church community and who engage in different and, at times, contradictory ways in the process of (re)interpreting common dogmatic beliefs and ritual practices in an attempt either to preserve or adjust them in the narrow contemporary context in which they find themselves, or to a broader rapprochement with secular modernity. In this process, these believers must contend with the presence and pressures of competing secular intellectuals, all bearers of different, often antithetical, political ideologies and practical proposals. The result is a plurality of perspectives, which dialogue and compete with one another and frequently assume conflicting postures, particularly during times of crisis such as the one that we face now with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenges and fatal consequences of the pandemic ignited a lively and contentious public and church dialogue surrounding the method of distributing Holy Communion from a common spoon. Although the official ecclesiastical authorities supported various preventive measures against COVID-19, they hesitated or categorically refused to alter this method. As Patriarch Bartholomew noted: "We have obeyed the exhortations of the health and political authorities, and as is natural, we obey, to the point, however, where the essence and the center of our faith is not touched" (Bartholomew 2020).

Such public statements, which highlighted the church's close collaboration with secular authorities but also sought to set a red line to safeguard its own interests, were not enough to prevent the outbreak of a fierce ideological battle between the proponents of

scientific reason and the traditional guardians of Greek Orthodoxy. The first camp sheltered behind claims of objectivity in the medical sciences embodied in the expertise of epidemiologists. The traditional voices in the Church held fast to centuries-old dogmas and rituals of the sacred tradition, and to the charisma of saints. Theologians seeking to stake out viable positions between these camps tried to find a compromise solution in the distinction between the external form and inner essence of the ritual. All sides employed their own de-legitimization strategies. The conservatives were cast as advocates of obscurantism, who transform Christianity into pure magic, putting people at risk of getting infected. Conversely, the reformers were portrayed as heretics who distorted the charismatic essence of Greek Orthodoxy in their attempt to adjust it to secular modernity, jeopardizing people's eternal salvation in this way. Religious reformers and secular-minded actors openly discussed the possibility of changes, but without managing to develop a working alliance that could put pressure on the church authorities to adopt a new method of distributing Holy Communion, their aspirations went largely unrealized. Even when some temporary changes were implemented, these were accompanied by a vocabulary framing that reinforced more than challenged the prevailing practice of giving Communion from the same spoon.

Since the Greek Orthodox hierarchy is invested with the obligation to preserve the essentials of the sacred tradition, changes in theology and practice are easily and frequently condemned as blasphemous and as dangerous heterodoxies. For this camp, such changes can only be accepted within a framework of tradition and as long as they do not compromise the core elements of ecclesiastical life. Otherwise, the identity of Orthodoxy is perceived as being threatened by the spirit of the world, which desecrates the sacred. To avoid this danger, more progressive church officials seek a balance between, on the one hand, the pragmatism that stems from their administrative position in the church and from their close relationship with the secular spheres of life (e.g., politics), and, on the other hand, the need to maintain an identity boundary for their community within the context of secular society. By presenting themselves as guardians of tradition, they attempt to allay fears and tame the ultra-conservatives, but as a rule with no success, because the latter claim for themselves this title and role.

The controversy over the method of distributing Holy Communion just outlined is really just the tip of the iceberg of a deeper conflict that concerns the position and role of the Orthodox Church in the modern secular socio-political order. The secularists support the tendency to embrace the privatization of religion, attributing to the institutional Church only the mere role of a spiritual organization that addresses the metaphysical anxieties of its members. In their opinion, the Church should have a limited presence and restricted voice in matters related to the public sphere. By no means is the Church justified in defying the state, even when the latter imposes restrictions on religious practices and even when such impositions are justified in terms of public safety, risk reduction, and communal solidarity. By contrast, the religious ultra-conservatives aspire to the "Orthodoxization" of all spheres of human life, for they perceive the Church as the "ark of the nation" that encompasses and shapes all the other particular identities and organizations, including the state. In their opinion, the Church should always submit to its sacred tradition, rejecting any changes to its beliefs and practices in response to the ephemeral needs of the secular culture and its political agents. Situated delicately between these two extremes are those who reject both the nationalization and the privatization of the Orthodox faith. These actors support the Church's active role in civil society in the direction of recognition and respect of the alterity of the "other", rejecting any claims of religious or cultural hegemony. In their eyes, the much needed reconciliation of tradition and modernity passes through the rejection of all forms of dogmatism and through the cultivation of a *habitus* of honest dialogue in the interest of the well-being of all members of the society. The outcome of this ideological struggle remains open and offers new possibilities for reaction and counter-reaction to the transformations of its ecclesiastical, cultural, economic, and political conditions.

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Notes

- ¹ For the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church during the pandemic, the reader is advised to consult (Mitrofanova 2021; Hovorun 2021).
- ² I use the labels “conservatives” and “traditionalists” interchangeably to designate religious actors who have an essentialist perception of tradition, rejecting *a priori* any change in the method of Communion. I use the terms “reformist”, “progressive” or “liberal” theologians for agents who tend to be more open to change as they critically reflect on traditional beliefs and practices. Finally, I use the terms “secularists” or “secular-minded” agents to designate those who reject the metaphysical way of thinking, understanding human life within the immanent order.
- ³ All translations from Greek by the author.
- ⁴ Tradition says that the Ottoman army managed to invade the city of Constantinople in 1453 through a small gate called Kerkopoorta, which was intentionally left open. Thus, in the Greek Orthodox collective consciousness the term signifies betrayal and severe disaster.

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