

## Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Greece

Alexandros Sakellariou

### *Introduction*

The pandemic of Covid-19 had a severe impact on every aspect of people's professional, private and social life including every religious manifestation. The expansion of the pandemic during February - March 2020 led the government to take all the necessary measures in order to protect the population from infection. However, the government was hesitant to impose strict measures on the Orthodox Church of Greece and gave her the ability to decide on her own about the necessary restrictions. The Orthodox Church's reluctance to completely close all Orthodox temples around the country and her persistence to practise Sunday Mass even with a small number of participants caused huge debates in the public sphere during the first weeks of the pandemic. Although the Church acknowledged the dangers deriving from Covid-19 and did not oppose to science, her initial reaction and non-compliance with the government restrictions made her appear as being against the state and medical regulations.

As the pandemic escalated, the Church realised that she had to adjust further, but a significant number of the clergy members (higher and lower rank), monks and nuns, theologians and lay people continued to stand against the restrictions (e.g. not wearing masks inside the churches, kissing religious icons, not keeping social distancing) and vaccination, participated in demonstrations and reproduced conspiracy theories.<sup>1</sup> Especially during the periods of important religious holidays e.g. Easter and Christmas the Church wanted to keep open the temples, and sometimes it actually did bypassing governmental restrictions, for example, during the celebration of the Epiphany on 6 January 2021. In some cases, the police had to arrest and fine clergy

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<sup>1</sup> See for example <https://cutt.ly/pKgziJX> (accessed 20 June 2022).

members for not following the imposed restrictions, e.g. because they opened the churches and practised Sunday Mass or organised litanies.

Apart from the Orthodox Church, there are other religious communities in Greek society (Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.) and a growing number of people who are self-identified as atheists, agnostics, or religious indifferent, especially among younger generations.<sup>2</sup> During the two years of the pandemic, reactions from other religious communities were completely absent. No other religious group or individual reacted against the restrictions imposed on all religious places by the government or appealed to the courts by arguing that their religious freedom and human rights were being violated, a theme that will be analytically discussed in the following section. It further needs to be underlined that while the government decided to close all religious places on March 16, 2020, after the Orthodox Church's unwillingness to make such a decision, other religious communities did so a few days earlier without waiting for the state to regulate over this. For example, a well-known Muslim website asked on 11 March 2020 that all Muslims should pray from their homes the coming Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, avoiding to visit official and non-official mosques. Similarly, the Synod of the Evangelical Church of Greece on March 14, 2020, decided to suspend every physical, face-to-face, religious ritual, to broadcast the Sunday Mass through the Internet, to suspend the Holy Communion and to pray from home (Sakellariou 2020: 116).

From the moment the debates over religion and pandemic in Greek society were very common in the public sphere and sometimes fierce, especially regarding the role of the Orthodox Church, a number of publications, studies and conferences, online seminars and lectures<sup>3</sup> focused on this topic can be easily found. First of all, a number

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<sup>2</sup> In one opinion poll (Public Issue 2008), 7 percent stated that religion is not at all important in their lives, while 14 percent said that religion is not that important. More recently (Kapa Research 2015) 81.4 percent said they are Orthodox Christians, while 14.7 percent said that they are atheists, a number much higher than the 1.8 percent mentioned in the same company's opinion poll in 2006. In the most recent surveys on the issue conducted by Dianeosis (2020), it is mentioned that 15.4 percent do not believe in God, while in 2016 (Dianeosis 2016) this number was 15.8 percent. It is important to mention that these numbers are much higher among the ages 17–24. With regard to religiosity there seems to be also a significant shift between 2006 and 2015, based on the aforementioned poll (Kapa Research 2015). Those who attend the church weekly went from 22.7 percent in 2006 to 6.7 percent in 2015; those who go one to three times per month went from 24.6 percent to 10 percent; and those who never go went from 6.9 percent to 36.7 percent.

<sup>3</sup> For example a session dedicated on the topic was include in a conference organised in 2021 by the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki <https://cutt.ly/CKgkJTH> as well as an online seminar of

of opinion polls (Sakellariou 2020: 163-170) included questions about the role of the Orthodox Church and trust in the Church as an institution, resulting in very interesting findings which will be discussed in the last section of this report. In addition, edited volumes mainly examining the issue from theological and Church perspectives were published (Asproulis and Wood 2020; Dimitriadis 2020; Chrysostomos 2020; Ierotheos 2021), as well as sociological essays (Sakellariou 2020), chapters in edited volumes dedicated to the broader theme of the pandemic (Papanikolopoulos 2020) and academic articles related to the impact of the pandemic on people's spiritual health (Papazoglou et al. 2021), the attitudes of the Greek believers towards the state's measures (Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021) and legal perspectives, i.e. human rights and constitution (Karvokyris 2021).

Overall, it could be argued that regarding religion the dominant theme in the Greek public sphere was exclusively related to the role of the Orthodox Church and her reactions against the restrictive measures during the pandemic adding to the already longstanding discussions taking place in Greek society on Church and state relations and the infiltration of religion in politics.

### *The legal aspect*

As mentioned above, during the first weeks of the pandemic the Greek government started to impose a series of measures in order to protect the population from Covid-19. The first infections were recorded at the end of February 2020, but the first serious restrictions were imposed in March through the ban of all Carnival celebrations and school excursions in Greece and abroad. On March 11, 2020, the government decided to close all kindergartens and schools, and the following two days all bars, cultural events, malls, shops, restaurants, museums and sports halls. Religious places were exempted from the measures, while the government was trying to persuade the Orthodox Church to take this decision on her own through official and unofficial communication. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> until the 16<sup>th</sup> of March the Church in all her announcements following Holy Synod's assemblies expressed her support to the governmental measures, asked people to follow the instructions, but underlined the importance of praying and saw the pandemic as an opportunity to surrender to God's

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interreligious dialogue between Orthodoxy and Islam with the theme "Religion and Health" <https://cutt.ly/jKgcMyJ> (accessed 20 June 2022).

will and to act in solidarity. The Church only asked from people with serious health problems to stay at home. On March the 15<sup>th</sup> the Prime Minister asked from the Archbishop to keep churches open only for individual praying. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the Holy Synod decided to stop all baptisms and weddings, unless there is a need with a small number of people attending. Furthermore, the Church decided to cancel all daily rituals but did not decide the same for the Sunday Mass. The same night the Prime Minister announced that due to the seriousness of the situation every religious place will be closed down without exceptions (Sakellariou 2020:106-117).

This was the first legislation (Common Ministerial Decision) to regulate religious practice for a period from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of March (Official Gazette B 872, 16 March 2020). The measures continued until May through the renewal of the Common Ministerial Decisions. It was only accepted that in some churches the priests could practise a ritual, especially the Sunday Mass but only in order to transmit it via the Internet, television or radio. In May 2020, the situation was improved significantly and religious places reopened with limitations. At the beginning all religious places opened only for individual praying (Official Gazette B, 1643, 2 May 2020), and then with limitations to the number of people who could attend inside and outside always following other protective measures (e.g. masks, social distancing) (Official Gazette B, 1816, 12 May 2020). As expected in the summer time the measures ceased for every activity, including religious practice and rituals, but the legislation came back in force gradually in autumn – winter of 2020-2021 with the following waves of the pandemic (e.g. Official Gazette 5509, 15 December 2020). As it comes out from the above, all these measures were temporary and were withdrawn in times when the pandemic abated, and put back in force in periods of outbreaks. Currently, no restrictions exist for religious places, similarly to other activities, and even protective masks are optional. Baptisms and weddings were mostly affected due to the restrictions, although exceptions have been foreseen with the participation of a very small number of people. However, from the moment the celebrations after the ceremony were banned people usually postponed them. Funerals, continued to take place, also with limitations to the number of attendees, but this was very difficult to implement.

As it was argued, the spring 2020 response of the Greek State to the pandemic came up with horizontal and in-depth limitations on fundamental rights, aiming in particular at the freedom of movement and assembly, economic freedom and the

exercise of freedom of religion. Their legal basis mostly referred to the “necessity law” provision of Article 44 par. 1 of the Greek Constitution (Karavokyris 2021).

The restrictions for religious places caused huge reactions from the Orthodox Church, while no other religious community reacted. Letters were sent out to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs and other officials to demonstrate against the ban especially during significant religious holidays. A number of lawyers, theologians and in some cases priests appealed to the courts to overthrow the restrictions arguing that their religious freedom was violated. In March 2020, a group of priests and believers appealed to the Administrative Court of First Instance of Athens against the first legislation that included the projection to close religious places (Act of Legislative Content, 25 February 2020). The same period, Orthodox believers appealed to the Council of State asking to open the Churches in order for the people to attend religious rituals. Finally, a group of people appealed to the Supreme Civil and Criminal Court of Greece (28 May 2020), arguing that the restrictions violated the Constitution, insulted the name of God and violated the Holy Canons of the Church with the purpose to alienate and extinct the religious consciousness of Greek people and to inflict atheism on the individual and state levels (Sakellariou 2020: 142-143). It is interesting that the Orthodox Church did not participate in these legal initiatives.

All the above appeals against the restrictions imposed on religious places were turned down by the Greek courts. The judicial reasoning implied crucial assumptions. First of all, the inflation of the public health interest covering practically any restriction of rights. Secondly, the application of the proportionality principle equals to a (smooth) necessity test, in which the unusual conditions of the pandemic justify the large discretionary power of the state. The legality of the debated measures is essentially depending on their temporary and exceptional character. Last but not least, the courts examined whether or not the administrative decision overcomes the legal habilitation, usually produced by an Act of Legislative Content in the terms of Article 43 par.2 of the Constitution (Karavokyris 2021).

During the Christmas time of 2020-2021, the government took some stricter measures due to the new wave of the pandemic including religious places, especially for the day of Epiphany, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. The Orthodox Church reacted and argued that she will not implement the new decision but will follow the previous one which

allowed the participation of people during the celebrations of Christmas and New Year days with limitations in their number and wearing protective masks. In addition, the Church on January the 5<sup>th</sup> appealed to the Council of State against this decision.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, all churches were open for celebrations during Epiphany, but a few days later, the Council of State turned down the appeal.

In sum, the main restrictions which affected religious life was the close of all religious places mainly during the peaks of the pandemic and secondly the limitations to the number of people who could attend religious rituals inside and outside of the religious places. When it comes to the appeals the main claims were that there is a violation of the Greek Constitution, more particularly article 3 according to which the dominant religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ, meaning that the Orthodox Church should be treated exceptionally compared to other religious groups; and second article 13 regarding religious freedom. In addition, it was claimed that the European Convention on Human Rights (article 9) was also violated.

### *The Sociological Aspect*

It is still very early to firmly reach a conclusion related to the impact of the pandemic on people's religious life and religiosity. However, there is interesting evidence which should be taken into consideration. As it came from the above section and despite the fact that all restrictive measures were temporary it is clear that the pandemic influenced people's participation in religious practices. Baptisms and weddings were postponed for long periods of time, either because of the restrictions or because people were afraid and hesitant, when the restrictions were gradually withdrawn. Funerals continued with limitations during this period. Overall there is no data yet to show the impact of the pandemic on the rise of civil weddings and civil funerals, for example.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://cutt.ly/bKkmSoe> (accessed 21 June 2022).

<sup>5</sup> A shift towards civil marriages has taken place during the economic crisis. Civil marriage was introduced in 1982. According to the available data in from 1991, out of the total of 65,568 weddings only 5,858 were civil. In ten years' time, in 2001 from the total of 58,491, civil ceremonies were 10,404 and in 2016 from the 49,632 weddings, the 25,854 were civil and 23,778 religious. After the introduction of the civil partnership option in 2013 the difference between religious and civil ceremony/partnership became even wider. For example, in 2017 the Hellenic Statistical Authority recorded 25,163 civil weddings, 24,975 religious services and 4,921 civil partnerships from only 581 in 2013.

The restrictive measures for religious places had an impact on the participation in religious holidays, everyday church attendance and Sunday Mass.<sup>6</sup> People had no access to religious places for a long time, but even when they opened many of them were hesitant to attend, fearing the implementation of the measures such as wearing a protective mask or keeping social distancing. Holy Communion, kissing holy icons and litanies were also considered as practices that could spread the virus. Pilgrimages were also influenced since people could no more visit places of religious significance in Greece (e.g. the Island of Tinos or Mount Athos) and abroad (e.g. Jerusalem) (Papazoglou et al. 2021). The use of the Internet and the media (radio and television) was an important solution for the people who wanted but could not attend religious services either because of the restrictions or because of fear for their health. Many local parishes organised religious services and the Sunday Mass including the option of online or television and radio transmission.

According to a number of opinion polls during the pandemic, the vast majority of the population agreed with the government's decision to close the churches in March 2020 (78.6% and 85%). In another one 84.7% agreed that during the Easter of 2020 all churches should remain closed. When asked which three activities should open first after the lockdown only 9% answered 'the churches', and when asked which should open last 34% replied 'the churches'. Moreover, when people were asked what they missed more during the lockdown only 30% replied attending a religious service in the church, contrary to 62% who replied 'a walk for coffee or lunch' and 31% who replied 'go out for a drink at night' (Sakellariou 2020: 167-168).

Regarding faith and trust, the findings showed a significant growth in trusting science, medicine and the state and only a small rise in faith in God, while trust in the Orthodox Church collapsed. In one opinion poll, people were asked if during the lockdown of 2020 believed more or less in a number of values, institutions, principles. While belief in God faced a rise of 12%, belief in science raised 28%. On the other hand, trust in the Church faced a significant decrease. 44.2% replied 'no' and 'not so much' when asked about their trust in the Orthodox Church, while 54.6% replied 'enough' and 'very much'. Scientists were much higher in the relative list of trust, in

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<sup>6</sup> All the data and information mentioned are mainly refer to the Orthodox religion due to lack of data about other religious groups and because the main debates were related to the stance and attitude of the Orthodox Church.

the third place, while the Church was in the seventh. In another opinion poll, in a scale from 0 to 10 regarding the evaluation of a number of institutions by the people during the pandemic, the Church scored 3.2 and she appeared in the last place, even below from the usually distrusted Media. In another study 67% replied that they do not trust the Church during the pandemic at all. It is very interesting that in an opinion poll of May 2019, 64.85% argued that they trust the Church (i.e. during the pandemic the Church lost around 10%), while in some previous surveys in the 1990s and early 2000s the Church was among the first two or three most trusted institutions, even the first among young people which is certainly not the case anymore.<sup>7</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that contrary to the Church's public discourse during the pandemic and her teachings only 22% argued that Covid-19 cannot be transmitted through the Holy Communion, while 70% argued that it can (Sakellariou 2020: 168-169). Even when surveys were focused only on the followers of Orthodox religion the vast majority agreed with the restrictions. An interesting finding, however, was related to the results regarding the attitude and beliefs of the young believers (15–24 years old) who appear more conservative than the young of their age, in relation to the older ones, make a special impression. The young people believe that the state has taken the specific measures to attack the Church, that the attitude of the Church is a little to not at all satisfactory, and they appear a little happy with the way in which the churches were reopened (Michailidis, Vlasidis and Karekla 2021: 13).

The last point is the relation of religious groups and the state. As mentioned in the previous section, no other religious community in Greece reacted against the restrictive measures the government decided. Furthermore, no other religious community or group of believers appealed to the Greek courts against the government and the restrictions imposed. The Orthodox Church (Metropolitans, monasteries, priests) and theologians or groups of Orthodox believers were the only who reacted in a number of ways (e.g. appeals, official public letters to the authorities, not respecting the restrictions). Many Orthodox monks, nuns, priests, theologians and lay people, participated in anti-Covid-19, anti-masks, anti-vaccination, anti-measure demonstrations in Athens and other parts of Greece, arguing that Orthodox religion is

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Eurobarometer 48 (1997) where 77% argued that they trust the Church and 21% that they do not and for young people see a survey of 2005 <https://core.ac.uk/download/188024846.pdf> (accessed 22 June 2022).

persecuted and very regularly reproducing conspiracy theories (Sakellariou 2020: 137-144, 153-163). However, it needs to be mentioned that after the first period of the pandemic (March-May 2020), the Orthodox Church of Greece and the Holy Synod made a significant turn and followed most of the restrictive measures collaborating with the state. Some exceptions still appeared, e.g. the Epiphany of 2021 or the organisation of religious celebrations in the summer of 2020 (litanies), when the Church decided to introduce her own guidelines and instructions against those of the state. Overall, it could be argued that from a confrontation at the beginning their relations moved to a status of collaboration. The crucial problems, though, were first, that the Orthodox Church failed to control the extreme voices from some of its members who continue to have significant influence on large parts of the population and second, that the Church wanted to be considered as state's partner and that the government should ask for her views and advice respecting her power and authority as officially argued (Sakellariou 2020: 128-130). On the same issue, it seems that the pandemic and the Church's stance strengthened the already dominant view among the population that religion has nothing to do with politics and that the Church should be separated from the state, an opinion even stronger among young people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For young people's views see (Sakellariou 2022a) and (Sakellariou 2022b).

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