



# (PREPRINT) Pandemic, *homo somatis*, and Transformations of the Russian Orthodox Ethos

ANONYMOUS

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**ABSTRACT** The article examines the reactions within the Russian Orthodox Church to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Based on materials from the press, religious and secular Internet portals and online forums, the article systematizes the nature of the responses of Church leadership, priests, and laity to the unprecedented curtailment of liturgical practices and social interactions in quarantine period. The extraordinary challenges of the period of the pandemic made some important trends in the rhetoric and practices of the Orthodox environment more pronounced, and also revealed tensions that go back to the ambivalent relationship of religious culture with the key epistemes of the late modern society.

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**KEYWORDS** Russian Orthodox Church, pandemic, communion, late modern society

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## IMPORTANT

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep tensions within the social and cultural systems, including religions. The pandemic and quarantine led to a crisis of the Church, as well as other social institutions, at all levels—in terms of its economic foundations (sharp drop in daily donations); the structure of power (decentralization of the decision-making mechanism); normative certainty (adaptation and transformation of some ritual practices); social-political participation (crisis of public presence and political involvement).

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But apart from all these various and particular aspects of the crisis I will try to use this fresh material to come closer to the understanding some fundamental cultural tensions manifested at the height of the crisis. My final task is therefore to look how basic religious attitudes and habitus collided and correlated with the prevalent epistemes of the late-modern society. Also, I

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will look at how the new challenges led to splits and plurality of reactions and behavior within religious environment—from clear “identitarian” opposition to the society’s mainstream to various forms of entanglement with it.

In the Christian religious environment, these fundamental tensions were sharply intensified by an explosion of emotional reactions caused by the fact that the epidemic coincided with the key and most eventful period of the annual liturgical cycle expectation and celebration of Easter (April 12, 2020, in most Christian communities, and April 19, 2020, according to the Julian calendar used by the Russian Orthodox Church). In what follows I will especially concentrate upon this spring period when the new, unexpected challenges of uncertainties and swiftly introduced restrictions provoked most spontaneous responses and created typical patterns of dealing with these challenges. This study is based on texts from church documents, media and social networks [5]

The plan of the article is as follows: first, I outline the essence of just one specific but most acute issue of the quarantine period - the (im)possibility and (im)permissible forms of the central Christian rite—the Holy Communion. Next, I introduce some theoretical reflections, comparing the foundations of the religious ethos with the dominant cultural norms of late modern society manifested during the pandemic. Then, drawing on this analysis of cultural tensions and entanglements, I return to the empirical material examining the controversy surrounding the changing correlation of “body and spirit”, as well as the forms of religious sociality. Finally, I will examine the shifting boundaries of a specific Christian Orthodox identity that have become both more porous and more tangible during the crisis. Ultimately, I will explore the issue of this identity in the broad sense: the ambivalent place of the religious (Christian) ethos and those groups that associate themselves with it within the Russian society at large; and even more broadly, the issue of the relationship of this ethos with the late modern culture. [6]

## Disputes over the Chalice

The restrictions imposed by secular and ecclesiastical authorities in connection with the epidemic have caused sharp controversy around the central Christian rite—the Eucharist. “Suddenly, we faced the need to answer the question about the very essence of faith - what do we believe in? What’s in the chalice? What is essential, and what can be dropped out?” (Luchenko 2020). In these disputes, there were two main components, which I analyze below: the issue of the essential charismatic agency (transmitted through the communion) and the issue of the meaning and value of religious sociality (conciliarity, *sobornost’*, in Eastern Orthodox terms). [7]

The introduction of the “non-working regime” (a partial lockdown) in March 2020 delegated the rights to impose restrictions to regional authorities, and they, in turn, introduced quarantine measures of varying severity; local dioceses had to comply with these different regimes. The Moscow Patriarchate gradually formulated recommendations of its own. The general principle was clearly stated and remained unchanged: the Eucharist in the temple, in situ, cannot be abolished under any circumstances and cannot be replaced by distanced forms; however, certain restrictions and innovations are inevitable (Legoida 2020; same position in Panev 2020). Actually, the essence of the dispute was the question of the degree of permissible modifications of the ritual. [8]

The first official statement of the Synod, the Church’s ruling body, on March 11, was carried out in the same vein: “full participation” in the sacraments is irrevocable, but also “frivolous [9]

attitude” towards the epidemic is unacceptable (Synod 2020 2020). On March 17, a key document was published—*The Instructions*—confirming the preservation of the Eucharist (communion) as the main sacred ceremony, but with a detailed listing of ways to observe many special “hygienic rules” in connection with the epidemic—from limiting the number of parishioners to using specific devices to reduce the risk of infection (Moscow Patriarchate 2020).<sup>1</sup> The “Instructions” confirmed the provision on the centrality and irreplaceability of the Eucharist: “The offering of the Bloodless Sacrifice in no case can be canceled, for where there is no Eucharist, there is no church life”; and also: “Holy Body and the blood of Christ are offered for the health of both soul and body.” “Instructions,” at the same time, grounded the restrictive measures upon canonical arguments. For example, it contained references to “historical practices” of divine service during previous epidemics; it also referred to the classic “Handbook for Clergy” by Sergey V. Bulgakov, published in 1913; to “Pidalion,” a book of canonical rules by the eighteenth-century Greek theologian Nikodimus the Hagiorite) (Moscow Patriarchate 2020)

In April, in the messages on the church day of the saint Mary of Egypt, on the feast of the Annunciation, on the Holy Week, and later on, the general decision to close churches and renounce the sacraments, despite the growing epidemic, was never adopted: in this sense, the position of the Russian Church differed from the policy of most Christian, including Orthodox, churches, which closed their places of worship. However, the Moscow Patriarchate officially repeated its calls to refrain from worship when possible.<sup>2</sup> [10]

All specific decisions regulating access to churches and to the sacraments depended on local authorities and local bishops. The severity of the quarantine varied from region to region, and most bishops acted in accordance with the orders of the secular authorities. But in some cases, the restrictions and new rules introduced by the secular and ecclesiastical authorities caused strong irritation and resistance. For some priests and laity, the threat of infection from the sacrament was difficult to fathom, while for others it seemed an inconceivable heresy and absurdity. The range of reactions was wide. Some Church hierarchs loyally accepted the restrictions: the abbot of the Valaam Monastery Pankraty cautiously avoided the word “quarantine”, calling the restrictions “certain measures,” and Metropolitan Mercury of Rostov, avoiding the word “prohibition,” emphasized the “call” to some restrictions. By contrast, at the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, the main Russian monastery, the first reaction was open disobedience, and then a hybrid solution was taken - to provide a choice between two chalices—“traditional” and “hygienic,” that is, following the official *Instructions* (see RIA-News 2020b; on Mercury, see comments in Maximov 2020; on Lavra, see Luchenko 2020). [11]

The resisting position was most sharply reflected in the message of Deacon Ilia Maslov, [12]

1 Here are some of the quite detailed prescriptions of the *Instructions*: “to offer the Holy Mysteries of Christ by wiping the spoon after each partaker with a wrap soaked in alcohol (with regular renewal of the inhibition) and then dipping it in water, followed by disposal of the water according to the practice provided for washing wraps”; “to offer” washing ” [zapivka] only individually—separately to each participant—in a disposable container“; “use disposable hygienic gloves to distribute the antidote”, etc. In the common tradition of the Orthodox communion, the spoon is always used by the priest to give wine and bread of the Eucharist to a communicant; the “washing”—a few sips of water—is taken by each communicant after the Eucharist.

2 On Easter 2020, Greek, Cypriot, Romanian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian churches and churches under the Patriarchate of Constantinople were closed to parishioners, as were Roman Catholic churches all over the world; The Russian and Georgian churches made an exception, although in fact the restrictions were significant here too (See Orthodox Easter: Churches Largely Empty Amid Covid-19 Pandemic, *Euronews Website*. Accessed XXXX. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/19/orthodox-easter-churches-largely-empty-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>).

widely distributed and actively discussed in online Orthodox forums. Maslov spoke of the impossibility of infection within the walls of the church; he sharply condemned what he called “disposable theology” with a direct reproach to the influential Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev and “the blasphemous topic of spoons” (justification of the use of disposable spoons for communion, see above); the refusal of holy services was compared to the Soviet policy of ghettoization of the church (Maslov 2020). Hilarion Alfeyev responded to the deacon’s message a few days later with a sharp rebuke, speaking about the “Pharisaism” and “irresponsible bravado” of those who “push themselves out as self-proclaimed true confessors.” However, the Metropolitan also made a quasi-theological argument in the dispute about the chalice:

“We firmly believe that no infection can be transmitted through the Holy Gifts. The Body and Blood of Christ are accepted by believers”for the healing of soul and body,” that is, they themselves are the source of healing. But the cup and spoon for communion are those items that are not protected from bacteria and viruses falling on them.” (RIA-News 2020a) [13]

Reports of a relatively high infection rate among priests did not become a decisive argument in the controversy, and the debates continued on social networks. “If Christ is not resurrected, then our faith is in vain!” wrote one user; another one reminded that “the Lord Himself gave us the image of communion at the Last Supper” when all his disciples drank from the same Cup, and referred to the chapter on Communion from the “Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith” by St. John Damascene, a prominent Church Fathers from the eighth century; “it is impossible to distort the image of communion given by the Lord Himself,” and therefore disposable spoons mean “doubts about the holiness of the Body and Blood of the Lord.” [14]

Other forum participants, on the contrary, sharply rejected these extreme positions; one of them posted: “all sorts of zealots have come out here,” [they present themselves as] “super-Orthodox”; and he then praised “rationality” of the abbot of the Valaam Monastery, with his more moderate position of accepting restrictions, in contrast to the zealous stubbornness of the monks from the Trinity-Sergius Lavra (*Azbuka very* March 20, 2020).The pragmatic and moderate position proceeded from the impossibility of opposing oneself to society as a whole: [15]

“It’s one thing to say that you are all unbelievers, all you 98 percent of the population, and so leave us alone, we will do as we see fit ... And it is another thing is to say that we are part of the country, and as part of the country, we comply with sanitary requirements.” (RIA-News 2020a) [16]

One of the priests, answering a question from the forum about the risks of infection though the communion gives an answer that leaves the contradiction open: [17]

So we, Orthodox Christians, believe that infection cannot be transmitted through Communion, because bread and wine at the liturgy in a mysterious, incomprehensible way are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord, and in them no infection and no virus can live. Therefore, there is no need to be afraid of getting infected through the Sacrament. However, given the dangers posed by the spread of the virus, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted instructions on how parish life, including Communion, should go in these difficult times. (RIA-News 2020a) [18]

Finally, there was a certain synthetic position, in which there was a noticeable confusion of two languages, two explanatory strategies - roughly speaking, the language of faith and the language of science: as one user wrote, the blood of Christ kills all bacteria and viruses; and another one reproduced the differentiating argument of the official discourse that we have already met: not the Holy Gifts, but the spoon and the cup can be infected (Ibid.). [19]

## Life and Death, *homo somatis*, and Late Modern Epistemes

If we talk about the deep, fundamental basis of the discomfort and rejection that, as we saw in the debate about the Chalice, many Christians felt, we need to turn to the most important principle, which revealed its almost absolute power over the minds during the pandemic—the unconditional priority of the value of physical human life, life as a biological given, above all other values. The domination of this principle manifested itself both in decisions on restrictions adopted by the ruling elites of most countries, and in the overall consent of public opinion with their necessity. It is biological life as the last, exhaustive and irreversible given - even though all other values or basic instincts could not be abolished or disappear—became the unconditional starting point for decision making.<sup>3</sup> This priority of the bio-principle, remaining at the very center of late modern culture, is not always consistent with some of the basic ideas of the “Christian consciousness.” [20]

On what basis does this central element of the modern Zeitgeist rest? It is not enough to explain this fact, in evolutionary terms, by the “self-evident instinct of self-preservation”: after all, it is just important to understand why such an explanation goes as “self-evident.” Never before has the threat of death associated with an epidemic generated such a broad consensus in the choice of action to protect human lives. [21]

In my opinion, bio-determinism rests on a combination of two cultural foundations, or epistemes: scientism and exclusive-expressive subjectivity. The science-centered (scientific) episteme, with the biological-evolutionary logic of species conservation as its central element, undoubtedly determined the strategy of the global response to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, we are talking about the centrality of biomedicine, an evidence-based medical industry and the health care system, which have a legitimate near-monopoly on the interpretation of health, illness and death. The important thing is that, despite the search for some kind of alternative medicine—holistic or integrative; and despite the significant development of bioethics, the medical and biological mainstream still maintains the understanding of a person, in line with an Enlightenment paradigm, as *homo naturalis*, *homo somatis* for the most part, that is, the person whose mind and behavior are mostly explained through natural and bodily mechanisms. [22]

The second fundamental late-modern episteme—what I have designated as exclusive-expressive subjectivity—is a continuation of the specifically modern “I-project” and presupposes the central meaning of the individual subject, the autonomous personality; this category underlies the basic criteria of an ideal collective order and includes such priorities as well- [23]

3 The tendency to build biological and even physiological determinism of this kind was accurately noticed in the famous hierarchical pyramid of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow in the 1940s (1943) (I am not discussing here the question of the controversial empirical validity of the Maslow hierarchy).

4 Without pretending here to draw any complete representation of this episteme, I will refer to a recent book on scientism as a “new orthodoxy” and as a “religion of science”: Robertson Williams (2015). Distinguishing between scientism and science, the authors write about “over-reliance and overconfidence in science as a source of knowledge about all aspects of human life and, ultimately, all human problems” (2–3).

being, security, individual rights, emotional experience, reflexivity, freedom of expression and self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

It is obvious that the two epistemes are in a complex relationship with each other: the “subjective” episteme in a sense opposes scientism with its claim for universal objectivity; on the other hand, it is quite consistent with bio-science because of its undoubted emphasis on somatic, *bodily* self-expression. Although during the quarantine period many motives of individual subjective self-assertion were temporarily curtailed, both epistemes, at the height of the pandemic, reinforced each other and merged firmly at the point indicated above - in the unconditional priority of the value of individual life as such, in fact, in the sacralization of the physical life of an individual, as well as those actions that were aimed at protecting it: spontaneous forms of glorification of medical workers and the shift of the highest public authority from political leaders, show celebrities and big businessmen to doctors and biologists were not accidental.<sup>6</sup> [24]

It is not easy for a consistent Christian consciousness to recognize individual bodily life as the highest value, and physical death as the greatest danger. Some radical Orthodox clergy voiced, in these terms, disagreement with the restrictions on the Eucharist and the ban on the liturgy. Andrei Tkachev, a very popular priest and media preacher, declared the refusal to participate in the holy service as “the end of Christianity.” He argued, expressing the widespread opinion, that the abolition of Easter services for the sake of salvation from death is absurd, since the feast of the Resurrection is the triumph of life and the absolute “trampling” of death as such: “Nobody will believe you that Christ has risen if you fear death” (Tkachev 2020). One of the bishops (Bishop Methodius of Kamensk, Urals region) just as sharply asserted the fundamental impossibility of subordinating the values of the Church (in fact, the value of eternal salvation) to the fear of physical death: [25]

In the temple, you can only become infected with eternal life ... Here in the temple is the victory over death, not the fear of death ... We will be brought here to the temple anyway, and it is better to go to the temple with our own feet ... [because] you need to leave traces, - [by coming to the church,] to make the road to the Kingdom of Heaven. (Methodius 2020) [26]

Another bishop (Metropolitan Kirill Nakonechny of Yekaterinburg) identified the following hierarchy of dangers: “The enemy of the Risen Christ, unfortunately, is real and much more dangerous than any virus. He wants to kidnap us from each other, and from us to steal our churches, and expel the Eucharist from churches” (Luchenko 2020). The widely discussed petition “Open churches for Easter!” by the *Sorok Sorokov* society, one of the most active Orthodox NGOs, proclaimed that “for millions of people in Russia, Heavenly Bread is more dear than earthly bread, and to deprive them of this Bread at a time when grocery and other stores are open is a serious affront to their religious beliefs” (Sorokov 2020). [27]

In one of the earliest works on Orthodox responses to the pandemic, such radical reactions [28]

5 In its most general form, the analysis of this trend made part of some classic studies: Anthony Giddens focused on self-reflexivity as an essential element of the society of “late modernity”: Giddens (Giddens 1991, 71–80), where he examines the influence of “I-reflexivity” on I-narratives, social roles and life styles. See also Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of “I-emancipation” as the basis of “fluid modernity”: Bauman (Bauman 2000, 16–52). Finally, the most important generalizing work remains the book by Charles Taylor (1989); Taylor develops the concept of “exclusive humanism” in another his book: Taylor (2007, 18–19).

6 In Romania, this trend manifested itself in the appearance of billboards depicting doctors with attributes of Christian saints; the local church opposed these images as blasphemous: *Orthodox Church condemns posters*.

were aptly labeled “magical fundamentalism” (Chapnin 2020). Some doubts, in a less articulated form, were also felt in the statements of some bishops about the closure of churches, and so the controversy over the Eucharistic cup that I discussed in the first section, fit into the same line of resistance to the dominant episteme of bio-determinism. One of the Orthodox publicists recalled that, from a Christian point of view, science cannot provide decisive answers to the questions of life and death, in part referring to the classic conflict of “faith and reason” (Shirokov and Gorbulikov 2020). Another advocate close to the right-wing politics radically questioned the defining status of physical death: “If human life is the most important thing in the world, then all martyrs and heroes are just inadequate fools or religious fanatics”—in the same way, he recalls further, as those “heroes who sacrificed their lives for the Fatherland.” His invective is directed against “atheists” for whom, as he put it, “banana is a second cousin” - with a hint to environmentally friendly ethics (Smolin 2020). The following diagnosis sounded most sharply: “today people are selling their faith and freedom for an idol called “health” (Maslov 2020). Patriarch Kirill in one of his epistles (at the feast of Annunciation, April 7, 2020) directly condemned the “anthropocentric civilization,” which puts itself above God and relies on strictly scientific arguments (2020a). In this condemnation, the patriarch continues the criticism he has been conducting for nearly thirty years (Agadjanian 2003, 323–33).

Orthodox criticism of bio-determinism joins numerous other voices condemning quarantine restrictions. On the one hand, it differs sharply from the frequent condemnation of quarantine in Russia and other countries, based on threat of economic stagnation and unemployment. On the other hand, it is in many respects consonant with opinions expressed by some leading European philosophers. Consider, for example, the desperate and even provocative—given the mass scale of the spring epidemic in Italy—pamphlets by Giorgio Agamben, who accused fellow citizens of an “unthinkable” rejection of basic rights and values in favor of an “unclear risk” of infection. Agamben explained such a “surrender of positions by the whole society” by the gap between biological and cultural human experience (due to the invention of medical technologies that artificially support vegetative existence). Of course, the criticism of Agamben, unlike the above-mentioned religious voices, was not directed against “anthropocentrism” as such; nor did it refer to the transcendental. However, he did not fail to reproach the Catholic Church, “having become the servant of science,” for abolishing Easter Masses and forgetting the martyrs and saints who consciously (like St. Francis) took mortal risks for the sake of faith and love for their neighbor (Agamben 2020b, 2020a).

Let us return to the Orthodox Church: we saw that its official position from the very beginning was ambiguous (and could hardly be different). This was evident in all the conversations that offered Christian (theological) justification of the restrictions. The arguments sounded more like a reminder of a special, different, Christian hierarchy of values, which, however, must be temporarily canceled. Restrictions were introduced “while maintaining firm faith in the good providence of God and in Divine omnipotence” but at the same time, other arguments were given in favor of ritual restrictions: a reference to the Gospel verse about the Lord’s temptation (i.e. refusal to risk one’s own life without the need)<sup>7</sup> and the commandment to love one’s neighbor (we will return to this last argument later below) (Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church 2020).

Accessed June 4, 2021. <https://basilica.ro/en/romanian-orthodox-church-condemns-posters-of-doctors-as-saints-a-blasphemous-act/>

7 Words quoted here: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Matthew 4:7) mean a call not to expose oneself to danger unnecessarily, relying only on divine help.

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In the same texts that reflected the official position of the Church, however, all introduced restrictions directly and unequivocally fit into biomedical, scientific logic, especially the same *Instructions* from March 17, which, as already mentioned, included detailed explanations for specific disinfectants and reproduced the formal medical vocabulary (“use of spoons followed by their disposal”; “organize temperature measurement,” etc.). The justifications for restrictions were firmly embedded into the medical discourse. The two languages, reflecting different systems of views, scientific and religious, were in contact, but did not interact directly within the same text. In this sense, as it was rightly noted, the compromise of the two communion cups in the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, which I mentioned above, was very symbolic (Luchenko 2020). It seems that at a deep level there was a basic agreement with the late modern episteme of the centrality of *homo somatis*, even if this agreement was expressed reluctantly or silently; and, at the same time, the inherited Christian language, built around the concepts of spirit and grace, was preserved. This insoluble dichotomy was vividly expressed by Metropolitan Mercury (Ivanov) of Rostov (south of Russia), addressing the flock and agreeing to the forced closure of churches: “[...] Better condemn me [for supporting the quarantine] than later curse me for the coffins of your loved ones who will be carried through the streets” (Panorama 2020). [31]

The canonically fixed (as we have just seen) and practically breaking through to the surface denial of the anthropocentric culture of *homo somatis* reminds of one important paradox: most orthodox religious traditions, and perhaps Eastern Orthodoxy in particular, are highly “somatic” by themselves. It is well known that Orthodox practice requires deep sensory involvement, active work of all five senses and constant bodily movement. This applies to both canonical and vernacular practices (Luhmann 2017; Lidoy 2006; Kirichenko and Poplavskaya 2012; Kormina 2019). In addition, a strong ascetic orientation of Orthodox piety, traditionally following monastic patterns, lays a decisive emphasis on bodily practices. It is important that this cultivation of pious physicality can be transformed, beyond the frame of monastic asceticism, into its opposite—the cult of physical healing achieved with the help of various types of consecrated matter (holy water, icons, etc.), the apex of which is the transubstantiated matter of the Eucharist. [32]

In this respect, “caring for oneself” in physical categories, which we find among Orthodox believers and which, relatively speaking, includes “magical” actions, is comparable to “caring for oneself” within the framework of the scientific late modern episteme: after all, the latter also presupposes certain actions and constraints or “sanctified” consumption—in this case, “sanctified” by modern science. However, in addition to the obvious differences between these two systems in their explanatory argumentation, the Christian picture of the world, of course, is not reduced to “magic”: firstly, it theoretically always interprets the healing properties of “matter” in terms of Divine grace, and, secondly, it puts the categories of earthly life and death in the perspective of the highest goal of salvation. [33]

In reality, however, such theoretical comparisons were hardly relevant in the time of the epidemic. The Church had to look for ways to replace the ritual practices canceled by the epidemic with ones that would be just as effective. The Patriarch made a tour of Moscow with the miraculous icon (“*Umilenie*”—“Tenderness”) in the classical fashion of spatial apotropaic (protective) magic, and many diocesan bishops followed his example, performing “air processions”—flying by plane, with icons and prayers, over cities and territories.<sup>8</sup> On [34]

8 Patriarch Kirill ob'ekhal Moskvu s ikonoi [Patriarch Kirill traveled around Moscow with the icon. *Novaya Gazeta*. Accessed 3 April, 2020. [https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/04/03/n/\\_14245939.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/04/03/n/_14245939.shtml)];

the other hand, the temples, if not closed, remained almost empty; as the epidemic has shown, the majority of people who considered themselves believers, nevertheless, preferred the medical logic of protecting physical life to the Christian logic of a “blessed materialism.”

However, even in this case, the rejection of the sensory, somatic mysticism of temple worship (and some accompanying vernacular practices) was felt as forced and involuntary; full agreement with the non-religious episteme “physical life above all else” would mean the crisis of identity and cognitive dissonance; therefore, this rejection required some kind of rationalization. I would pick at least two forms of such rationalization: on one hand, the motive of “love of one’s neighbor”, and on the other hand, the discourse of spiritualization of religious belonging..

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## Love One’s Neighbor: Social Ethics Beyond the Sacred?

In Russia, as in other countries, the arguments in terms of social virtues and care for one’s neighbor (love for one’s neighbor) were obviously very common. The argument of caring for one’s neighbor can be interpreted in different ways: we saw above that for Agamben the reference to it served as a reminder of a sacrificial rebuffing of bio-determinism. However, on the whole, the argument of caring for one’s neighbor during the pandemic, in the voices of religious leaders and - possibly in different words—in secular discourse, was undoubtedly the main ethical justification for the need for quarantine: “love of one’s neighbor”, being, as it were, the reverse side of the “*soin de soi*”—caring for oneself—is the most intuitive and universal ethical norm, going back to the “golden rule” of ethics, the Kantian “categorical imperative,” as well as some texts of the Gospels.

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In the Catholic tradition, the argument of “love of one’s neighbor” is firmly embedded in the broad discourse of “common good” (Catechism, Part III, Section I, Ch. 2, Art.2). At a deep level, the argument of “caring for one’s neighbor” is firmly aligned with another important idea—the sanctity of human life as the highest value. Catholic doctrine states: “Life and physical health are precious goods entrusted to us by the Lord. We must care for them judiciously, taking into account the needs of others and the common good.” Yet immediately after this follows an important proviso that emphasizes the specificity of the Christian position: “If the moral law calls for respect for bodily life, it does not, however, make it an absolute value. It revolts against a neo-pagan concept that seeks to spread the cult of the body...” (Ibid., Part III, Section II, Ch.2, Art.5).

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The Russian Church offers very similar ideas in its official documents. It “proceeds from the concept of life as an invaluable gift of God, based on Divine Revelation.” But here, too, the same reservation follows: although “care for human health - mental and physical - is from time immemorial the concern of the Church”, yet “maintaining physical health apart from spiritual health from the Orthodox point of view is not an absolute value”; and also: “The Church warns against attempts to absolutize any medical theories, recalling the importance of maintaining spiritual priorities in human life” (Bishops Council 2000 2008, XI.1., XII).

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As we have seen, the argument of “caring for our neighbors” was also voiced in the above-mentioned *Instruction* on the celebration of the Eucharist in an epidemic; Metropolitan Hilarion (in the interview cited above) and many others insisted on it. Moscow priest of Italian

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flights by the local bishops in Kursk, Zlatoust, Khanty-Mansiysk, Omsk, Kostroma, in Belarus and other places are recorded here: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5618392.html>; <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5618778.html>.

origin Fr. Ioann Guaita, reflecting the views of the liberal church tradition, argued that people should observe sanitary restrictions “as civilized people, as responsible citizens, and as believers, as Christians.” He called the denial of limitations for the sake of “higher values” a manifestation of pride, temptation, and spiritual blackmail (Pravmir 2020). However, in most cases, this argument sounded more pragmatic, in the language of common sense, without direct and emotional references to theological rationales—in contrast to the aforementioned ascetic criticism of biocentrism. Such a “theological colorlessness” of the “love one’s neighbor” logic was apparently due to the fact that a special Christian language of social ethics still remained relatively underdeveloped in Russian Orthodoxy (Kostyuk 2013).<sup>9</sup>

## Effects of the “Social Distance:” Spiritual vs Material, Individual vs Collective

The theme of the priority of “spiritual” religiosity in conditions of physical restrictions was also heard very often. Answering the believer’s question about the impossibility of the traditional blessing of the willow on Palm Sunday (an extremely popular Orthodox practice), a priest responded that such a blessing made at home, and not in the church, is no less valid, and he continued that, in essence, blessing was not that important at all, for the most important thing was “inner faith”: after all, he reminded, even among those who met Jesus in Jerusalem with palm branches, there were those who, a few days later, shouted “Crucify him!”<sup>10</sup>. The same was true of the sanctification of Easter cakes: after all, what we call “sanctification,” recalled one bishop, is, in essence, the blessing by the Lord Himself (as written in liturgical books), and therefore every layman himself can ask God for it (RIA-News 2020c). In addition, it is not at all unthinkable of giving up some “pious habits”: the main thing is not whether there will be consecrated, blessed willows and cakes in the house, but what is happening within the soul<sup>11</sup>. Answering, in an online group, to a woman who regretfully told about the impossibility of coming to her mother’s funeral because of the quarantine, another priest recalled that “there are no barriers to prayer, neither in time, nor in distance, death itself does not put obstacles for prayer communication”<sup>12</sup>. Another priest said that it was God’s Providence that thanks to the quarantine “we have learned what we lacked, and have corrected what was wrong in us,” and he called to focus on inner prayer, before all the rest; and another priest considered it a blessing that the quarantine gave more time to read the Gospel; yet another one, echoing all the previous ones, compared quarantine with “a spiritual desert, from which the exit is to the Promised Land.” (Fathers Fedor Borodin, Aleksey Uminsky, Alexandre Satomsky: see Sviashchenniki 2020).

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Another aspect of the same challenge was the crisis of church sociality. Along with the question of the nature of the sacrament, the Eucharist, on the verge of matter and spirit, there was another prominent theme—about the liturgy as a “common service”, as an act of “conciliarity,” “togetherness” (the famous Russian concept of *sobornost*’), the need to come together as a key principle of grace-filled (charismatic) communication. The collapse of live, physical sociality, of course, affected the entire liturgical cycle (and not just the Eucharist),

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9 Kostyuk writes about the lack of a developed interest in the social (2013, 247, 387–92); about the “taboo” of the social theme in theology (2013, 234) and the isolation of the secular “religious philosophy” of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, which tried to fill these gaps (2013, 270). The discourse of the “common good” as a whole is almost absent in Orthodox theology; a recent exception is the book by Aristotle Papanikolaou, who calls the idea of common good a kind of “transcendental” of

and was felt especially painfully on the most important Easter days. The impossibility of *conciliar* participation seemed as nonsense, from the point of view of Christian logic, not least a nonsense as the assumption that the Chalice or the Gifts could be contagious.

The leadership of the Church, in addition to the “common sense” and medical arguments supporting social distancing, offered a more canonical justification, essentially ascetic, with references to the monastic experience of solitude. In a message dated April 3, the Patriarch urged, that the believers follow the example of St. Mary of Egypt and take upon themselves “the feat of permanent stay in their homes, make their homes a desert” (Kirill 2020a). Many priests also expressed this metaphor of solitude by calling for intense prayer and spiritual focus, in the spirit of the same tendency towards the spiritualization of faith already discussed. The motive of gratitude for the fact that the quarantine “providentially” left the believers alone with Christ was often repeated (Priest Alexander Nasibullin in Pravmir 2020). The Belarusian Metropolitan (Pavel of Minsk), persuading the faithful to refrain from church services, urged: “Pray at home, as our grandmothers did during the years of [Soviet] persecutions against the Church. Believe me, just as no one could take away the Easter holiday from our grandmothers, so no one can take away the Resurrection of Christ from us!” (Moscow Patriarchate 2020).

For engaged believers, the most painful breakup was apparently the abolition of sacramental and pastoral communication with the priest. Speaking about the modern Catholic Church, a French sociologist fixed the opposition, confirmed during the quarantine period, between the “Church of the Shrine” (*Église du sanctuaire*), based on belief in the special “ontological properties” of the priest, to the “Church of the periphery” (*église des périphéries*), that is, the Church of the laity who can do without priests; he linked the promotion of this latter model to the ecclesiastical ideology of Pope Francis and gave examples of resistance against it in the months of the epidemic (Rouwel 2020). This phenomenon, which we can call charismatic decentralization, has been much less developed in Russian Orthodoxy. Compare a typical reminder by one of the priests - in a certain counterweight to the appeals for internal spiritual work - that “although Christianity is not reduced to a ritual, to ‘going to Church’, it is not a speculative doctrine either” (Kordochkin 2020).

Hardly anyone in the Church could dispute such a statement. Some priests turned to the most important canonical metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ. “For many, the Church is, first of all, the walls of temples, external prescriptions, rituals, and hierarchy. But today the Church is revealed to us as the mystical Body of Christ.” “To be the Body” means, of course, to be together: so the texts say; “but there is always a certain gap ... between these texts and what penetrates into our heart, into our consciousness”; a general answer is impossible, and the main thing is to find the right answer for yourself (Priests Dimitrii Sikhonenko, Aleksei Vtulov in Pravmir 2020). This reflection certainly attempts to find an internal, individual solution in the situation when the classical requirement of “being together” becomes problematic.

Arguments about the meaning of church sociality in these categories paradoxically bring

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modern secular democracy and substantiates the connection of this idea with the Orthodox discourse of “divine-humanity”—divine-human communion (Papanikolaou 2012, 133–34, 157–59).

10 Voprosy sviashchenniku. *Foma*. Accessed April 10, 2020. <https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-nakarantine.html>.

11 Voprosy sviashchenniku. *Foma*. Accessed April 10, 2020. <https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-nakarantine.html>.

12 *Batiushla online [Priest online]*. *Vkontakte*. Accessed April 10, 2020. [https://vk.com/topic-25505827\\_26391950?offset=4480](https://vk.com/topic-25505827_26391950?offset=4480).

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us back to the problem already mentioned above: the physical and mystical meanings of “corporeality” are correlated; however, the forced restrictions of the quarantine highlights their opposition. The mystical, spiritual dimension of conciliarity (togetherness), in which everyone finds his own model “according to his heart,” creates a community that exists beyond physical sociality and adds an emphasis on the individualization of faith.

To what extent were these emphases a forced response to what one essay called the “charismatic helplessness” faced by the Church (Soldatov 2020)? The reduction of the fullness of liturgical and daily practices caused strong embarrassment, and calls for inner individual spiritual concentration might be seen as only a temporary measure. But even in this case, we can assume that implicitly these calls, accentuated during the quarantine, revealed a certain tendency, a movement towards *église des périphéries*. This movement fits into the second late-modern episteme mentioned above—the episteme of “self-exclusivity,” for which social distance—not only physical, and regardless of epidemics—becomes the norm. This norm is projected onto the Christian consciousness and makes it inevitable to modify practices in the direction of greater “virtuality.” The opposite logic is also evident: and the explosive growth of new digital practices using the Internet during the quarantine period became the catalyst for this deep tendency towards individualized religiosity.<sup>13</sup>

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## Babylon, Leviathan, and the Meaning of Christian Identity

Summarizing all that has been said, let us try to assess what the systemic crisis associated with the pandemic has revealed in terms of our understanding of the place of religion in today’s Russian society. Our starting point would be to look at those rhetorical frames in which religious identity is assessed “from within” the religious community itself. Obviously, this particular self-identification (or a spectrum thereof), however shaken by the pan-social effect of the epidemic, could not completely disappear and even became, in a way, more apparent.

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A skeptical attitude towards the limitations of church life presumed the rejection of what was felt as the exclusion of religion from the cultural and social “center”, its displacement into the category of phenomena outside the “primary sphere of life support”; as if “the production of spiritual goods”, if we speak in terms of the theory of religious economics (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Iannaccone 1997), were excluded from the category of production of “goods of prime necessity.” Challenging this opinion, a patriarchy spokesman believed that the ministry of priests was as important as the work of doctors, law enforcement officers and social workers (Legoida 2020). Equating temples with beauty salons, theaters, and even schools in the quarantine seemed unacceptable; “the Church is not Disneyland,” as one of the priests exclaimed, adding that reducing religion to the area of leisure and entertainment was offensive (Kordochkin 2020). This rejection was most consistently expressed in the above-mentioned petition “Open churches for Easter!” (Sorokov 2020). This rhetoric is comparable to a similar petition by Roman Catholic activists, according to which “something terribly wrong was happening to a culture that leaved open abortion clinics and liquor stores, but closed places of worship.”<sup>14</sup> The disappointed statement of the limited influence of religion in a deeply secu-

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13 In this article, I do not consider separately the topic of new practices related to electronic media; this critical topic requires special attention and detailed analysis. For the mediatization of religion in general, see Campbell (2013). For mediatization in Orthodoxy, see Luchenko (2015; Ostrovskaya 2019).

14 *Open Letter 2020. We are Easter People. An open letter to bishops*. Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://weareaneasterpeople.com>.

larized society is combined with criticism of consumerism through which shines the criticism of the dominant late-modern epistemes.

The second frame of this kind of “identitarian resistance”, which manifested itself with varying degrees of radicalism, was distancing not only from the “consumer society,” but also from the State—not so much (and independently) from the current political and ideological regime, but rather from the State’s presumed meta-ideological “non-religiosity.” In the aforementioned *Petition* was addressed to the Russian president, and the authors sharply criticized the “spiritless arbitrariness” and “cynical disrespect for the Orthodox faith” on the part of the local authorities, for their decision to close the churches; the *Petition* reminded that these hostile actions ran the risk of diverting the usually loyal believers to the political opposition. Open rejection of the harshest forms of administrative interference on the part of the secular authorities often occurred in the provinces: the Saratov Bishop was indignant at the “attitude of the local authorities to their people”; the reaction of the Krasnodar Metropolitan was just as harsh; in Kirov, social networks sharply rejected the policy of the local governor, and local Orthodox Cossacks refused to participate in the “isolation” of churches; in the Komi Republic, activists were going to sue a state body over the closure of churches; in Volgograd and the Republic of Mari El, local bishops refused to close churches, despite requests from the authorities and the doctors’ recommendations. In fact, partly hidden resistance to tough politics could be found, , as we saw above, in the compromise decisions of the Moscow patriarchy itself.<sup>15</sup>

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Tactical disagreement with secular authorities was undoubtedly fueled by more fundamental idiosyncrasy about the potentially hostile Leviathan, just as it was about Babylon, the “culture of consumption.” Actually, the image of the State could be easily associated with both symbols. This deep distrust of the State among many Orthodox Christians is apparently deeper than national-conservative sympathies for the Putin’s political regime. In a more straightforward form, this rejection was expressed in apocalyptic fears of total control (a common motive among ordinary believers: “the government is preparing an electronic state on earth”) (see forum Batiushka-online). Definitely, in these fears we can still see the echoes of the post-memory of Soviet anti-religious violence: such was the comparison with the “openly godless government” both in the above-quoted *Petition* and in the comments in the *VKoktakte* social media group (Sorokov 2020). This silent or open opposition to the modern state’s claims to what Michel Foucault called *surveiller et punir*, discipline and punish (1975), Christian and other believers joined a fairly widespread rejection of the quarantine found in Russia and elsewhere. Such an opposition could be caused by economic difficulties, libertarian instincts, or some other reason, and it might be justified either in utilitarian categories, or with the help of vague or explicit conspiracy theories. At the same time, it is significant that, despite associations with the Soviet past and suspicions of repressive intentions of the secular authorities, anti-quarantine resistance rarely manifested itself in terms of restrictions of “religious freedoms” (“freedom of conscience”); apparently, the comparative weakness of these arguments explained with the general underdevelopment of the discourse of religious freedom in Russian society and, in particular, with the privileged public status of the Russian Church. (The motive for protecting freedom of conscience sounded much stronger in Western countries).

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15 The quote of Metropolitan of Saratov Longin (Korchagin) in *Achilles*. Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://ahilla.ru/saratovskij-mitropolit-vozmutiliya-namereniyem-vlastej-ne-puskat-veruyushhih-v-hramy-na-pashu/>; statements of Metropolitan of Yekaterinodar Isidor (Kirichenko). Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://www.yuga.ru/news/449671/>; on Kirov region, the Komi Republic, the Volgograd region and the Mari El Republic see the report “In urgent need”. - 7x7. Horizontal Russia, 04/16/2020.

Of course, despite the listed examples of distancing from the “consumer society” and secular power control, the majority of Orthodox priests and laity accepted the rules of the game dictated by the key late modern epistemes and generally enforced by the authorities. This acceptance was in many cases dictated by pragmatic loyalty, but in other cases by a deeper recognition of the priority of the value of an autonomous individual life. [51]

## Concluding Note

As we have seen, the pandemic has made certain tendencies in religious life more apparent: a movement towards a greater internalization of practices and faith; greater extra-ritual, extra-sacramental “spirituality”; wider separation of believing (faith) and belonging. These trends have been intensified by the unprecedented shift of religious practices into the space of virtual media. The development of these tendencies have been confirmed by those examples of principles resistance, which outlined, within the society, a relatively narrow space deliberately different, “identitarian” religiosity. The Christian identity thus revealed was all but persistent or solid. On the one hand, the borders of this identity blurred when the believers followed mainstream responses to the pandemic—either under institutional pressure or by their own choice. On the other hand, this identity was reassembled, revived and strongly articulated—either with fundamentalist or with modified new emphases—by those groups and individuals who resisted this erosion of identity. [52]

All these processes, in their deep content, were animated by complex negotiations between the perceived Christian ethos and hegemonic contemporary cultural epistemes, which I have designated above as scientific bio-determinism and exclusive-expressive subjectivity. As the Russian patriarch proclaimed, the Church needed a specific response that will “significantly differ from the ‘new normality’ currently promoted by some public and political groups, which includes a radical restructuring of social relations, growing individualization, and the deepening of divisions among people” (Kirill 2020b). Here we can feel obvious tensions with late modern epistemes; but what follows is a complex dialogue that does not imply either straightforward acceptance or absolute rejection. [53]

To make a very last statement, it should be remembered that the epistemes themselves, despite their dominance, are by no means monolithic or possessing indisputable explanatory means, and the months of the pandemic have shown these uncertainties. [54]

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