



Pandemic, *homo somatis*, and Transformations of the Russian Orthodox Ethos

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ABSTRACT The article examines the reactions within the Russian Orthodox Church to the coronavirus pandemic, especially its first year of 2020. Based on materials from the official institutions, 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 during the quarantine period. The extraordinary challenges of the period of the pandemic made evident some important trends in the rhetoric and practices of the Orthodox environment and reveal tensions that are rooted in the ambivalent relationship of religious culture with the key epistemes of late modern society.

KEYWORDS Russian Orthodox Church, pandemic, Communion, late modern society

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep tensions in 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); and social-political participation (crisis of public presence and political involvement). [1]

However, apart from all these various and particular aspects of the crisis I will try to use this material to come closer to the understanding of some fundamental cultural tensions manifested at the height of the crisis. My central task is therefore to look at how basic religious attitudes and habitus collided and correlated with the prevalent epistemes of late modern society. In addition, I will look at how the new challenges led to splits and a plurality of reactions and behavior within the religious environment—from clear ‘identitarian’ opposition against the societal mainstream to various forms of entanglement with it. [2]

In the Christian religious environment, these fundamental tensions were sharply intensi- [3]

fied by an explosion of emotional reactions caused by the fact that the start of the epidemic coincided with the key and most eventful period of the annual liturgical cycle—preparation for and celebration of Easter. In what follows I will especially concentrate upon this spring 2020 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.¹

This study is based on texts from church documents, media, and social networks. The official instructions, messages, sermons, and interviews issued by the Moscow Patriarchate office or produced by the highest Church hierarchs during the epidemic constitutes the first set of relevant data. It contains both prescriptive rules for clergy and laity and their interpretations for a larger audience. The second set of data includes all sorts of spontaneous reactions to the official church's or to state-initiated guidelines—reactions coming from local hierarchs and particular priests as well as lay religious actors. Among the last group, the individual postings and messages in the open Orthodox forums—the direct speech of common believers—deserves particular attention here. [4]

The plan of the article is as follows: First, I outline the essence of just one specific but a 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 forms of religious sociality. Finally, I will examine the shifting boundaries of a specific Christian Orthodox identity—an overall self-perception of those who identify with this religious tradition in Russia, inasmuch as such a generalization is possible; I will show that such boundaries 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 Russian society, and even more broadly, the issue of the relationship of this ethos with late modern culture. [5]

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 chalice²? What is essential, and what can be dropped out?”³ 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). [6]

1 The restrictions continued throughout the next waves of the epidemic, including the Easter time of 2021 and 2022, but the reactions and controversies I focus upon here were not that dramatic as during the first year. Most of my material therefore comes from 2020.

2 The chalice, or *potir* in the Russian usage (initially Greek), is a vessel reminiscent of that in Christ's Last Supper, containing the blessed wine during the sacrament of Eucharist. The priest normally uses a special spoon to scoop up the wine from the chalice and give it to each communicant, in addition to the holy bread. The same spoon is used for all—a practice questioned during the epidemic.

3 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs' crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona>.

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.⁴ Actually, the essence of the dispute was the question of the degree of permissible modifications of the ritual. [7]

The first official statement of the Synod, the Church ruling body, on March 11, was carried out in the same vein: “Full participation” in the sacraments is irrevocable, but “frivolous attitude” towards the epidemic is also unacceptable.⁵ On March 17, a key document was published—*The Instruction*—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.⁶ The *Instruction* 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 the “Holy Body and the blood of Christ are offered for the health of both soul and body.” The *Instruction*, 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, and to “Pidalion,” a book of canonical rules by the eighteenth-century Greek theologian Nikodimus the Hagiorite (see the *Instruktsiia*). [8]

In April 2020, in the messages on the church day of the saint Mary of Egypt, at the feast of the Annunciation, during Holy Week, and later on, the general decision to close churches and cancel the sacraments was never adopted, despite the growing epidemic. 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.⁷ [9]

All specific decisions regulating access to churches and to the sacraments depended on local [10]

4 Vladimir Legoida: An Interview from April 5, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchy*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5617247.html>. Same position in Greek Orthodoxy: John Zizioulas: “The Church without the Eucharist is No Longer the Church. An Interview by Jivko Panev.” *Orthodoxie.com*. March 29, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://orthodoxie.com/en/metropolitan-john-zizioulas-the-church-without-the-eucharist-is-no-longer-the-church/>.

5 Meeting of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, March 11, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5605029.html>.

6 All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise. Here are some of the quite detailed prescriptions of the *Instruction*: “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, a few sips of water taken by each communicant after the Eucharist] separately to each participant - in a disposable container”; “use disposable hygienic gloves to distribute the antidote”; “use of spoons followed by their disposal”; “organize temperature measurement”, etc.). From: *Instruktsiia nastoiateliam prihodov i podvorii, igumenam i igumeniam monastyrei Russkoi pravoslavnoi cerkvi v sviazi s ugrozoi rasprostranenia koronavirusnoi infektsii* [Instruction for the rectors of parishes, hegumens of the monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church in connection with threats of the coronavirus epidemic]. Meeting of the Holy Synod, #30, March 17, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608594.html>.

7 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

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. However, 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 “appeal” to believers to follow restrictions.⁸ 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 above-quoted official *Instruction*.⁹

The position of resistance was most sharply reflected in the message of Deacon Ilia Maslov, a public figure with a somewhat marginal image but large outreach. The message was 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 and the *Instruktsiia*). He compared the refusal of holy services to the Soviet policy of ghettoization of the church.¹⁰ Hilarion Alfeyev responded to the deacon’s message a few days later with a sharp rebuke, speaking about the “Pharisaic” and “irresponsible bravado” of those who “push themselves out as self-proclaimed true confessors.”¹¹ 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. (Ibid.)

Although there were reports of a relatively high infection rate among the priests, this information did not really affect the controversy, and the debates continued in the social networks. “If Christ is not resurrected, then our faith is in vain!” wrote one user; another one reminded readers 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

here too (See *Orthodox Easter: Churches Largely Empty Amid Covid-19 Pandemic*, Euronews. Last accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/19/orthodox-easter-churches-largely-empty-amid-coronavirus-pandemic.html>).

8 Valaamskii monastyr’ vremennno ne prinimaet palomnikov [The Valaam monastery temporarily refuses the pilgrims]. RIA-News. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://ria.ru/20200317/1568745473.html>. See also Georgii Maximov *Kak ponimat’ slova patriarha* [How to understand the words of the Patriarch]. Youtube. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqSrfutO_w&feature=emb_logo.

9 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs’ crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona>.

10 Ilia Maslov: *Koronavirusnaia dressirovka tserkvi* [The training of the Church by the coronavirus]. *Analiticheskii tsentr sviatogo Vasilii Velikogo*. March 19, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://stbasil.center/2020/03/19/koronavirusnaja-dressirovka-cerkvi/>.

11 Metropolitan Hilarion: *Ne boishsia zarazit’sia sam—podumai o drugikh* [Not afraid to be infected yourself—think about others]. *An interview with RIA-News*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://ria.ru/20200324/1569073789.html>.

“Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith” by St. John Damascene, a prominent Church Father 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.”¹²

Other participants of the same online forum, *Azbuka Very*, on the contrary, sharply rejected this extreme position. One of them posted that “all sorts of zealots have come out here, [they present themselves as] super-Orthodox” and then praised the “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* on March 20, 2020). The pragmatic and moderate position proceeded from the impossibility of opposing oneself to society as a whole: [14]

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 to say that we are part of the country, and as part of the country, we comply with sanitary requirements. (Ibid.) [15]

One of the priests, answering a question from the forum about the risks of infection though Communion, gives an answer that leaves the contradiction open: [16]

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 being 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. (Ibid.) [17]

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, that the Holy Gifts cannot be infected but the spoon and the cup can (ibid.). [18]

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

If we talk about the deep, fundamental basis of the discomfort and rejection that many Christians felt, as we saw in the debate about the Chalice, 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 to 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—that became [19]

12 Quoted here the participants of the online forum *Azbuka Very*, S.K., Gloria, Sergii. *Azbuka Very*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://azbyka.ru/forum/threads/voprosy-pro-koronavirus-i-ne-tolko.23701/page-10#post-385112>.

the unconditional starting point for decision making.¹³ This priority of the bio-principle, remaining at the very center of late modern culture, may be not always consistent with some of the basic ideas of the ‘Christian consciousness.’

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. [20]

In my opinion, supported by a few theoretical references provided below, this attitude I call bio-determinism rests on a combination of two cultural foundations, or epistemes, which stay in a tense, sometimes even contradictory co-relationship: scientism and exclusive-expressive subjectivity. The science-centered (scientistic) episteme, with the biological-evolutionary logic of species conservation as its central element, undoubtedly determined the strategy of the global response to the pandemic.¹⁴ 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, despite the significant development of bioethics and even despite a powerful postmodern critique of the scientific truth-claims—the medical and biological mainstream still seem to maintain the understanding of the 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. [21]

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-being, security, individual rights, emotional experience, reflexivity, freedom of expression, and self-determination.¹⁵ [22]

It is obvious that, as I already mentioned, 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 [23]

13 The tendency to establish a biological and even physiological determinism of this kind was famously noticed in the 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).

14 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” by Williams and Robertson (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” (2015, 2–3).

15 In its most general form, the analysis of this trend constitutes a part of some classic studies: Anthony Giddens focused on self-reflexivity as an essential element of the society of “late modernity” (1991, 71–80), where he examines the influence of “I-reflectivity” on I-narratives, social roles and life styles. See also Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of “I-emancipation” as the basis of “fluid modernity” (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 book (2007, 18–19 and *passim*).

fact, in a sacralization of the physical life of an individual, as well as those actions that were aimed at protecting it and 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.¹⁶

It is not easy for a consistent ‘Christian consciousness’—if such an ideal-typical expression can be permitted—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 popular priest and media preacher, declared the refusal to participate in the holy service as “the end of Christianity.”¹⁷ He argued, expressing a 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” (ibid). 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:

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.¹⁸

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, steal our churches, and expel the Eucharist from churches.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

In one of the earliest works on Orthodox responses to the pandemic, such radical reactions were aptly labeled as “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 fits into the same line of resistance to the dominant episteme of bio-determinism. One of the Orthodox

16 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: <https://basilica.ro/en/romanian-orthodox-church-condemns-posters-of-doctors-as-saints-a-blasphemous-act/> (Last accessed April 14, 2022).

17 Andrei Tkachev: *Paskha doma – konets khristianstva* [Easter at home is the end of Christianity]. *Union of Orthodox Journalists*, April 2, 2020. Last accessed April 4, 2022. <https://spzh.news/ru/news/70112-paskha-doma--eto-konec-khristianstva--klirik-rpc>.

18 Bishop Methodius: *My tak ili inache umrem* [We will die anyway]. *Znak*. April 13, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.znak.com/2020-04-13/my_tak_libo_inache_umrem_na_urala_episkop_prizval_hodit_v_hramy_vo_vremya_pandemii.

19 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs’ crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona>.

20 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramy na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition “Open churches for Easter”]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

publicists recalled that, from a Christian point of view, science could not provide decisive answers to the questions of life and death, in part referring to the classic conflict of “faith and reason.”²¹ Another advocate, politically leaning to the right, 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.”²² His invective was directed against “atheists” for whom, as he put it, “banana is a second cousin” - with a hint to environmentally friendly ethics (see Smolin 2020). The following diagnosis sounded most sharply: “today people are selling their faith and freedom for an idol called ‘health’.”²³ Patriarch Kirill, in one of his epistles at the feast of Annunciation on April 7, 2020, directly condemned the “anthropocentric civilization”, which supposedly puts itself above God and relies on strictly scientific arguments.²⁴ In this condemnation, the patriarch continued the criticism he had been expressing for nearly thirty years (Agadjanian 2003, 323–33).

Orthodox criticism of bio-determinism joined numerous other voices condemning quarantine restrictions. On the one hand, it differed 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 was in many respects consonant with opinions expressed by some European intellectuals. Consider, for example, the desperate and even provocative pamphlets—given the mass scale of the spring 2020 epidemic in Italy—by Giorgio Agamben, who accused fellow citizens of an “unthinkable” rejection of basic rights and values in favor of an “unclear risk” of infection.²⁵ Agamben explained such a “surrender of positions by the whole society” with 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 Russian religious voices, was not directed against anthropocentrism as such; nor did it refer to the transcendental. However, he did not fail to reproach the Roman Catholic Church for “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.²⁶

However, let us go back to the Russian 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

[28]

[29]

21 Evgenii Shirokov and Vladimir Gorbulikov. *Ot konca sveta spaset Bog ili nauka?* [Will God or science save from the end of the world?]. *Foma*. April 9, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://foma.ru/koronavirus-ot-konca-sveta-spaset-bog-ili-nauka.html> (Last accessed 14/04/2022)

22 Mikhail Smolin (2020). *Samoe strashnoe: vlast' ne boitsia odnogo – Boga* [The worst thing: the authorities are not afraid of God]. *Dvukhglavyi orel. Obshchestvo razvitiia russgoko istoricheskogo prosveshchenia*. Last Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://rusorel.info/samoe-strashnoe-vlast-ne-boitsya-odnogo-boga>.

23 Iliia Maslov: *Koronavirusnaia dressirovka tserkvi* [The training of the Church by the coronavirus]. *Analiticheskii tsentr sviatogo Vasilia Velikogo*. March 19, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://stbasil.center/2020/03/19/koronavirusnaja-dressirovka-cerkvi/>.

24 Patriarch Kirill: *Patriarshee poslanie* [Patriarch’s message]. April 3, 2020. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/5616517.html>.

25 Giorgio Agamben: “L’invenzione di un’epidemia.” *Quodlibet*. February 26, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.

26 Giorgio Agamben: “Una domanda.” *Quodlibet*. April 13, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda>.

maintaining firm faith in the good providence of God and in Divine omnipotence”²⁷; yet, 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)²⁸ and the commandment to love one’s neighbor (we will return to this last argument later below).

Yet, if we further interpret all the texts that reflected the official position of the Church, including the *Instruction* from March 17, we see motives directly and unequivocally fitting into the biomedical, scientific logic, which, as already mentioned, included detailed explanations for specific disinfectants and reproduced the formal medical vocabulary (see footnote 3 above). The justifications for restrictions were firmly embedded into the medical discourse. The two languages, reflecting different systems of view, *scientific* and religious, were found next to each other 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.²⁹ 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.”³⁰

There is another interesting angle for this controversy: The denial of the anthropocentric culture of *homo somatis*, both canonically fixed (as we have just seen) and practically voiced in various forms, should not obscure the fact that most orthodox religious traditions, and perhaps Eastern Orthodoxy in particular, are highly “somatic” in and of themselves. It is well known that ‘orthopraxy’ is specifically central to the Eastern Christian tradition (Hann and Goltz 2010; Bremer 2016). Moreover, the practice requires deep sensory involvement, active work of all five senses, and the veneration of the sacred materiality of consecrated matter (relics, icons, water and other objects). This style of mind and worship applies to both canonical and vernacular practices, and there is a fairly large anthropological literature providing evidence of such “somatic emphasis” (see, e.g., Luehrmann 2017; Lidov 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 material objects and substances. The transubstantiated matter/substance of the Eucharist may be seen as the apex of these phenomena.

27 *Instruktsiia nastoiateliam prihodov i podvori, igumenam i igumeniam monastyrei Russkoi pravoslavnoi cerkvi v sviazi s ugrozoi rasprostraneniia koronavirusnoi infektsii* [Instruction for the rectors of parishes, hegumens of the monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church in connection with threats of the coronavirus epidemic]. Meeting of the Holy Synod, #30, March 17, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608594.html>.

28 The quote “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4:7) means to not expose oneself to danger unnecessarily, relying only on divine help.

29 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs’ crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona>.

30 Bishop Mercury: *Nuzhda zakon meniaet* [Needs can change the law]. Interview with Metropolitan Mercury in 2020. *Panorama*, Rostov-on-Don. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.panoram.ru/news/society/nuzhda-zakon-menyaet-mitropolit-merkuriy-poprosil-zhiteley-samoizolirovatsya-na-paskhu/>.

In this respect, ‘caring for oneself’ in physical, bodily terms, which we find among Orthodox believers and which, to put it in canonically rigorous categories, includes ‘magical’ actions, is comparable to caring for oneself within the framework of the scientific and individualistic late modern epistemes. After all, the latter also presuppose certain actions, constraints, or ‘sanctified’ consumption—in this case, sanctified by modern science and driven by the *soin de soi* (caring of oneself). However, in spite of such affinity, we should be careful of not ignoring obvious differences between these two dispositions in their explanatory argumentation. The Christian worldview, of course, is not reduced to such pragmatic individual magic: Firstly, it theoretically always interprets the healing properties of ‘matter’ in terms of Divine grace; secondly, it puts the categories of earthly life and death in the perspective of the highest goal of salvation; and thirdly, it provides a sense of communitarian, collective quest for healing effects of the sanctified matter. [32]

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 cancelled 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.³¹ On 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.’ [33]

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. [34]

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

During the epidemic, in Russia as in other countries, arguments regarding social virtues and caring for one’s neighbor (love for one’s neighbor) were obviously very common. However, 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, both 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*, 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. [35]

In the modern Catholic tradition, the argument of ‘love of one’s neighbor’ is the most de- [36]

31 *Patriarch Kirill ob’ekhal Moskvu s ikonoi* [Patriarch Kirill traveled around Moscow with the icon]. *Novaya Gazeta*, April 3, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/04/03/n_14245939.shtml; 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>> (Last accessed February 14, 2022).

veloped and firmly embedded in the broad discourse of the “common good” (Catechism, Part III, Section I, Ch. 2, Art.2)³². At a deep level, the argument of caring for one’s neighbor is closely aligned with another important idea—the sanctity of human life as the highest value. The 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 specific 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...” (Catechism, Part III, Section II, Ch.2, Art.5).

The Russian Church offers very similar ideas in its recent 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 the “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.” Also, “The Church warns against attempts to absolutize any medical theories, recalling the importance of maintaining spiritual priorities in human life.”³³

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 origin Fr. Ioann Guaita, representing the views of a 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.³⁴ 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,’ as one can call it, 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).³⁵

Effects of ‘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 (a widely popular Orthodox practice), a priest

32 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

33 *The Bases of the Social Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church XI.1. and XII on the Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html>.

34 *Sviashchenniki o vere i zhizni v usloviakh pandemii* [Priests on faith and life during the pandemic]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.pravmir.ru>.

35 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 (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 (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 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).

responded that such a blessing is no less valid when made at home, and not in the church, and he continued that, in essence, the blessing was not that important at all because the most important thing was ‘inner faith’: After all, he reminded his listeners, even among those who met Jesus in Jerusalem with palm branches there were those who, a few days later, shouted “Crucify him!”³⁶ 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.³⁷ In addition, it is not at all unthinkable to give 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.³⁸ Answering to a woman in an online group who regretfully spoke 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, and even death cannot cut off prayer communication.”³⁹ 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,” calling to focus on inner prayer before all the rest; another priest considered it a blessing that the quarantine gave more time to read the Gospel; and 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 in the footnote above).

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), and was felt especially painfully on the most important Easter days. The impossibility of *conciliar* participation seemed nonsensical from the point of view of the Christian logic, as much as the assumption that the Chalice or the Gifts could be contagious. [40]

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 believers to follow the example of St. Mary of Egypt and take upon themselves “the feat of permanent stay in their homes,” to “make their homes a desert.”⁴⁰ 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 believers alone with Christ was often repeated (Priest Alexander Nasibullin: *Sviashchenniki* 2020). The Belarusian Metropolitan (Pavel of Minsk), persuading the faithful to refrain from church services, urged: “Pray at [41]

36 *Voprosy sviashchenniku. Foma*. Last accessed April 10, 2022. <https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-nakarantine.html>.

37 Bishop Savva Tutunov. *V RPTs raz’asnili vopros osviaschenie kulichei i paskhi...* [The Church explains the blessing of Easter cakes...]. *RIA-News*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://ria.ru/20200416/1570106544.html>.

38 *Voprosy sviashchenniku. Foma*. Last accessed April 10, 2022. <https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-nakarantine.html>.

39 *Batiushla online* [Priest online]. *Vkontakte*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://vk.com/topic-25505827_26391950?offset=4480.

40 *Patriarshee poslanie* [Patriarch’s message]. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/5616517.html>.

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!”⁴¹

For engaged believers, the most painful experience was apparently the break of sacramental and pastoral communication with the priest. Speaking about the modern Catholic Church, a French sociologist fixed the opposition, exacerbated 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 go without priests; he linked the promotion of this latter model to the ecclesiastical ideology of Pope Francis and gave examples of a conservative resistance against it in the months of the epidemic (Rauwel 2020). This phenomenon, which we can call charismatic decentralization, is much less developed in Russian Orthodoxy. Compare a typical reminder by one of the priests—a counterweight of sorts 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.”⁴²

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 of Christ” means, of course, to be together, as 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: *Sviashchenniki* 2020).

This reflection certainly attempts to find an internal, individual solution of ‘being mystically the Body’ in the situation when the usual requirement of ‘being together’ becomes problematic. 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?⁴³ 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*, more independent from the *sacra*. This movement also 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 can also be valid: the explosive growth

41 *Metropolit Minskii Pavel sovershil oblet granits Belarusi* [Pavel, Metropolitan of Minsk, made a flight over the borders of Belarus]. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5616445.html>.

42 Andrey Kordochkin: *Mesto tserkvi – v sfere dosuga?* [Does Church belong to leisure sector?]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.pravmir.ru/mesto-czerkvi-v-nishe-dosuga/>.

43 Alexander Soldatov: *Test dlya patriarha* [A test for the Patriarch]. *Novaya gazeta*. April 4, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/04/84707-test-dlya-patriarha>.

of new digital, virtual practices using the Internet during the quarantine period became the catalyst for this deep tendency towards spiritualized and individualized religiosity.⁴⁴

Babylon, Leviathan, and the Borders 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. [46]

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 spokesperson believed that the ministry of priests was as important as the work of doctors, law enforcement officers and social workers.⁴⁵ Equating temples with beauty salons, theaters, and even schools in the time of 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.⁴⁶ This rejection was most consistently expressed in the above-mentioned petition "Open churches for Easter!"⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ The disappointed statement of the limited influence of religion in a deeply secularized society is combined with criticism of consumerism, through which one can hear criticism of dominant late modern epistemes. [47]

The second frame of this kind of 'identitarian resistance,' which manifested itself with varying degrees of radicalism, was distancing itself not only from consumer society but also from the state—not so much from (and independently of) the current political and ideological regime, but rather from the state's presumed meta-ideological 'non-religiosity.' 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 them that these hostile actions ran the risk of diverting the usually loyal believers to the political op- [48]

44 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 Russian Orthodoxy, see Luchenko (2015, 2021); Ostrovskaya (2019).

45 Vladimir Legoida: An Interview from April 5, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchy*. Last accessed April 4, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5617247.html>.

46 Alexei Kardochkin: *Mesto tserkvi – v nische dosuga?* [Does the Church belong to leisure industry?]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.pravmir.ru/mesto-czerkvi-v-nishe-dosuga/>.

47 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramy na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition "Open churches for Easter"]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

48 Open Letter 2020. *We are Easter People. An open letter to bishops*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <https://weareaneasterpeople.com>.

position.⁴⁹ 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 angry 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.⁵⁰

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. 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*). This deep distrust of the state among many Orthodox Christians is apparently deeper, as I said above, than the national-conservative sympathies for the Putin’s political regime, and this fact correlates with the abounding scholarship showing deep ambiguities within an apparent “symphonic” narrative of church-state relations (Papkova 2011; Richters 2013; Stoeckl 2018; Koellner 2021; Agadjanian 2021). [49]

It goes without saying that in these fears we can also still see the echoes of the memory of Soviet anti-religious violence, such as in the above-mentioned comparison with the “openly godless government” in the above-quoted *Petition*⁵¹ and similar references in the comments in the *VKontakte* social media group. The impact of collective memory of forced secularism and not-fully-completed post-Soviet ‘revival’ can be felt in how religious groups perceive themselves in today’s Russian society.⁵² [50]

These special attitudes can be included, however, into a broader interpretative frame: In this silent or open opposition to the modern state’s claims to what Michel Foucault called *surveiller et punir*, discipline and punish (Foucault 1975), Christian and other believers joined a fairly widespread rejection of the quarantine found in Russia and elsewhere throughout the years of the pandemic. 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 [51]

49 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramy na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition “Open churches for Easter”]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

50 The quote of Metropolitan of Saratov Longin (Korchagin) in *Achilles*, April 19, 2020. Last accessed February 14, 2022. <https://ahilla.ru/saratovskij-mitropolit-vozmutilysya-namereniem-vlastej-ne-puskat-ve-ryushhih-v-hramy-na-pashu/>; statements of Metropolitan of Yekaterinodar Isidor (Kirichenko): <https://www.yuga.ru/news/449671/> (Last accessed February 14, 2022).; on Kirov region, the Komi Republic, the Volgograd region and the Mari El Republic see the report “In urgent need”. - 7x7. Horizontal Russia, April 16, 2022.

51 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramy na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition “Open churches for Easter”]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

52 The theme of the legacy of Soviet secularist past and its reversal definitely deserves special elaboration that cannot be fully developed here and goes beyond the frame of this paper. The major contributions to the anthropology of Post-Soviet secular legacy—as well as desecularization—include Rogers (2005); Steinberg & Wanner (2008); Pelkmann (2009, esp. Introduction); Luehrmann (2011); Kormina, Panchenko & Shtyrkov (2015).

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 opposing restrictions of ‘religious freedoms’ (‘freedom of conscience’). Apparently, the comparative weakness of these arguments can be explained with the general underdevelopment of the religious freedom discourse in Russian society, as well as by the fact of the privileged public status of the Orthodox Church. (The motive for protecting freedom of conscience sounded much stronger in Western countries.)

Of course, despite the listed examples of distancing oneself from consumer society and secular power control, the majority of Orthodox priests and laity accepted the rules of the game grounded in 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. [52]

Conclusion

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 principled resistance which outlined, within the society, a relatively narrow space of a deliberately different, ‘identitarian’ religiosity. The Christian identity thus revealed was, however, all but persistent or solid. On the one hand, the borders of this identity blurred when 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 fervor or with modified new emphases—by those groups and individuals who resisted this erosion of identity. [53]

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 would “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.”⁵³ 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. [54]

To make the very last statement, it should be remembered that the ‘epistemes’ themselves, despite their dominance, are by no means monolithic or possess indisputable explanatory means, and the years of the pandemic revealed these uncertainties. However, this is another, different theme that goes beyond my scope here. [55]

53 Patriarch Kirill: *Doklad na eparkhial'nom sobranii Moskvy* [Report at the Moscow diocesan assembly]. December 24, 2020. *The Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5739902.html>.

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