



Alexander Agadjanian

RELIGIONS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE GLOBAL
HEALTH CRISIS AS SHIFTS CATALYSER IN RELIGIOUS
IMAGINATION AND PRACTICES

Ալեքսանդր Աղաջանյան

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RELIGIONS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS AS SHIFTS CATALYSER IN RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION AND PRACTICES

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Abstract. *This paper draws upon the author's own research and the two special issues in the two academic religious studies journals he himself edited. In addition, the paper gives an overview of many other publications that appeared in the recent years as an attempt to analyse the reactions of various religions to the Covid-19 pandemic and the respective shifts in religious practices the pandemic triggered or accelerated. The author singles out a few major themes that stood out prominently in the experiences of the religious communities during the pandemic: theological interpretations of the health crisis; shifts in corporate rituals; an explosive growth of the virtual forms of worship; a reconfiguring of authority structures; preserving specific religious identity, etc*

The idea of this paper is to make a general overview of how religions across the world reacted to the pandemic of the Covid-19 virus, with an attempt to single out a few major general trends that were common to various religious traditions or that might be specific to only some of them. In making this overview, I will draw largely upon the growing literature on the subject mostly coming from sociology and anthropology of religion, which started appearing in the academic journals and websites since at least the beginning

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of the 2021. In addition to bringing together these new studies, I will draw upon my own empirical material gathered in the years of the pandemic in my research of the Russian Orthodox Church's dealing with the challenges,² as well as upon my experience in editing two special issues in religious studies journals.³ I will include my own work into a large and growing corpus of publications on the interaction of religion and Covid-19.⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects and spheres of human societies and cultures; religion has been one of them. Of course, the prominence of religious discourses and actions in response to the epidemic varied according to the general weight of religious institutions and attitudes across the countries: they were central in such places as India, many Muslim states, or some Catholic nations such as Mexico or the Philippines; they were less publicly prominent in other places such as China or Europe. In this sense, the level of religious awareness of the pandemic issues depended on a level of secularization in a given society. Accordingly, the nature of the religious engagement with the pandemic might be varying from direct denial of the virus and opposition to the governmental and medical arrangements, to a collaboration with the state health institutions in terms of offering auxiliary healthcare and psychological services. We have also seen the variations within each religious tradition and even within the same institutions, as the shock of the pandemic revealed a variety of attitudes within the communities.

Another preliminary reflexion: as religious communities and individual believers are part of larger societies, constituting their sub-

² Alexander Agadjanian, «Сопrotивление и покорность. Вызовы пандемии, позднемодерные эпистемы и русский православный этос». *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом* 39, no.1 (2021):12-38; Alexander Agadjanian, "Pandemic, *homo somatis*, and Transformations of the Russian Orthodox Ethos. *Entangled Religions* 12, no.3 (2022). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.9655>

³ Религия и Ковид-19. Тематический блок. *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом* 39, no.1 (2021); Religion and Pandemic: Shifts of Interpretations, Popular Lore, and Practices. Special Issue. *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 3 (2022).

⁴ See, for example, the blogs like "Dossier Corona", *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, Utrecht University: <https://religiousmatters.nl/dossier-corona1/>; the Covid-19 section in London School of Economics blog "Religion and Global Society": <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/category/covid-19/>; another special issue of an academic journal was published in 2022: "Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic: mediating presence and distance," *Religion*, 52, no.2 (2022)

systems or sub-groups, we always need to keep in mind that their reactions and actions are intertwined with those of other social groups and are themselves multiply-motivated. We could, during the years 2020-2022, find similar patterns of reactions and actions that were motivated economically or politically – from open denial and dissent (against business or freedom restrictions) to various degrees of adaptation to the extraordinary context of the pandemic. Our special focus is therefore specifically religious sources and motivations of social action; particular effects the whole phenomenon of the pandemic had in the life of those groups and people who explicitly identified with religious ideas or institutions.

Let us try now to highlight a few major aspects, or themes, that have emerged and have been widespread, *mutatis mutandis*, across various religious traditions worldwide.

The first theme is what we would call a theology, or sometimes a sort of semiotics, of the epidemic – the ways the religious imaginations dealt with the disaster referring to authority of religious specialists and scriptures; how they explained it in providential terms as signs of a transcendental logic. We can see usual theological tropes presenting the pandemic as the punishment for committed sins – either self-critically recognizing believers’ own depravities, but more willingly shifting the blame onto external agents. The reason of the epidemic, for the Jewish ultra-orthodox in Israel, Russia or the United State, might be “the lack of modesty”, the violation of *kashrut*, the “moral relativism and postmodernism” (with a hint to the West) but also the atheism of the Chinese and the anti-Semitism of the Iranians.⁵ Among Russian Muslims, the general trope that the Doomsday’s menace would only be withstood by impeccable piety could be reinforced by a specific anger against the Chinese anti-Uighur policies that allegedly triggered the epidemic.⁶ The Nigerian religious leaders largely referred to the traditional Doomsday narratives, with references either to the God’s punishment for sins

⁵ Galina Zelenina, “Тора против вируса, раввины против правительства: ультраортодоксия перед лицом пандемии,” *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом* 39, no. 1 (2021): 104-105

⁶ Sofia Ragozina, “‘Popular Ijtihad’ and Entangled Islamic Discourse on the Covid-19 Pandemic in Russia,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no.3 (2022). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.8919>

or the work of the devil; the explanation of the decease has been clearly transcendental, while the secular medical discourse was ignored. Interesting, that this kind of religious rhetoric united such different Nigerian groups as Muslims (specifically, the *salafi* groups like the Izala and NASFAT), and Pentecostal Christian (such as the churches Christ Embassy and the Living Faith), creating a sort of inter-religious entanglement with a similar stance. Even more interesting, however, that both groups combined the religious rhetoric with conspiracy schemes, accusing the Western powers of provoking the disaster, while referring to blockbusting Hollywood dystopias as allegedly providing keys for such interpretations.⁷ Here we can see a typical example of what Webb Kean once called “semiotic ideologies”, combining, in this case, religious and other sources.⁸ Overall, the suspicion of humanity’s growing vices, often with anti-western (or at least anti-liberal) connotations, as of the origin of decease, has been common for more conservative communities, such as not only aforementioned Muslims, but also Orthodox Jews or Orthodox Christians. As other research shows, it might have also been central for arguments of such a state body dealing with religion as the *Diyanet*, the Turkish governmental Directorate of religious affairs, whose rhetoric during the pandemic clearly distanced from health discourse and was largely riddled with the same combination of religious moralizing and anti-western invectives.⁹

For most of religious communities, however, the “theological” discourse as such was not the only, and, perhaps, not the most important one,

⁷ Dauda Abubakar, Abdullahi Muhammad Maigari, Murtala Ibrahim and Arafat Ibrahim, “Curtailed Worship, Conspiracy Theories, and Hollywood Dystopias: Reacting to the COVID-19 Pandemic among the Reformists Muslims and Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 3 (2022).

⁸ Term introduced in: Webb Keane, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things”, *Language & Communication* 23, no. ¾ (2003): 419

⁹ The Diyanet’s discourse was referring to gay-parades as the signs of decay and cause of global troubles. See Oğuz Alyanak, “Turkey’s Diyanet and Political Islam during the Pandemic,” in: *Viral Loads: Anthropologies of Urgency in the Time of COVID-19*, ed. Lenore Manderson, Nancy J. Burke, Ayo Wahlberg, (London: UCL Press, 2021) 162-180. See also a chapter, from the same collection, on a moral discourse in the Orthodox Jewish milieu: Tsipy Ivry and Sarah Segal-Katz, “Purity’s Dangers: at the Interstices of Religion and Health in Israel,” in *Viral Loads: Anthropologies of Urgency in the Yime of COVID-19*, ed. Lenore Manderson, Nancy J. Burke, Ayo Wahlberg, (London: UCL Press, 2021), 384-408.

in the perception of the pandemic. Most of the less radical, mainstream religious institutions would usually accept the medical arguments provided by health authorities and state officials, follow the respective policies, and even provide adjacent services.¹⁰ In many cases, the religious actors added careful theological justifications of such compliance, through the ideas of compatibility of religion with science; therefore, in the religious rhetoric, we can see easy transitions from rigidity to flexibility. In most cases, however, as I can judge from an overview of various studies, even most moderate and collaborative religious groups accepted the introduced health measures with embarrassment, regret and reluctance, as a temporary compromise. There were exceptions – such is, for example, the case of Jain communities, in both the United States and India, for whom the outbreak of the pandemic was an occasion to strengthen an already developed pre-pandemic discourse claiming the complete compatibility and consent between the principles of their faith and that of natural sciences.¹¹

For a great majority of religious groups, what really led to a deep and ongoing embarrassment was not so much the “intellectual” (or theological) challenge of the pandemic, but rather what I would call the *habitus* shock – the curtailed practices of worship; this is the second major theme I would like to highlight here. Sanitary restrictions became the blow that the epidemic inflicted at the very heart of religious life – its rituals, its sensual and material procedures, its corporeality, its sense of bodily communion with the divine and with believing fellows. Whereas before the pandemic various religious practices routinely flourished - the reception of Holy Communion at Mass, pilgrimages to sacred places, veneration of relics, icons, or holy figures - now the same objects were presented to them as transmitters of contagious and

¹⁰ For a detailed study discussing the engagement of one religious institution – the Romanian Orthodox Church - in anti-Covid public health measures, see Stefan Dascalu, Patrik G. Flammer, Mahan Ghafari, Shaun C. Henson, Roger Nascimento, and Michael B. Bonsall, “Engaging Religious Institutions and Faith-Based Communities in Public Health Initiatives: A Case Study of the Romanian Orthodox Church During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Frontiers in Public Health*, 16 December 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.768091>.

¹¹ Claire Maes, “Jain Life Reimagined: An Examination of Jain Practice and Discourse During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 3, <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.9179>

deadly disease. Moreover, the religious communities were targeted in the media as creating most dangerous situations to the public health when persisting on mass gatherings.¹² Still, the ritual gathering were felt as absolutely central. In a popular conviction quoted in one study, “if you don’t go three times to the *jumma* [Friday prayer], your heart will close.”¹³ A study of vernacular Catholic practices in Mexico showed how the pandemic restrictions disrupted the sacred materiality of an important tradition of *ex voto* dances offered to local saints in supplication for health and prosperity – and now, ironically, seen and potentially contagious events spreading the virus.¹⁴

I myself studied in detail the bitter debates, within the Russian Orthodox Church, over the closing of churches for Easter 2020 celebrations, cancelling of the Eucharist, or introducing hygienic rules into the ritual sequence – all the measures that seemed to be an impossible intrusion of medical materiality into the sacral materiality of religion.¹⁵ For many, especially the more “fundamentalist,” or identity-sensitive, communities and priests, the closure of the churches and the cancelling of the holy communion was simply nonsense and heresy. The official hierarchy, however, were trying to be in line with secular and health authorities, although this loyalty strongly varied from diocese to diocese, from region to region. The suspension of key rituals and of bodily proximity, “togetherness” (*sobornost*), seemed to create a cognitive dissonance: how can one be infected from the Eucharistic chalice (the cup) or, especially, from the holy

¹² See London School of Economics blog: Michal Kravel-Tovi and Esra Özyürek, 2020. “Contagious crowds: religious gatherings in the age of coronavirus,” 22 May 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/05/22/contagious-crowds-religious-gatherings-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>

¹³ Arndt Emmerich, “Masks, Mosques and Lockdowns: Islamic Organisations Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.8900>

¹⁴ David Robichaux, José Manuel Moreno Carvallo, Jorge Martínez Galván, “Dancing for the Saints in the Time of Covid-19: Responses to the 2020 Lockdown in Central Mexico,” *Entangled Religions* 12, no. 3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.8901>

¹⁵ For another study discussing the impact of the pandemic on Orthodox Christian practice, see Andreas Papazoglou, Dimitrios V. Moysidis, Christos Tsagkaris, Marko Dorosh, Efstratios Karagiannidis and Rafael Mazin, “Spiritual Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts on Orthodox Christianity Devotion Practices, Rituals, and Religious Pilgrimages”, *Journal of Religion and Health* 60 (2021), 3217–3229

gifts, bread and wine, which are considered as being the body and blood of Jesus and are supposed to give the “true life”? As one bishop said, “in the church, you can only be infected with the eternal life...Here in the church, it’s the victory over death, not the fear of death...”¹⁶ The dissonance and outrage were still exacerbated because the restrictions fell on Easter time: in the social media I have studied the issue was actively discussed; as one user exclaimed, expressing a common embarrassment, “if Christ hasn’t risen from the dead, the whole our faith is in vain!”; how then the Easter can be downplayed by the virus?¹⁷

The Moscow patriarchy was perplexed, trying to find a compromise between the restrictions and the ritual requirements: in March 2020, it elaborated a special instruction of how to conduct liturgy combining canonical traditions with detailed hygienic measures; the instruction was severely criticized as blasphemous by the fundamentalists but grudgingly accepted by the mainstream priests in most dioceses.¹⁸

The debates and tensions, similar to these, were found everywhere. The sensorial, bodily “presence,” its suspension and, possibly, its substitutions – what can be called “negotiating the presence” - has been the main concern, during the pandemic, of all kinds of religious communities, including Pentecostals, Mormon, Hindu, Sufi, Shi’a Muslims, spirits devotees in Singapore, or Burning Man celebrants, as shown in a recently published collection of papers.¹⁹ The authors of an introduction to this

¹⁶ Bishop Methodius (Kondratiev), «Мы так или иначе умрем», *Znak*, 13.04.2020. https://www.znak.com/2020-04-3/my_tak_libo_inache_umrem_na_ural_e_episkop_prizval_hodit_v_hramy_vo_vremya_pandemii

¹⁷ Online Forum «Азбука веры», <https://azbyka.ru/forum/threads/voprosy-pro-koronavirus-i-ne-tolko.23701/page-10#post-385112>

¹⁸ Instruction – “Инструкция настоятелям приходов и подворий, игуменам и игумениям монастырей Русской православной церкви в связи с угрозой распространения коронавирусной инфекции,” Заседание Синода, Журнал №3, 17.03.2020, *Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchy*, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608594.html>. See my longer analysis in: Agadjanian, *Сопrotивление*, 15-17.

¹⁹ Carola Lorea, Neena Mahadev, Natalie Lang & Ningning Chen, “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance,” *Religion* 52, no. 2 (2022), 177-198

collection refer to Birgit Meyer's emphasis on the sensational forms.²⁰ For most of the communities, the only way to keep a religious identity and remain pious and true believers was to "negotiate the presence" by various means. The Jains "negotiated the bodily presence" by domesticating the key practices of *pūjā* and *darśan* in the situation of the physical restrictions.²¹ The Greek Orthodox "domesticated" the Easter shroud (*epitaphoi*), the central element of the Good Friday ceremony in Christian Orthodoxy, to substitute the "presence" of the sacred in their homes when the churches were closed.²²

This search of substitutions for traditional, participatory and sensorial rituals is closely related to the third big theme found in many contexts throughout the time of the pandemic - a rapid growth of the virtual, online-mediated forms of worship and devotional assemblies. The pandemic inspired and accelerated the trend to what has been called "the distanced Church"²³. It might be at first perceived as a temporary, involuntary suspense of physical actions and gatherings but, in fact, it meant a continuation of the old trend of translating old practices into the new language of the digital and thus became an area of creativity that may have lasting effect beyond the time of the quarantine, or actually predated it. Since a couple of decades, with the new mediatization of religion²⁴, the religious groups were creating what is aptly called "the third space" - not just between the temple-gathering and family/home, but to put it metaphorically, between the physical and the

²⁰ Birgit Meyer, "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding," in Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations. Religion/Culture/Critique*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 1–28

²¹ Maes, "Jain Life."

²² Giorgos Papantoniou & Athanasios K. Vionis, "Popular Religion and Material Responses to Pandemic: The Christian Cult of the *Epitaphios* during the COVID-19 Crisis in Greece and Cyprus," *Ethnoarchaeology* 12, no. 2 (2020), 85–117

²³ Heidi Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, 2020, Available electronically at <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/187891>.

²⁴ Heidi Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Routledge, 2013; Heidi Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies", *New Media & Society* 19, no.1 (2017), 15–24; Teresa Berger, *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 2018; Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., *Digital Religion*, London, Routledge, 2021, and Heidi Campbell, John Dyer, eds., *Ecclesiology of the Digital Church: Theological Reflections of a New Normal*, London, SCM Press, 2022.

virtual.²⁵ The pandemic further stimulated this trend. Such were attempted to weave digital elements like recording in the home services, for example, in the case of Jains, Mexican Catholics, Greek Orthodox and others. The domestication of worship and new space arrangements have been widely reported in the pandemic time.²⁶ The new media also change the borders of the worshipping community. For example, a national Muslim *ummah* tends to merge with global (digitally connected) Muslim community while discussing/exchanging the personal piety and commitment to rules.²⁷ In fact, the new media's effect proved to be complex: they could be both subversive (in relation to the old practices) but also reinforcing conservative mobilization. The new media could be also ambivalently related to the issue of individual vs communal religiosity. On the one hand, they may give rise to individualized - personal or domestic - forms of worship and spirituality (which seems obvious when the gatherings are forbidden) – and this trend was abundantly chronicled in the studies.²⁸ On the other hand, because of their public openness and connectivity, the new media expand the community, redraw the boundaries or even create new communities.²⁹ Overall, the resulting paradox, brought to all religious groups, showed a growing hyper-connectivity as opposed to (and, in a way, substituted for) the sensory deprivation I talked about above.

Yet another effect of the pandemic – and this is the fourth theme raised by this extraordinary experience - has been the adjustment, or a certain reconfiguration, of the religious authority and respective institutional

²⁵ Steven Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, *Media Theory and the 'Third Spaces of Digital Religion*. Colorado Boulder: University of Colorado Boulder, 2014.

²⁶ Bhambra Manmit and Austin Tiffany, "From the Sanctuary to the Sofa: What COVID-19 has taught us about Sacred Space," *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog*, April 28, 2021. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2021/04/from-the-sanctuary-to-the-sofa-what-covid-19-hastaught-us-about-sacred-space/>.

²⁷ Ragozina, "Popular Ijtihad."

²⁸ Joseph Baker, Gerardo Marti, Ruth Braunstein, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Grace Yukich, 2020. "Religion in the Age of Social Distancing: How COVID-19 Presents New Directions for Research," *Sociology of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2021), 357–370; Mohammad Alami Musa, "Will Religion post-Covid-19 be More Personal, Less Communal?" *The Strait Times*, July 2, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/willreligion-post-covid-19-be-more-personal-less-communal>

²⁹ Lorea et al, 2022, "Religion and the COVID-19," 182-83.

structures. It was correctly observed that religious authority, seen within the frame of Durkheimian and Bourdieuan sociology, is largely based upon performative power of the rituals, and therefore the curtailing of the rituals might question and challenge the structure of authority.³⁰ German Muslim institutional hierarchy, as a study shows, was challenged by the new rules, which brought about renegotiating authority and decision-making between the individual mosques and the Muslim bureaucratic bodies. At the same time, they were also testing relations with German state authorities in a time of uncertain regulations. In fact, these groups used this opportunity to show themselves as reliable partners of the state and thus to assert a stronger identity status of Muslims in Germany in general.³¹ Russian Muslims went through the same kind of adaptation: the Muslim institutions stood firm and loyal to the state and controlled the *ummah*; however, in addition, what this study showed, the traditional authority of the *ulemas* was amplified, if not in a way challenged, by what the author called “popular *ijtihad*” – the explosive growth of spontaneous opinions of common Muslims through the internet forums and blogs.³²

In my study of the Russian material, the guiding rules generated at the top of hierarchy (of both religious and secular authorities) were sometimes vague and contradictory, and it led to uncertainties in reactions of local and various grassroots groups who challenged the institutional authority and improvised with new forms of virtual (online) or home activities. This challenge, sometimes an open rejection of the official guidelines, came from both fundamentalist “deniers” (who also were among the most active “antivaxxers” – those who rejected the Covid-19 vaccination) and from groups reputed as “liberal” or “reformists.” While the former protested the secular state’s enforced restrictions as such, the latter – the “liberals” - would rather comply to medical restrictions, and yet emphasizing those forms of

³⁰ Loïc Bawidamann, Laura Peter & Rafael Walthert, “Restricted Religion. Compliance, Vicariousness, and Authority during the Corona Pandemic in Switzerland,” *European Societies* 23: sup1 (2021), 638-639

³¹ Emmerich, “Masks.”

³² Ragozina, “Popular *Ijtihad*.”

individual and spiritual religiosity and small-group gatherings that they believed were lacking in the official Church institutions.³³

The fifth crosscutting theme, connected to the issue of redistribution of internal religious authority, is the theme of multiple political implications of the religious institutional reactions. I have already mentioned how the pandemic's challenges affected the relations between the Muslim institutions and local civic authorities in Germany and Russia. Other groups, positioning themselves in a floating space between resistance and compliance, also negotiated their relations with the state. In most cases, conservative religions, in alliance with right wing and populist political groups, resisted governmental restrictions and mandatory vaccination, based upon medical and public health pragmatism, this opposing what is now often called "biopolitics". More liberal religious groups, as I said above, could be more loyal to public health policies but they could be also suspicious of the governments' misuse of lockdowns for restricting religious freedoms. Overall, the idea of legal rights (in our case, religious freedoms), presumably curtailed by the governments, has been common in the United States and other liberal-democratic societies.³⁴ Such arguments, and anything close to anti-governmental resentment, were obviously did not manifest themselves in such authoritarian contexts as China, Vietnam or Singapore.

In my own research, I found a lot of evidence of how many mainstream Christian Orthodox communities, although overall loyal to the authoritarian Russian political regime, stayed in tense confrontation with local authorities whom they suspected in secularistic arrogance. An activist lay Orthodox group called *Sorok sorokov*, in their open letter to the Russian president, directly accused the local authorities in "non-spiritual arbitrariness and cynical disrespect towards the Orthodox faith" (*бездуховный произвол и циничное неуважение к православной вере*).³⁵ In the final analysis, the

³³ Agadjanian, Сопротивление; Idem, "Pandemic."

³⁴ See an example of protests by churches in Louisiana against the governor's restrictions: Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis & Uffe Schjoedt, "Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 10, no. 2 (2020), 115-117

³⁵ Петиция «Откройте храмы на Пасху». *CitizenGo*. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=type&utm_campaign

resistance against the state pressure is deeply rooted in the religious imagination mixed up with conspiracies. Such was a suspicion, found in the social media, that “the government (or, sometimes: the world government) prepares an electronic state on earth”; even the patriarch of the Russian church, speaking specifically about the plans of digitalization of state services, referred to the apocalyptic perspectives of the secular state’s encroachment on the minds of people.³⁶

Finally, I will delve upon another theme that runs throughout many studies, which is what we can call, in the most general way, the question of religious identity. In various societies, the groups and the individuals who presented their behavior as religiously-motivated, faced, in different ways, the health crisis that was globally interpreted in clearly non-religious terms – medical, rational, or scientific. People, who identified themselves with a religion, might have responded in activating theological explanations or “semiotic ideologies,” as I have shown above; but in majority, they could not ignore the rational, pragmatic public health discourse. As I showed above, religious groups were stuck between resistance and compliance - more or less discreet or open resistance, rooted in their religious persuasions and habitus; and a compliance with policies imposed by (mostly secular) states and international institutions. In a way, it was a dilemma of ontological and epistemological security testing the ability to retain a specific identity, a specific way of knowing or interpreting the world and one’s place in it, while at the same time remaining a part of a society that runs upon different, mostly secular principles (even though the degree of such secularism, of course, varied significantly). “Securing the identity,” can we assume, is not less important for many as securing the physical life menaced by the epidemic.

Not only the denial and resistance, but also the compliance with restrictions needed to be justified in religious terms, so that a group can preserve its identity. How could such compliance be justified? It might be, for example, the claim that a religious tradition is a special and the most efficient resource to cope with insecurity, fear, and mourning. Interesting is

³⁶ Online Forum “Батюшка-онлайн,” in VKontakte 13.04.2020 https://vk.com/topic-25505827_26391950?offset=4480; Рождественское интервью патриарха Кирилла телеканалу «Россия» 7.01.2021, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5746352.htm>

a series of articles analyzing how religious practices were used as elements of a psychological therapy coping with the fears and losses.³⁷ Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a moral discourse of empathy, love of one's neighbor or exalting life as a sacred gift.³⁸ It might be even the justification of the authority of the state to impose sanitary restrictions as a religiously legitimate exercise of power; in the Christian context, the classic reference to Paul's Epistle to Romans could be used³⁹. It might be, finally, a religiously framed justification of changes, shifts and transformations in practices, some of which have been mentioned above. In an interesting study, it was shown how the *Shi'a* pilgrimages centers in Mashhad and Qum, Iran, have been remodeled for carrying new functions of vaccination or medical help-centers during the Covid pandemic, thus "legitimizing" the new agendas and functions with the grace they traditionally possess.⁴⁰ In another case, in Ghana, it was shown how the pandemic made Muslim veiling (*hijab or niqab*) a protective garment against the virus, functioning as a medical mask; the veil was therefore de-coded from being a symbol of Islamic extremism as it was seen earlier. Furthermore, in a clear case of inter-religious entanglement, this veiling started to be used also by some Christian women in a mixed Christian-Muslim neighborhood studied in this paper.⁴¹ These examples show how the religious identity worked as both protective and

³⁷ See for example an article exploring therapeutic use of Buddhist pilgrimages: Carol Teuton Benoit, Patricia A. Thomas & Theodore P. Remley Jr., "Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrims and the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 24, no. 9 (2021), 899-917. See also a study of religious coping potential, made in Colombia and South Africa in 2020: Victor Counted, Kenneth I. Pargament, Andrea Ortega Bechara, Shaun Joynt & Richard G. Cowden, "Hope and well-being in vulnerable contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic: does religious coping matter?" *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1832247>

³⁸ In my research, I showed how the Catholic conception of the "common good" and "the sacredness of the human life" elaborated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the encyclicals have been evoked during the pandemic. The Russian Church made similar references to its own texts. See Agadjanian, Спротивление, 26-27.

³⁹ Loïc Bawidamann et al, "Restricted Religion," 644

⁴⁰ Amelie Neuve-Eglise & Mahnaz Tavakoli, "Les saints face au virus. Mobiliser les sanctuaires chiites iraniens contre la pandémie de Covid-19," *L'Homme*, No. 241 (janvier/mars 2022), 65-102

⁴¹ Kauthar Khamis, "Hijab and Niqab: A Cross-Religious COVID-19 Safety Measure in Madina Zongo," *Entangled Religions*, 12, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.9650>

legitimizing symbolic resource incorporated into the medical and health discourse of the pandemic.

To summarize, we can say that the pandemic made religious identity revealed or even accentuated but also modified, and this made the study of these issues challenging for scholars: any crisis is always the time to catch features and trends less palpable in “peaceful times.” Positions of various groups might be different, but they all were intensified in motivation, self-expressive agency and, sometimes, adaptive creativity. In my opinion, this *catalyzing* effect was central. Most of the narratives, emotions and practices were not quite new and reflected the trends that already existed, even before the pandemic, within religious groups and within the religious fields of many societies. Yet, what was really new was the dramatic, acute experience at the juncture of health threats and breaks in communicative, performative habitus so central for religious identity. This new experience might have articulated some previously dormant patterns of ideas and behavior of those who identify themselves with religious traditions.

**ԿՐՈՆՆԵՐՆ ՈՒ COVID-19 ՀԱՄԱՎԱՐԱԿԸ. ԻՆՉՊԵՍ ԳԼՈՒԲԱԼ
ՃԳՆԱԺԱՄԸ ԲԱՅԱՀԱՅՏԵՑ ՈՒ ԱՐԱԳԱՅՐԵՑ
ՓՈՓՈԽՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ ԿՐՈՆԱԿԱՆ ԵՐԵՎԱԿԱՅՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԵՎ
ՍՈՎՈՐՈՒՑԹՆԵՐԻ ՄԵԶ
Ալեքսանդր Աղաջանյան
Ամփոփագիր**

Այս հոդվածը հենվում է ինչպես հեղինակի սեփական հետազոտությունների, այնպես էլ երկու ակադեմիական հանդեսների հատուկ համարների նյութերի վրա, որոնք խմբագրվել են հեղինակի կողմից (հրավիրյալ խմբագիր): Հոդվածում նաև քննարկվում են մի շարք այլ հրապարակումներ, որոնք լույս են տեսել վերջին տարիներին և վերլուծում են տարբեր կրոնների արձագանքը Covid-19 համավարակին, այն է՝ այն փոփոխությունները, որոնք առաջացել են կամ արագացել են Covid-

19 համավարակի պատճառով: Հեղինակը առանձնացնում է մի քանի հիմնական թեմաներ, որոնք արտացոլում են համավարակի ժամանակ կրոնական համայնքների փորձը: Մասնավորապես, առանձնացվում են այնպիսի թեմաներ, ինչպիսիք են ճգնաժամի աստվածաբանական մեկնաբանությունները, կոլեկտիվ ծեսերի ձևափոխումները, կրոնականության՝ վիրտուալ ձևերի կտրուկ աճը, համայնքի ներսում իշխանության համակարգի վերակազմավորումը, ինքնության սահմանների պաշտպանության խնդիրը և այլն: