

COVID-19 and the Russian Orthodox Church

by Cyril Hovorun

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has affected in nuanced ways various religious niches and subcultures. This article explores some reactions to the pandemic as they have been developed and articulated in the Russian Orthodox Church. These reactions are diverse and often not public. On the upper level of the church's leadership, the official standpoint of the Russian hierarchy is usually coherent with the official policies of the Russian state. On the lower levels, lay persons, priests, and even bishops often disobey the official line and propagate opposition to the anti-COVID-19 measures.

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Official Reactions

On the official level, both the rhetoric and policies of the Russian Church regarding the global pandemic were generally coherent with the relevant rhetoric and policies of the Russian state. This coherence reflects the kind of symphonic relationship between the church and state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill. For example, on 23 March 2020, Patriarch Kirill set up a "Patriarchal working group for coordinating the work of church institution in the situation of the spread of the coronavirus infection." On 25 August 2020, the Holy Synod adopted a "Message to the episcopate, clergy, monastics and laity on the invasion of a harmful infection this year." It particularly urged the faithful to take good care of themselves and others in preventing the spread of the COVID-19:

The pastors and faithful of our Church understood: one's careless attitude to one's health, which may seem to be a private affair of every person, in these days can turn out to be other people's suffering and death. Many Orthodox Christians have preferred responsibility for the life and health of their neighbors to imprudence and self-assurance. They have fearlessly fulfilled their duty ignoring their own wishes and habitual way of life and realizing that the precautions they take in no way belittle our faith in the effectiveness of Divine Providence and sacredness of the Church's sacraments, the most important of them being the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.¹

The Synod thus addressed one of the most painful issues related to pandemic—that of restricted access to worship. When the Russian state imposed such restrictions during the first wave of the pandemic, which was the period of Great

Lent and Easter 2020, the church's responses on different levels were confused and confusing. The central authority kept mostly silent, while many bishops openly rebuked or sabotaged the restrictive measures imposed by civil authorities. Such sabotage endangered the seemingly smooth relations between the Russian state and church. In the wake of this danger, the Russian Synod clarified its standpoint on the controversial issue:

The considerably limited participation of people in worship service was unprecedented for our episcopate, clergy and laity in their personal experience. Realizing that the new threat facing humanity could involve grave consequences that hardly could have been fully predicted and aware of her responsibility for the life and health of innumerable people, the Church shared people's burdens generated by the spread of the harmful infection and called upon her faithful to refrain for a while from their habitual way of participating in the liturgical life. However, this decision adopted as it was in an extraordinary historical situation cannot become a new norm. The freedom of conscience and freedom of faith, including the right of believers to participate in worship services even in exceptional situations should remain unshakable.²

"COVID-Dissidents"

The leadership of the Russian church also acknowledged that there is significant resistance to the official line. Patriarch Kirill, while opening the session of the Holy Synod on 8 December 2020, stated:

Unfortunately, a terrible infection has affected many clergymen. Many of our brethren, dozens of them I will not state a specific number now because some clarifications are still needed, but around one hundred people died of this disease. Therefore, when we are told, including by some people in sacred garments, that there is no epidemic, that it is a fabrication, that it is all brought into our lives specifically to restrict church attendance or the mobility of people the answer to that lie is the hard truth about our deceased fathers and brothers.³

The "people in sacred garments" mentioned by the patriarch, it appears, include even the members of the Synod, such as the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Onufriy Berezovsky. He is the second in the rank member of the Synod after the patriarch. He is also notorious for his publicly expressed doubts about the pandemic and mocking those who take it seriously. For example, in May 2020, he made the following comment in front of TV cameras when asked about what he thinks of COVID-19:

We are all sick-each one has his own sore. There are people whose temperature first rose and then dropped, and tomorrow, another person's temperature went up. This is life. It is the season of transition from winter to spring, and everyone gets sick. Whenever one feels ill, he immediately suspects the coronavirus: whether the leg or ear is in pain-he blames for everything coronavirus.⁴

Even the favorite priest of Patriarch Kirill, whom he often asked to preach during the patriarchal liturgies, Fr Andrey Tkachev, mocked those who care to protect themselves and others by wearing masks. He mocked them literally *ex cathedra* while preaching at a church in Moscow. He came to the ambo in a respirator causing the congregation to laugh and made sarcastic comments about those wearing masks: “I wish you laugh at this demonic muck all your life.”⁵ By the “demonic muck,” he meant the way media covered the pandemic and alerted people about its consequences.

No one of those who mocked and discouraged people from taking care of themselves and others ever took their words back or repented. Some of them suffered from the COVID-19, though. Metropolitan Onufriy was reportedly hospitalized with this disease in the elite medical complex nearby Kyiv, where he was treated in secret. Other clergymen and laypeople who followed his instructions and who caught the infection were less lucky. Most of them could not afford to be treated in elite complexes, and many died.

Figures such as Metropolitan Onufriy or Fr Tkachev became known as “COVID dissidents.” This sort of dissent is often driven by skepticism about the risks to health and life from the coronavirus. Such dissidents defiantly ignore hygiene standards and do not recognize scientific data on the COVID disease. They tend to explain it by various conspiracy theories. For example, the metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Luka Kovalenko, who by the way has been educated in medicine, claimed that the global pandemic was created artificially. He saw behind it such forces as George Soros, the Vatican, and even the Ecumenical Patriarchate:

We must also acknowledge and openly declare to the faithful children of the Church of Christ that the events now unfolding in the global community indicate that the world actively builds a global open society based on anti-Christian values. The “great masons” of this construction will not discard any, even most anti-human, methods to carry out their plans. For the first time in world history, they have used bacteriological weapons on such a scale that led to a planetary pandemic and the death of innocent people. This is the first step in a carefully thought-out, multi-pass combination aimed at rebuilding the entire human civilization. The network of one of them, Soros, together with his vast army of politicians, journalists, liberal secular and religious public figures, is actively destroying the old world order. It prepares the world for a new centralized system of governance and control over the entire human community. The Vatican heads the religious sector of this work. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, as well as non-Orthodox radical extremist groups, are its allies.⁶

Lack of responsibility of hierarchs regarding people who trust and depend on them has badly affected virtually all church groups. Among the most vulnerable groups are students in theological seminaries. The Radio Freedom in Ukraine investigated the following case of abuse.⁷ In March 2020, all higher education

institutions in Ukraine sent their students home and switched to education online. The Theological Academy and Seminary of Kyiv, under the responsibility of Metropolitan Onufriy, also sent home most of its students. However, some students were forced to stay in the Kyiv-Caves Lavra, where the school is located. They were kept because the bishops in charge of students wanted them to sing and serve them during the Easter period. Most of these students eventually became infected by a coronavirus. Fortunately, none of them died. At the same time, no one was held responsible for this abuse.

Reactions to Dissent

There were, nevertheless, bishops who experienced some administrative consequences for their carelessness. For example, the metropolitan of Saratov Longin Korchagin was an outspoken COVID dissident during the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020. As a result, at the same session of the Holy Synod that adopted a statement regarding the pandemic, on 25 August, Longin was moved to another diocese. This was regarded as a punishment for him. However, it is not clear whether this was a punishment for his stubbornness on hygienic measures or because he had a conflict with the local authorities.

There were also conflicts between church hierarchs and local governors that remained unpunished. One of them happened in July 2021. Every year a procession dedicated to the murder of the last Russian Tsar Nicholas Romanov and his family in 1918 takes place in the city of Yekaterinburg. In 2021, local governor Yevgeny Kuyvashev wrote in his Instagram that he disapproves of this procession, because its participants do not observe hygienic measures. The local bishop, Metropolitan Yevgeny Kulberg, also through social media, rebuked the governor and insisted that the procession must take place regardless. This was an outright public confrontation between local civil and ecclesial authorities.

Some hierarchs rebuked the vaccination campaign even more strongly. For example, the abbot of the Solovetsky monastery in northern Russia, Bishop Porphyry Shutov, stated in his sermon delivered in July 2021 that the vaccines against COVID-19 modify the very human nature and make human beings susceptible to external control:

The vaccine is a genetically engineered, high-tech product. It contains cells, proteins of either RNA or DNA matrices. These agents integrate into the human genome, change it, modify it, edit it. At this point, any Christian responsible for their salvation must stop... What is a genetically modified person? Or, if you like, a person with a genetically edited genome? To what extent does the image of God remain intact in him? And who can guarantee that this intervention does not damage our image of God?... Does the person who has experienced these interventions really remain an autonomous and sovereign personality? Or has the control center of our behavior moved somewhere outside?⁸

Official speakers of the Moscow Patriarchate denounced the sermon, but the bishop did not suffer any consequences. While the punishment for hierarchs who undermine hygienic measures and vaccination is virtual or non-existent, sometimes the punishment for those who criticize this undermining standpoint could be severe. For example, on 21 April 2020, the rector of the Patriarchal Cathedral of Moscow, Fr Alexander Ageikin, died of coronavirus. He was a close collaborator of Patriarch Kirill. At the same time, he publicly criticized some quarantine measures. He can be characterized as a mild COVID dissident. Deacon Andrey Kuraev, who is an outspoken clergyman known for his criticism of the patriarch, criticized on social media Fr Ageikin's hypocrisy. Soon, on April 29, Kuraev was suspended in his clerical capacity by a decree signed by the patriarch. He was tried by the church court and sentenced to defrocking. Patriarch Kirill can enact this sentence any moment. Although Kuraev's criticism of Ageikin was not the reason but an excuse for this verdict, this excuse is telling as such: he was suspended for criticizing another clergyman who had been critical of anti-COVID measures.

The Role of Fundamentalism

There are various reasons for such double standards that the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate applies. One is the fear of fundamentalistic setback. Fundamentalist groups had been marginal in the Russian Orthodox Church. During the last decade, however, they piecemeal moved from the margins to the church mainstream. The church's leadership tried to instrumentalize this movement in promoting its own agenda, such as ideological conservatism under the guise of so-called "traditional values." However, it seems that various fundamentalistic groups instead exploited the leadership of the church for their purposes. The inconsistent church reactions to the pandemic, on the one hand, and the consistency which various fundamentalistic groups demonstrate through their media, on the other, corroborate this thesis.

For example, the fundamentalistic outlet Antimodern.ru consistently criticizes those who care about anti-COVID measures. For example, two relevant articles on this website are titled "The dawn of consciousness in the era of coronavirus"⁹ and "The birth of pathological consciousness"¹⁰. Their author criticizes the alertness about pandemics as pathological consciousness. Bishops and clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church do care a lot to avoid landing on the list of assumed modernists denounced by this site. Everyone who pushes the anti-COVID measures too far is in danger of being accused of modernism by fundamentalists.

Flirtation with fundamentalistic groups inside the Russian Orthodox Church

became a part of the major campaign that its leadership launched approximately ten years ago. This was a campaign against so-called “liberals.” Many of those who initiated or backed it originally had come from the liberal camp, including Patriarch Kirill. The rationale of this anti-liberal campaign is political-the church has aligned with the Kremlin’s turn towards ideological conservatism.¹¹ This alignment has caused a deep polarization within the Russian Orthodox Church, which resembles the ongoing culture wars between Democrats and Republicans in the United States.

COVID-19 and the Russian Culture Wars

The ideological polarization within the church, backed by its leadership, has created confusion regarding pandemic-related policies. Many of those who associate themselves with “conservatism” believe that the dangers of the pandemic have been exaggerated by “liberals.” This belief makes them distrusting preventive anti-COVID measures and policies. Metropolitan Luka, for example, accused the “liberals” of lies in the context of his reflection on the coronavirus pandemic:

If we look closely at the modern world, we will see that it is already soaked in lies. Commercials lie about the usefulness and naturalness of certain products. Historians lie to us, distorting and perverting the events of past years. Sociologists lie to us, overestimating the ratings of parties and their candidates. Liberals lie to us, calling perversions a struggle for gender equality. Politicians, deputies, mass media, etc., lie to us. There is no place left in the world for the truth.¹²

The Russian Orthodox hierarchy implies that the “liberal” warnings about COVID-19 are also lies and cannot be trusted. Such presumably “liberal” voices are also heard in the Russian Orthodox Church. One of them is the web portal “Pravoslavie i mir” (Orthodoxy and the World), which has published many helpful materials on COVID-19.¹³ Another “liberal” web-portal, Bogoslov.ru, has offered substantial theological reflections on the pandemic. These and other “liberal” media are systematically criticized by “conservative” media in the framework of the Russian Orthodox culture war. Many examples of such criticism can be observed in the publications of the outlet of the Orthodox ideological conservatism, “The Russian People’s Line” (<https://ruskline.ru>).

The exchange of fire between these media over ideological issues is not helpful for the coherent policies of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding COVID-19. Those members of the church who align themselves with ideological conservatism mistrust the publications in what they deem “liberal” media. In turn, these media are often the most detailed source of information on the dangers of coronavirus.

Thus, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church set a trap for themselves by creating polarization between “liberals” and “conservatives,” as well as by endorsing fundamentalism. On the one hand, they try to implement restrictive measures and convince their flock to take COVID-19 seriously. On the other hand,

they realize that the flock may take these measures with ideological bias and accuse the church's leadership of liberalism.

Unfortunately, this bias has been cultivated by the church's leaders themselves, and now it fires back.

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He has published several books in different languages, including *Sacred Architecture in East and West* (edited, Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2019), *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018; Ukrainian translation published in 2018); *Ukrainian Public Theology* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2017, in Ukrainian), *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017; Ukrainian translation published in 2018); *Wonders of the Panorthodox Council*, (Moscow: Christian Book Club, 2016, in Russian); *Meta-Ecclesiology, Chronicles on Church Awareness*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Ukrainian translation published in 2017); *From Antioch to Xi'an: an Evolution of 'Nestorianism'* (Hong Kong: Chinese Orthodox Press, 2014, in Chinese); *Will, Action and Freedom. Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Endnotes

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 “Слово Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на заседании Священного Синода 8 декабря 2020 года” on December 8, 2020. Official webpage of the Moscow Patriarchate: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5731259.html> (accessed December 9, 2020).
- 4 «Онуфрий о количестве заболевших коронавирусом в Лавре: Мы все больны – видео». Ліга. Новости on May 5, 2020: <https://news.liga.net/society/news/onufriy-o-kolichestve-zabolevshih-koronavirusom-v-lavre-my-vse-bolny---video> (accessed December 9, 2020)
- 5 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm_Z4PWZ-2o (accessed December 9, 2020)
- 6 Post at Telegram on December 8, 2020: <https://t.me/Lekarzp>.
- 7 Vlasta Lazur and Roman Tyschenko, “Фіточай і вітамін С проти коронавірусу. Розповідь семінариста про карантин у Києво-Печерській лаврі”, Радіо Свобода, April 15, 2020: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30556188.html> (accessed December 9, 2020)
- 8 The video recording of the sermon was deleted from the YouTube but is still available at <https://expertmus.livejournal.com/video/album/459/?mode=view&id=15845>
- 9 <https://antimodern.ru/untergang/> (accessed December 9, 2020).
- 10 <https://antimodern.ru/soznanie/> (accessed December 9, 2020).
- 11 See Kristina Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Conservative Crusade.” *Current History* 116/792 (2017) 271-276.
- 12 Post at Telegram on December 7, 2020: <https://t.me/Lekarzp> (accessed December 9, 2020).
- 13 See <https://www.pravmir.ru> (accessed December 9, 2020).