

The polarization and radicalization of religious discourse, effects of the health crisis

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To counter the covid 19 epidemic, the authorities had to suspend some rights and freedoms, including those concerning collective religious life. The dissatisfaction caused by this inconvenience was a good opportunity to resume or develop controversies on religious issues. In fact, due to the pandemic, religious topics have made the top of public debates. At the same time, the health crisis created a context of revitalization and radicalization of the antagonistic exchange of views between secularization activists and supporters of religious groups and values. Paradoxically, this media confrontation has led to an increase of the image and trust capital of traditional religious groups.

The number and the extent of religious topics debated in the public space during the last two months are a proof of this. The most significant ones are summarized below:

1. State Church relationship

By far the most debated topic, which has seriously tested the state-church relationship, is the prohibition of the collective communion of Orthodox believers. At the end of February, the Romanian Patriarchate announced in a [statement](#) the sanitary and spiritual measures to be taken throughout Romanian Orthodox Church during the pandemic. Among these was the declaration that people who were afraid of catching the disease by sharing the Holy Eucharist with the common teaspoon, it is done in the Orthodox Church can ask the priest to use a single-use teaspoon brought from home.

The „single-use teaspoon for communion” was already a hot topic of debate in the past, and for most Orthodox believers this practice is ruled out because sharing the common teaspoon is a defining test of faith. For the Orthodox Christians, the Holy Eucharist represents the true body and blood of Christ, it heals, it does not make someone sick. Therefore, the fact that this recommendation came from the Patriarchate scandalized the entire Orthodox community. As proof, there were strong reactions from several theology professors and Church hierarchs. The Patriarchate returned shortly with [clarifications](#) and hinted that the initial recommendations were made under the pressure of the Government. This was later confirmed by other religious denominations.

The topic of the „single-use teaspoon for communion” returned with an even greater impact when the issue of relaxing social distance measures was raised. The state authorities, through National Institute of Public Health, conditioned the participation of the faithful to the religious services, outside the places of worship, by the acceptance by the religious groups of some recommendations. In the category „[special precautions](#)” it is stated that „the offering / reception of communion shall be avoided if disposable teaspoons and glasses cannot be provided”. This time the religious groups were no longer consulted but were only notified of these provisions. The one that reacted was the Romanian Orthodox Church, for which these recommendations were actually made, being the majority religious group in Romania. [In response](#), ROC claimed that it did not agree with the proposed recommendations and that the issue of Holy Communion is one that belongs exclusively to the Church. Following the decision of the members of the Holy Synod, Romanian Patriarchate announced that common communion is suspended until the end of the consultation with the other Orthodox Churches, after June 1, 2020. (Currently, Orthodox believers can receive Holy Communion individually, but not during Holy Mass, so not in groups and not at the same time).

Many theologians and even bishops have [spoken](#) out on this situation, not shyly claiming that a true „age of sanitary despotism” is in full swing (a reference to the blasphemous billboards, see below) in which „intolerant secularists” and „apostles of atheist progressivism” want to reconfigure the liturgical tradition of the Church.

There have also [been reactions from religious freedom specialists](#) who have warned that any aggression against religious freedom can have very harmful long-term effects. Romania’s representative in the OSCE panel on religious freedom pointed out that „according to international standards (UN, OSCE, EU, Office for International Religious Freedom within the US State Department, etc.), states cannot suspend religious freedom even in state of war or state of emergency Religious freedom in its external dimension can be restricted only to restore public order and security Outside of these principles, the intrusion of the state into church life is an anti-democratic attitude and it has the potential to provoke dangerous long-term precedents and gestures of hatred towards members of religious communities”.

However, the State showed some goodwill towards ROC. Before the Easter holiday, the Ministry of the Interior signed a collaboration [protocol](#) with the Romanian Patriarchate which allowed Orthodox believers to receive the holy light of Easter under certain conditions. Although the protocol was later amended at the intervention of the president of the state, the existence of this protocol shows that at least some state institutions are still sensitive to the model of the Byzantine symphony.

Regarding the compliance of the pandemic restrictions by the clergy, there were cases in which even a bishop offered publicly the Holy Eucharist to children during the Liturgy, [without any subsequent legal consequences](#), in the sense that two courts ruled that the common communion of the faithful was

not followed by illness. Then, the same bishop announced that he would [repeat the service of Resurrection](#) so that the faithful could fully enjoy the Easter light this year as well. Compared to this announcement, the [Romanian Patriarchate delimited itself](#), specifying that the initiative belongs exclusively to the bishop in question.

2. Billboards depicting doctors as saints

Billboards depicting doctors as saints after the model of orthodox icons appeared in several cities. The doctors bless with their right hand, while on the left they hold a medical observation sheet. Another image shows a nurse with several hands, as in the representations of the god Shiva, the creator and destroyer of the universe in Hindu mythology. The initiating advertising agency claims that their approach is just a message of thanks brought to the doctors in the context of the pandemic.

The Romanian Patriarchate, however, [was of the opinion](#) that these images represent „a visual ill-treatment of Christian iconography”. The spokesman of the Patriarchate emphasized that this approach is „a ridiculous campaign to promote a dystopian vision of the situation caused by the pandemic; an embarrassing attempt at symbolic theft and visual mistreatment of Christian iconography, marked by bad taste fed by ignorance and a hideous ideology that only knows how to caricature Christianity. ... It is not, therefore, just a blasphemous approach, but also an insult to the very honourable professional of doctors, who, like all of us, certainly do not believe themselves to be saints or improvised saviours and do not claim a public cult”. At the request of the Romanian Patriarchate and several doctors, the City Hall of Bucharest announced that it will ask advertising agencies to remove the panels.

3. Religious site closed for fake news

One of the measures taken by the Government during the state of emergency was the immediate closure of any media institution that broadcast fake news. Thus, the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications closed a religious site known for promoting radical and extremist attitudes. [The motivation](#) for closing the site was „the presentation of clearly false information that has the potential to create unjustified social behaviour and panic among citizens.” One of the articles framed as fake news was entitled „The killing pensioners in concentration and extermination camps is prepared”. Other articles were meant to alarm and confuse readers, suggesting that the pandemic was created so that chips could be implanted in the population or vaccinated against their will.

4. Infection of a high hierarch with Covid 19 and accusations regarding the privileged treatment he received

On April 20, a high prelate of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Archbishop of Suceava and Rădăuți, aged 90, was confirmed positive for the coronavirus test. Because he was transferred by helicopter to a medical unit specialized in treating Covid 19 infection in the capital, some public

opinion leaders argued that the high prelate received [privileged treatment](#) compared to other Covid 19 patients precisely because of his position. They also given as examples of good conduct more than 100 priests in Italy who died caring for the sick. The offensive attitude towards the high prelate had the opposite effect. Despite the accusations that he had collaborated with the Securitate during the communist regime, he was respected and appreciated, and not only for his age, but for his entire clerical activity. Namely, there was a wave of sympathy among the population towards the clergy and towards the Church in general. This condition was strongly accentuated by the death of the high prelate, his funeral being intensely publicized.

5. The attitude towards clerics in media

Often, media reports about clerics were critical and focused specifically on the mismatch between their standard of living and the dignity of a priest, which presupposes a self-imposition of a modest lifestyle. However, in the context of the health crisis, during which the access of believers to places of worship and public religious life was strictly restricted, [articles](#) published by the general press lamenting the material condition of priests and their families.

6. The change of the name of the National Cathedral on Google Maps

The name of the National Cathedral was changed on Google Maps with the title of „Cathedral of the Fooling of the Romanian Nation”. This incident, seemingly trivial and not without precedent, previously the name had been changed in „Cathedral of the Pride of the Patriarch” and „Cathedral of the corrupts”, rekindled perhaps the most publicized religious topic after December 1989 and provoked an [extremely harsh reaction](#) from Romanian Patriarchate, taken over by all mainstream media. The spokesman of the Patriarchate said that „the recent attack on Google Maps over the name of the National Cathedral, built in the memory of the best of the people of this country, its heroes, is another proof of the hatred of some who, with or without their will, end up composing some harsh anti-Christian/anti-Orthodox ideological cores in Romania”... „All these small and ridiculous self-improvised ideological cardboard gods are suicidal animated by the principle of destroying personal and public moral order woven and nurtured by Christianity. The christophobia of some people, who end up committing the act of changing on Google Maps the name of a building that the Orthodox Church with the natural support of the Romanian State built in the memory of all the heroes in the history of this Christian country, indicates a dangerous moral pathology that already does a lot of harm to Europe and to the world civilized by Christianity throughout two millennia.”

7. The arrest of a bishop for sexual assault on minors

During the same period, a premiere took place for the Romanian Orthodox Church. A bishop, who withdrew in 2017 from the episcopal see, but who retained his dignity as a bishop, following accusations of sexual assault on seminarian students to whom he was a teacher, was [arrested](#) by the

authorities on the same charges. It is the first case of this kind in the whole history of the Romanian Orthodox Church, considering the suspicions that triggered it.

Conclusion

After an overview of the religious landscape in recent months, [sociologists of religion have concluded](#) that due to the pandemic, despite the attacks on religious groups, „the old directions of development are strengthened”.

Considering that the State, partly obliged by the sanitary emergency, fully showed and manifested its authority in relation to the religious groups, the latter had to pass the test of „communication” with the authorities, with their own believers but also with their newer and older opponents.

Thus, this carousel of communication on religious issues, brought to surface the existence of two camps, regardless the field from which those who participated in the public dialogue belonged: believers and nonbelievers. At the same time, the intensity of the exchange of remarks got even very thick touches in some places.

Another conclusion was that only the religious groups that had the means, the habit and the experience of communication stood out, namely the Romanian Orthodox Church. Another characteristic feature of the ROC was that only its practices blatantly contravened recent measures of social distancing.

However, the image capital accumulated by ROC is not only the result of PR actions and is in no way undeserved, because in addition to effective communication, the Church has proven to be „modern” through an intense use of virtual media. The Church has also introduced the idea of „Christian volunteering” (simple believers have helped to share donations made by the Church) and has really increased social involvement (consistent donations of money, health equipment, online education equipment; the tailoring workshops of the monasteries produced sanitary materials - masks, coveralls, etc. all to be donated).

But the net gain of the Church was the penetration of news with a religious or ROC-related substratum where it was not normally present in the mainstream media. Or if that happened, they were extremely critical. For more than two months, millions of Romanians, some of whom have certainly never been to church, have been *forced* to watch exciting discussions on religious topics in the media. This is tantamount to a mass catechesis, which the Church did not expect until the outbreak of the health crisis.

Where does this change come from? The global health crisis has brought back the imminence of death in everyday life and in this way life has been revalued, as well as death. So, [the answer](#) could be „fear

of the unknown and... death, and religion is the last reservoir of meaning and hope of the society”. by [Mirel Bănică \(director of the Institut d’histoire religieuse\)](#).

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