Orthodoxy and the COVID-19 Crisis: Ritualized Security and Performative Social Action

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Research Problem

Have Orthodox Christian churches engaged in creation of novel religious practices during the coronavirus pandemic? How do those practices emerge, and how do laypeople respond to them? This article[1] addresses these questions by reflecting on the major project findings based on examination of Orthodox churches of Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. The findings build on a theoretical framework that includes several perspectives and combines macro- and micro-sociological theories of religion. The article follows the recent attempts of Nancy Ammerman and Jörg Stolz, who provided unified theoretical models of religion combining a practice approach as well as micro- (personal rituals and meanings) and macro- (structural opportunities) perspectives.[2]

Historical context

Understanding the historical role of Orthodox Christianity in the countries dominated by this religion is vital for systematic analysis of the context of religious regulations during the coronavirus pandemic. This discussion is also crucial for understanding the motivation and opportunities of local Orthodox churches in responding to government policies of social distancing.

1 This article is a summary of findings from the two-year project supported by the University of St. Gallen led by Dr. Tornike Metreveli. More nuanced account of the project data, methods of data gathering, methodological approaches in 11 case studies will be available in the forthcoming manuscript and funder's website https://gce.unisg.ch/en.

2 Ammerman, 2020; Stolz, 2009 and 2020.

The prevalent thesis of the literature is that Orthodox churches are historically intertwined with their corresponding nation states and thus have a strong sense of agency when it comes to the idea of national and state security. This thesis is credible but comes with a number of sociological caveats and situational political nuances and can hardly be generalized. As our research in Serbia and Georgia showed, the Orthodox churches were important participants in the discourse that legitimized the political elite legitimation in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, but whether and how they influenced public policies depended as much on governments and their clientelist practices towards religious organizations, as on organizational interests of churches accommodating themselves in the political system.[3] On the other hand, Ukraine – which unlike Georgia or Serbia has had a uniquely pluralist religious field and legal framework – had two rivalling Orthodox churches, of Russian and Ukrainian origin respectively, which built different strategies to communicate with the state and negotiate policy preferences.[4]

The very nature of Orthodox doctrine (e.g. desirability of symphony and harmony with the state) and its historical development as national churches creates a context as the Orthodox church acts as a state within the state. The church experiences legitimacy in following its own ways when considering "national development" and national security issues. Nevertheless, national Orthodox churches vary operationally when negotiating with respective governments in reaction to the covid-19 pandemic. In Georgia, the Orthodox church resisted social distancing policies, while in Ukraine, some Orthodox churches resisted the curfew (Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate), while the new Orthodox church of Ukraine (which received autocephaly in 2019) welcomed and strongly promoted social distancing. How can we explain this variation?

3 Metreveli, 2016a and 2016b.

4 Brik and Casanova 2021; Metreveli 2019, Shestopalets 2019.

Methods

Our research employed content analysis of official statements of churches, media interviews, semi-structured interviews with clergy, and examination of legal documents to provide empirical evidence of how Orthodox churches justified their stance towards social distancing and new religious practices. After analyzing the macro-sociological context and narratives, we proceed with studying the Orthodox religion as a set of practices. Building on Nancy Ammerman's proposal to draw on social practice theories, we consider, in turn, embodiment, materiality, emotional expression, aesthetics, moral judgment, narratives, and spirituality of the Orthodox churches during the pandemic.[5] One may add another layer to this theoretical framework – a theory of ritualized behavior. While the first layers of the unified theory explain the clergy's motivation to insist on new narratives and practices, we also find it essential to discuss how and why these novelties were put in motion despite intense criticism of the state, media, scholars, and activists. The new narratives and practices thrived in the environment of inferred threats that flourished during the pandemic.

Ritualized behavior is crucial for detecting and reacting to inferred threats.[6] In the case of Orthodox churches under the pandemic, this implies that religious groups narrow the attention of laypeople first to discourses (e.g. the importance of praying, participation in religious service) and practices (e.g. kissing of icons, kissing of priests' hands and crosses, communion from the shared spoon) in order to respond to the perceived threat of the covid-19 virus. Because of this ability to quickly adapt and create new ritualized behavior, Orthodox churches were very efficient in persuading lower rank priests and their congregations to maintain the celebration of Mass. At the same time, lay people felt that religious rituals were vital for coping with the crisis. Thus, we propose a

5 Ammerman, 2000.

6 Boyer and Liénard 2006.

chain of arguments starting with the macro-level (history, supply, institutions), moving to the micro-level of lived religion as social practice (stories, actions, emotions, objects), and concluding with insights from behavioral science (religious practices as a form of ritualized behavior).

Results

Why would some religious organizations (Georgian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate) largely ignore massive public health threats and challenge governments and international health organizations during the corona crisis? We examined the history and context of religious doctrines, the history of the church-state relationship, and various features relating to different types of financial, economic and political resources available to churches to adapt to the reality of the pandemic. We thus delved deeper into the narratives of justification, that is: what churches say to themselves, to the state, and to citizens in order to explain their motivation and actions during the pandemic. These narratives can partially rely on their historical and moral role in shaping people's lives. They can partially include a novel repertoire of arguments and viewpoints explicitly tailored for unprecedented pandemic times. After this, we focused on actual practices (e.g. special prayers dedicated to the pandemic, new rituals, adaptation to new social distancing rules). Finally, we examined the responses from the states, in order to explore whether governments tolerate new narratives and practices, accept them, or alienate themselves from the church.

Ammerman suggested that lived religion can be considered a social practice of embodiment, materiality, emotional expressions, aesthetic symbols, moral judgments, miracles, and spiritual experiences.[7] Our data of official statements (narratives) and in-depth interviews with priests indicate that Orthodox churches indeed

7 Ammerman, 2020.

employed all these layers of social practices to develop new rituals related to the pandemic. First of all, churches emphasize that religious commitment during the pandemic can improve physical health (embodiment). They also stressed the importance of the communion from the same spoon and the attendance of holy places to protect health (materiality). Moreover, specific emotional expressions and aesthetic symbols related to the power of the church were employed to justify "closed doors Masses" (clandestine celebrations of Mass) despite decrees of social distancing. In Ukraine, for example, some churches had access to national state media to broadcast their Mass celebrations. They also had meetings with government agents and the police, and they provided charity to people. These actions emphasized their power and authority, and either tie in with responsibilities of the state or even compete with secular institutions. Considering moral judgments, we can demonstrate that Orthodox churches insisted that the state is obliged to allow the celebration of the Mass and that it ought to be attended in order to help people during the crisis, ensuring collective security. Finally, Orthodox clergy often reminded the general public about miracles and spiritual experiences of communion as pivotal aspects of saving souls and bodies during the pandemic.

While the theory of social practices has demonstrated that the recent activities of Orthodox churches have become a part of their lived religion, we also believe that there is yet another crucial theoretical step to take in order to explain the sustainability of these practices. We argue that new narratives, practices, and communication with governments and congregations, as emanating from the Orthodox Christian churches, can be theorized as the emergence of a new ritualized behavior that emphasizes the value of personal and national security. How can one however understand why some ritualized religious behaviors are more successful than others? It seems to depend on a combintion of factors such as coercion, commitment, habit, or belief.[8] Religious rituals are not

8 Liénard and Boyer 2006, p. 815.

performed just because "this is the rule" but also because of the general features and elements of action representation.[9]

When it comes to our findings on Orthodox churches, collective action takes the form which we call ritualized security. Ritualized security centers around the theme of potential danger. Danger operates here in the form of narrative practice. As the arguments go, faith, Christianity, nationhood are in danger once parishioners do not "attest their loyalty to God" in turbulent times, a loyalty that is purported to manifest itself in the attendance of religious service, in taking communion from the same spoon, and in observing the Mass. Therefore, parishioners must develop a well-coordinated social action against this perceived danger by performing adherence to the necessary public health security regulations. Religious meanings must accompany such civil actions. For example, a priest could obey the social distancing law (stipulating a rule of gathering no more than ten people in a church) but at the same time making sure that people pray and kiss the icon – because otherwise, they will not be protected from the virus. In other words, legal requirements become deeply embedded in religious practice.

Research based on the neurocognitive model of individual ritualized behavior shows that what Pierre Liénard and Pascal Boyer has called the "hazard-precautious system" acts as a trigger for collective rituals and differs from fear-systems on the level of neural correlates.[10] We argue that ritualized security acquires meaning by connecting the fear narratives to the spiritual dimension of religious practices inside the religious space. It is thus an explanatory narrative frame that operates as an everyday collective practice through which participants may appeal to sacred words, embrace sacred objects, take communion from the shared spoon, and yet at the same time wear the mask inside the church and maintain distance between parishioners.

In the context of our study, we observe that Georgian and

9 Liénard and Boyer, 2006, p. 817; Barrett and Lawson, 2001.

10 Liénard and Boyer, 2006, p. 820.

Ukrainian priests addressed the Covid-19 as a potential threat (not as a consolidated manifest danger), and as a sign of "Godly punishment for human sins." According to this narrative, faith protects against the potential risk of the pandemic. Therefore, faithful people should attend masses and perform religious rituals with particular care and focus since these are crucial for their survival. Moreover, the state should allow religious worship since this is the best way to ensure the safety of a faithful people. New rituals such as a prayer of protection against the covid-19 or kissing the icons in the formal compliance with some of the state regulations (sanitizing) were meant to ensure the sense of security among congregations.

The strategy of addressing the pandemic as merely a potential threat and proposing innovative rituals of dealing with this threat (e.g., new prayers or rituals) were likely to be very efficient in line with the theory of ritualized behavior.[11] We do not claim that priests followed the logic of this theory intentionally. However, we note that their natural response to the pandemic was very effective in maintaining the attention and engagement of their congregations also because of the nature of neurocognitive systems, which respond to inferred threats by focusing on low-level precautious behavior.

Our findings suggest that the Orthodox churches offered a response (distinctive to these religious traditions) to the covid-19 crisis by ritualizing security. We outline several factors and trajectories of interactions under which the Orthodox churches reacted to the pandemic: (1) the context of power relations in relation to the nation states (church monopoly or religious pluralism) → (2) specific narratives that church attendance ensures safety for individuals and for the nation as a whole → (3) sealing such narratives with a set of practices and rituals → (4) coordination of these narratives and practices in liaison with state (either dividing the tasks of social distancing enforcement or delegating matters to the

11 Boyer and Liénard 2006.

state) → (5) performative nature of social distancing → (6) public reaction (support by the loyal congregation).

If one "zooms in" on the meaning of the necessity of sticking to the performance of rituals, ritualized security unfolds as an intriguing practice of clientelism. The government performed the role of a law enforcer. So did the church. Icons were wiped clean after the faithful had kissed them, sermons were broadcasted through loudspeakers outside the church buildings (in order to meet requirements of smaller gatherings inside). However, most notably for the public health officials, the church denounced the stay-at-home rule and kept intact the practice of communion from the same spoon. On paper, all churches achieved social distancing to ensure that worship is legitimate in the eyes of the public. The public reacted accordingly, with only loyal and faithful groups endorsing new practices.

Whether the concept of ritualized security provides a useful theoretical framework for analyzing ritualized behavior as a mechanism by which religion participates in political life needs to be tested across a broader comparative-historical context. Our project seeks to test the external validity of the thesis of ritualized security with forthcoming data from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Russia, Montenegro, Finland and Sweden. However, in the contexts where religion takes organized form, we argue that ritualized security reveals a novel form of communication of meaning in the context of broader macro-cultural repertoires.

Summary

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The article defines and pilot-tests a proposed concept, "ritualized security", to explain the behavior of Orthodox Christian churches under the covid-19 pandemic. The analysis focuses on empirical case studies in Ukraine and Georgia. Based on material and results gathered through institutional analysis (e.g. official statements of churches, examination of legal documents, media interviews) and semi-structured interviews with clerics of the Orthodox churches, we suggest that Orthodox churches have ritualized public health security practices in cases when political benefits outweighed the risks. Depending on the church-state relations to state polities, the churches delegated the function of enforcer to the state or acted, justified by moral and theological rhetoric, in defiance of governmental authorities to advance their own ideological, economic, and political agendas.

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