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Apophatic love, contagion, and surveillance: Orthodox Christian responses to the global pandemic

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Orthodox Christians globally reacted to the possibility of contagion and risk in dialogue with theological positions about materials, their own long history which includes surviving previous pandemics and plagues, governmental and civil expectations and edicts, and pious – but often unofficial – understandings about protection and the sacrality of religious artefacts and the space of the temple. This article draws upon primary ethnographic research amongst Orthodox Christians in the UK, Serbia, Greece and Russia, as well as news articles about and primary ecclesiastical documents from Orthodox Churches more widely, to highlight commonalities and divergences in Orthodox Christian responses to the pandemic. Examining both the theological basis, and socio-political differences, this article considers how the Orthodox theology of apophaticism and relationality impacts wider discourses of contagion (both positive and negative), and consequently compliance with public health initiatives. Comparison across diverse Orthodox settings suggests that Orthodox Christians are concerned with the neighbour – both in terms of who may be watching (and reporting) them, and who may fall sick because of them.

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Orthodox Christianity is a 'tactile and sensual religion' (Dubisch 1995:61), wherein the bodily engagement of the faithful is an aspect within every part of religious practice. The touching of icons and relics as well as bodily practices such as prostrations or the kissing of the priest's hand are highly normative aspects of public devotion. Orthodox temples are filled with icons, and large temples, or those in city centres, often have cleaning regimes in place to wipe the lipstick smudges from prominent icons. Relics, often the bodily remains of saints, are also common in Orthodox monasteries, parishes and, in some cases, homes. Particularly important relics – either because of their reputation for performing miracles, or because of the popularity of the saint – are often taken on tours, making it easier for the faithful in foreign countries to pay pilgrimage to these great saints and venerate them.

For example, in March 2020, the right arm of St George the Victory-Bearer made a tour of Great Britain. On his tour, he came to visit a small Greek parish in northeast London. St George was accompanied by four monks from the monastery of Xenophontos, on Mt Athos in Greece, and after visiting parishes in Scotland and northern England, they visited two parishes in London. They arrived in the afternoon, and the parish was opened for people

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to come and pray before a service that was held later in the evening. Throughout the afternoon a constant trickle of people came into the parish. Upon entering, most venerated the icons around the entrance of the nave, lit candles, and then joined a short queue in the centre isle of the temple. The queue led forward to a small table set at the front of the nave, in front of the iconostasis (rood screen). On the table sat an ornate reliquary with the lid open, showing the form of a right forearm in precious metal, encrusted with pearls and precious and semiprecious gems. Small windows in the metal cover showed part of the middle finger and a section of the forearm, about two inches up from the wrist.

As people approached the relic of St George, most performed a genuflection in front of the relic, then rose to their feet, made the sign of the cross over themselves, and then lent forward to kiss St George in veneration. Some simply kissed the reliquary, but most made a point to kiss the relic itself, through the small windows. During their time in the temple, some approached St George multiple times, then returned to a spot to stand or sit in prayer. Others approached the hieromonks (monastic priests) who accompanied St George from Xenophontos. As the evening service approached, the small parish began to fill with people. After the tour completed its course, the four monks returned to Mt Athos not only with St George, but also with COVID-19 (OrthoChristian 2020).

As the Orthodox world responded to the pandemic, and as dioceses and parishes responded to governmental injunctions, a variety of responses ensued. Too many, in fact, to go into here. However, we will unpack two related issues in this article.

The first relates to the Eucharist. In the Orthodox Church,[1] the Eucharist is prepared by intinction, with small pieces of bread added into an admixture of fortified wine and water.[2] Using a shared spoon, the communicant is fed a wine-soaked bit of bread. Within the heterogenous public discourse concerning Orthodox life and practice, some individuals accepted that no one can become ill at all from anything in the Church – if they enter in faith. However, these voices were largely quieted as the months dragged on.[3] A more sustainable argument is that no one can become ill from the Eucharist – but people can contract the virus from crowded temples, from kissing surfaces upon which the virus might rest, or (probably) from sharing the *zapivka* – the 'washing down' cup used in the Slavonic rite, of warm diluted wine, served alongside the antidoron ('instead of gifts', a bread of fellowship shared communally). Even within this argument, however, some have moved to introduce temporary measures, 'for the comfort of the people' or to satisfy state injunctions – such as sterilising the shared spoon (in boiling water, rectified spirit, or a sanitising wipe) upon which the Eucharist is served between communicants. Brief initiatives to use single-use spoons, one per communicant, were quickly banned by various local church authorities – on both theological and ecological grounds. While guidance from local synods were often very detailed, local parishes also tinkered (cf Mol, Moser and Pols 2010) as the months went on to find the right balance between responsibility and care.

The second issue we will unpack relates to the veneration of icons and relics. While some people, both lay and clerical, urged the continuation of received orthopraxis as normal – as no evil, but only blessing, can come from a holy object such as an icon – most sources encourage the faithful to refrain from kissing/touching icons, the hand of the priest, the *zapivka*. The tactile encounter with the surface of the icon, the faithful are reminded, does not have to be done with a kiss. In Moscow, where before the pandemic the icon would be venerated with both a kiss and a gentle touch of the forehead, many people now just touch the icon with their forehead. In the UK and wider English-speaking contexts, it is not

uncommon to hear priests remind the faithful that icons can be venerated simply by looking at the icon in prayer. The transmissive capacity of the saint's power – like love – invites physical contact but can be passed even at a social distance.

Orthodox practice is built on a theology that emphasises relationality and the affective bodily response to sensorial stimuli. It is an approach to material culture wherein the ethics shared across the Orthodox Churches are localised in a heterogenous array of aesthetic forms (cf Carroll 2017). In order to understand the various responses to the pandemic, both in terms of risk and health policy, we start by examining what the materials of religious symbols are understood to be, and then move to examine the theological assumptions that underpin how the Church teaches concepts of relationality. In other words, to get at a fair analysis of what is at stake when Orthodox Christians decide if they should use a shared spoon or refrain from kissing an icon upon entering the temple, we must first consider the dual function of the Orthodox symbol as both disclosure and concealment.

This paper draws upon original ethnography conducted by Carroll in the UK and Greece, Lackenby in Serbia, and Gorbanenko in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also draws upon the transnational (or what Pop 2018 has called 'translocal') discourse within the Orthodox Christian community, as it appears in various news outlets, social media, and local word-of-mouth. As some of the specifics spoken of in this article rest in grey areas of legality and public perception, within the shifting landscape and timeline of the pandemic, all individuals and parishes are anonymised within this article, and in some cases the specifics of parishes are fictionalised to protect communities and individuals involved.

We start by exploring how Orthodox Christians understand the material world and its symbolism and how this influences Orthodox devotion and liturgical behaviour. We then connect this to wider ethico-social behaviour as it relates to two different idioms of contagion, and then look at the theological tenants that underpin and influence Orthodox ethical practice. We conclude with the suggestion that, based on the religious logic of how contagion and neighbourly love work, public health initiatives must be seen to come from within the Church, rather than be imposed from outside. In the heterogenous context of religious practice and ethical responses to health risks, outside pressure to comply with public health initiatives – if imposed without attention to the nuance of religious discourses – risks alienating populations that are otherwise likely to comply with public health policy.

Being conjoined

The Greek word for symbol (*symbollon*) means to draw together, to conjoin (*sym-ballei*), it is the opposite of that which pushes apart – the diabolic. Symbols do not 'represent', they conjoin the signified to the interpretant. It is important to note, that, contrary to popular understanding in Western European Christianity, the Eucharist is not, strictly speaking, a symbol (John of Damascus 1958; Yarnold 2000). It is substantially what it is, that is Christ. It is the liturgy (the whole cycle of liturgical life) that is symbolic; it is the fasting, the prayer, the participation in the liturgy (Lackenby 2021) – the acceptance of the invitation of the image to that 'cognitive passage' to heaven – that is symbolic. These symbolic rites and behaviours, which draw people closer to God and the Church, are not only found in the liturgy, but in the wider way of life. As such, the theology and ritual practice of the Church is experienced as a quotidian aspect of daily

life for devout Orthodox as they are always preparing for the next liturgy and eventual death.

The sense of urgent need that the Church feels toward allowing people to receive communion – that it be celebrated and made available for the people – has opened a wide variety of practices as the symbols of the rite are fluxed to allow the bodily participation in God. A priest in the US offers 'drive through communion' in the parking lot, for parishioners who have said the Typika[4] and pre-communion prayers at home. While few governments outright made communion illegal, per se, many did outlaw commensality in social groups beyond the household. Thus, participating in the Eucharist fell into a grey area, not exactly illegal, but not permitted. Parishes responded in diverse ways. Some closed or moved entirely online – streaming the service conducted in an almost empty temple (with one alter server and cantor in addition to the clergy) or from home. But rumours of priests serving – and communing – in secret circulated. Some parishes conducted their services behind closed doors, letting a few faithful in, but keeping the public out.

Particularly as the harshest lockdowns began to ease, online live streaming of services included conveniently timed technical difficulties and framings of the camera used to occlude practices that may be on the threshold of suitability in the eyes of – who? The unnamed, unknown watching eyes is, in our experience, rarely named. It is someone, or something *out there* – indicated with a gestured hand – with eyes that may be watching. When pushed to articulate 'who' or 'what' that watching someone was, one priest in Athens confided 'someone in the neighbourhood.' Was there fear of the government? Not directly, no, but if someone – again the gesture *out there* – called the police and complained, they 'could be shut down.'

In Moscow, one woman explains the danger of the *zakhozhane* ('church-drop-inners'). People drop in, leave bodily fluids on the temple furniture, and, she fears, knowingly bring disease into the temple and to the priest. And there is tension between how COVID hits as it pleases, yet 'nothing happens without God's permission. Either God's permission, or God's providence.' Those who drop in might bring COVID into the temple, and it would be allowed by God's permissive, rather than perfect, will. Even with the love and care amongst the body of parishioners, even in the knowledge of God's infinite grace, there remains the real possibility of external threat. (For more on the will of God in the context of illness and suffering, see St John of Tobolsk 2018.)

In the UK, like in Greece, the Eucharist was never made illegal, per se, but eating food communally was made illegal, and anxiety around communing was high. In some parishes, no communion was offered during the Liturgy. In normal circumstances, this would be highly unusual, even problematic. However, at the point in the Liturgy when the people would normally be communed, the priest presented the chalice from the Holy Doors, and then turned back into the altar and proceeded with the post-communion prayers. This is while the camera is rolling. In one parish, visited in Greater London late in Autumn 2020, the nave was sparsely populated with people keeping well apart from each other. Everyone wore masks; hand sanitiser was available at the door; one of the women of the parish guarded the door militantly, with temperature gun in hand, taking the name, details, and temperature of each person who entered. Everyone knew each other, but she still kept a seating chart, and logged where each person chose to stand. Unlike in normal times, people did not move around the nave to venerate icons and light candles. When the chalice was presented to the people, rather than the collective surge forward to commune: no one moved from their

place. The service continued, the final prayers sung, and one of the young men walked out of the frame of the iPhone pointed at the altar, then quickly rushed over to end the live-stream. The mood shifted immediately. Without the camera, people relaxed amongst friends and family, the priest reappeared in the Holy Doors with the chalice, and people moved forward to commune. While most still wore their masks, people were at ease in the temple again. Friends greeted each other with hugs and kisses on the cheek (through, in some cases, the mask). People approached icons to touch them.

In Serbia, Lackenby was told that whilst *vernici* ('believers') could contract the virus borne in the air, and thus a mask should be worn at certain times, they could never become sick via the Eucharist if they approached it with deep and sincere belief. In Serbian temples, as is common in other Orthodox communities, too, one can observe people wearing a mask for the duration of the Liturgy, then pulling it down to receive the Eucharist, before covering their mouth again. While one risks becoming infected by standing alongside fellow believers during a service, for these Serbian *vernici,* and many like them elsewhere, there is no felt risk from the shared spoon.

Sitting in an outdoor café in Athens, a local priest explained to Carroll that there were four schools of thought about the temple and the virus. Some, and here he rolled his eyes as he said it, think the whole temple is safe, as if a decontaminated zone, and no one can get sick within the temple walls. The second group, he explained, say that you can catch the virus borne in the air, but not from kissing/touching icons, the priest, or any other sacerdotal surface. The third think that you can catch the virus from the surface of icons or the hand of the priest, but not while taking communion. The fourth limit it further to specifically the Eucharist: they say that the body and blood of Christ cannot carry contagion, but the chalice and spoon might. He adds a fifth group: 'And a fifth group, the faithless, say you should not take the Eucharist because it will make you sick.'

Apart from 'the faithless', each of these groups hold at least part of the Liturgy as safe from viral contagion. As several episcopal authorities have stated publicly, there is a greater danger from being denied the Eucharist than is present from COVID-19 (Interfax Religion 2020).

In one exchange, as a group of parishioners sat down to dinner after an evening service, one woman pulled sanitising wipes out of her purse and handed them around. Another woman, rejected the wipe, saying 'The only protection we need is Christ', as she made the sign of the cross over herself. This is not necessarily a discourse about contagion and protection against it, but rather, we argue, a discourse about two entangled, and at times competing, kinds of contagion. The ways in which blessing (Gr: *evlogia*) pass from one object (or person) to another rests on the same logic of contagion. Contagion relies on proximity; it relies on the proximity of participation. Like with contagious magic, *evlogia* passes through contact, as one icon is placed atop its miracle-working prototype.

Contagion

Within the wider literature on the anthropology of religion, attention to the idioms of contagion tends to focus on the distinctions seen between types of people as a result of how substances such as grace, blessing or pollution flow between people. For example, in Maya Mayblin's work on Roman Catholicism – and an offshoot of Catholicism which ordains female priests – the discourse of contagion illuminates how sin and grace are 'particular

kinds of objects—objects that are *differently* contagious or containable to subgroups of persons' (Mayblin 2017:142, emphasis original). In the discursive tradition Mayblin examines, the female body has 'no risk of contagion' and 'repels rather than soaks up the sacramental grace' (2017:144). Ultimately, however, in Catholicism, 'idioms of contagion and containment index contrasting models of humanity' (2017:147-8) and while grace appears to 'cleave to particular persons', thereby making ontological distinctions (for example between the sexes), 'sin tends to travel outwards smoothly and evenly, blurring the distinction between types and subcategories' (2017:148).

Similar to Mayblin's concept of 'grace', Diego Maria Malara, in his work on Ethiopian Orthodoxy, highlights how 'the partible and sharable qualities of blessing as a quasi-substance' can be 'contagiously extended to others' (Malara 2017:130). In the Ethiopian context, however, blessing, unlike Catholic grace, is unbound, and flows 'irrespective' of the person's piety (2017:130). This open flow of contagion is also true of blessing's antithesis: pollution. Malara notes that '[t]he sexual partner of a menstruating woman is obviously more exposed to contagion, and sexual intercourse during this period is considered both repulsive and a serious sin' (2017:143-4), such that a 'man who has come into contact with menstrual blood should avoid access to sacred spaces and substances for a certain period thereafter' (2017:144). This aligns with Mary Douglas' observation that contagion is a two-way process, wherein taboos protect the divine and the profane from each other.

Here, we wish to focus on what we see to be a third kind of semiotics of contagion. While there is, within the wider global community of Eastern Orthodoxy, notions of contagion which, similar to Mayblin's observation, mark ontological distinctions between persons, and, similar to Malara's observation of pollution, pass to other people and places (see, for example, Belyakova et al 2011; Calofonos and Petropoulos 2008; Kalkun 2020; Kan 1996; Schultz 2003), that is not the focus here. Rather, we focus on a context that uses the idiom of contagion to explain how blessings flow from one material to another.

In her analysis of relics in the first millennium of the Christian Church, Cynthia Hahn (2010) discusses the 'contagious' nature of the '*virtus*' of a saint. The *virtus*, literally 'virtue', she suggests is better translated as 'the power of the holy person.' Hahn argues that 'relics were defined through the recognition by some audience of the presence of power… without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth' (2010:291). Hahn's appraisal of the holy and its relation to an audience is fairly normative of western academic discourses on the agency of things. However, as Küchler and Carroll have argued at length (2021), this kind of discourse misses the point, and ignores the sequential capacity of the image to – much as Yannaras outlines – act as a mental model through which the person my enter into a relationship with the prototype. A limited interpretation of the capacity of the image does not account for the social agency exerted by the saints and their icons in situations, such as described by Charles Stewart (2012), wherein saints pictured in buried icons appear to villagers asking them to dig.

Stewart argues that the theophanic miracles in the Greek context suggest an important difference between European Catholicism and Orthodoxy. 'Catholic cases', he explains, 'can only be given a history back to the moment of theophany. Antecedent sources lie in the ether of transcendence. The Greek cases, by contrast, begin at the moment when the objects were first created; their discovery in the present activates a historical imagining of the land and its former inhabitants' (2012:169). As Carroll (2015) has argued, Orthodox icons serve as a nexus of the phenomenology of time, as described by Husserl, wherein Orthodox past,

present and future are drawn together in the same event-moment of veneration. The intersubjective and affective relationship between the devotee and the saint mediated by the icon or relic is not predicated on the audience's anticipation alone, but also on the *virtus* or the saint acting *before* the material presence of the object. As in Stewart's example, the saint appears to the villagers asking them to dig, and in digging they find the icon buried long before. These 'autochthonous icons represent the local' (Stewart 2012:64), and 'become symbols of an inchoate but highly significant conglomeration of local affect, morality, aspiration, and identity' (2012:64). 'What matters', Stewart argues, 'is not that one icon of the Annunciation is a finer work of art than the other but that one is *ours*' (2012:64).

This notion of an icon being 'ours', which Stewart highlights, is the same noted by Carroll in terms of how Orthodox Britons relate to the pre-Conquest saints of the British Isles. The 'celebration of holiness, the holiness of our own region' (Parish Newsletter, quoted in Carroll 2018:50) is, like the 'ours' seen in the Greek islands studied by Stewart, not one of ownership, but rather relationship. In attending to 'ours', Orthodox engage in an intersubjective relationship with the saint. The saint, for their part, pictured in an icon, or present as a relic, or appearing in an apparition, provides the human an image through which to enter into what the theologian Christos Yannaras (2005) calls an 'empirical relationship' of love. This invitation to love is not initiated by the audience, but by the 'personal power' or 'a personal *energy*' (Yannaras 2007:181, emphasis original) of the divine. Within Eastern Orthodox thought, this relational dynamic of love that is at play between the human and the divine arises from the theological practice of apophaticism, which we address in the next section.

On apophaticism

At its core, the concept of apophatic theology is defined as theological knowledge via negation, as opposed to cataphatic theology, that is, through positive affirmation. However, in the Orthodox Christian context, apophaticism as a method is more complex than a simple negation. The truth to which apophaticism points, as the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas explains, 'lies beyond the choice between affirmation and negation' (Zizioulas 1985:90).

As Yannaras explains, 'The apophaticism of the Greek East is not confined to negations, it presupposes both affirmative natural knowledge and, at the same time, its denial, that is to say, the *abandonment* of any claim to consolidate and objectify the truth in conceptual definitions' (2005:71, emphasis original). That is to say, apophaticism is a method that resists the kind of linguistic purification that took root in western scholasticism (Yannaras 1975). Rather than working to purify the concepts of theological articulation, apophaticism is 'a dynamic starting-point for [the] realization of an empirical *relationship* with the designated reality' (Yannaras 2005:71, emphasis original). This concept of 'empirical *relationship*' he defines as 'the special capacity of the human subject to approach the knowledge of reality by means of a general faculty of apprehension' (2005:71).

In the semantics of apophatic thesis and antithesis, in the naming and the un-naming, in the symbolic statement and its negation, an image is produced. The apophatic is not only a single proposition, but in fact the thesis, its antithesis, their abandonment, and the image left behind has iconic likeness, even though in its essence it is entirely unlike the truth of which we are in pursuit. The affirmation and negation, done in the same stroke of the pen – 'such as being beyond being, divinity beyond divinity, source beyond source' to quote John

of Damascus (d.749 CE) – produce 'a most sweet conjunction' (John of Damascus as quoted by Yannaras 2005:69, cf fn23), one that transforms 'the conceptual opposition into a depiction in images' (2005:69).

In the work of the 1st Century Athenian judge and convert of St Paul, Dionysius the Areopagite, and those following him, image is used in its broadest sense: as not only material icon but also the object of thought called to mind through words or, more importantly for Dionysius, the movements of the liturgy. The image is not a static thing, but one that is dynamic and invites the human into relation. The image, which results from the dance of thesis and antithesis, is only sensible – as both perceivable and intelligible – if the person accepts the 'invitation' to ascent. The image is fundamentally an invitation which relies on the bodily senses to transcend the bodily senses, and bring the whole person into participation with God. It is via the dynamic response – a synergistic co-action of person and divine energy – that this 'cognitive passage' is possible.

This point is worth clarifying. The 'cognitive passage' here is not solely one of rational ascent, but rather 'another kind of knowledge'; it is an 'experiential-cognitive human capacity' (2007:193), one which 'is realized dynamically on all three levels of human cognition: sensation, reason, and the heart' (2007:199). In fact, the image invites the human into 'a personal relationship with the signified' (2007:193).

This 'empirical relationship' is, finally, one of erotic love. There is hesitancy expressed in the literature – both ancient and modern – about this term, but the 'passion' of the personal relationship, 'is the starting-point for apophatic knowledge' (2005:99). This love is one of 'passion, in the literal sense of something suffered' (2005:99); it is full of yearning, 'self-offering', and 'free from any objective' (2005:104). Thus love, in this context, is not about warm feelings toward the other, but rather about self-sacrifice in a manner that anticipates suffering. At its core, apophatic theology is an invitation to 'this experience of God as the 'mad lover' of the whole creation and of each human person' (Yannaras 2005:105, citing Dionysius).

While this is a theological discourse at a level of abstraction that many parishioners may not be able to articulate, it is not uncommon in many parishes – especially in urban centres like London, Athens, Thessalonica, Kraljevo or Moscow – to find highly articulate and theologically trained lay persons. In many cases, these parishes have 'coffee clubs' (Carroll 2018:23) or similar groups of people who strive to live the liturgical life (such as self-identifying 'believers' or '*vernici*' in Serbian, Lackenby 2021) who gather after services to discuss exactly these kinds of theological topics. Whether this is a regular point of discussion amongst parishioners or not, it is nonetheless a paradigmatic aspect of Orthodox thought and practice that has shaped the liturgy and material ecology of the Church and, thereby shapes the social, behavioural, and epistemic frameworks of the lay populous (see Küchler and Carroll 2021). The icon, as a representation, is not simply a stand in, or an indicative sign of the saint or God, who is absent. Rather, the interplay of the representation, its negation, and the opening of the possibility for a sensible and passionate relationship is the foundation for how the liturgical life is lived. With this background in mind, it becomes easier to appreciate the Orthodox understanding of material symbols, and their vital role in both liturgical and quotidian life as sacred objects and ritual practices facilitate relationships between persons, both human and divine. Thus, when presented with biomedical evidence of danger, and confronted with legal orders to refrain from the most banal acts of worship, Church leaders rallied

to provide pastoral guidance that balanced the various competing demands in an ethical spirit of love.

On love and ethics

Across the encyclicals and other official or pastoral statements issued by Orthodox hierarchy during the pandemic, the theme of love is recurring. As Metropolitan Silouan of Great Britain and Ireland instructed his congregations to abide by the UK lockdown issued in late March 2020, he asks the reader to 'take particular note' that 'because of our love' the parishes will be closed. He signs the letter 'with paternal love' (Oner, Metropolitan Silouan 2020). Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durres and all Albania, in an open letter to the public, asks that people 'cultivate creativity, a peaceful disposition, kindness, understanding, affection and love' (Anastasios 2020).

Love is, by no means, a uniquely Orthodox response to the pandemic (see Koenig 2020). However, in an Orthodox context of love – what Yannaras calls an empirical relationship, – we suggest that the act of love, or more broadly pathic concern for the neighbour, is an epistemological predisposition to events like the pandemic, not just an appropriate response to them. As the German theologian Ernst Benz highlights, Eastern Christianity is characterised by an 'ethics of love' which 'stresses brotherly love, not only for all believers but also for all men'; an idea situated in the iconographic implications of all mankind being 'created after the image of God' (1957:150). In outlining the foundation of Orthodox Christian bioethics, the priest and ethicist Fr Stanley S. Harakas writes, 'The Eastern Church doctrinal position tends to be cautious in defining positively the central affirmations of its faith. It prefers the *via negative*, or 'apophatic' method (i.e. saying what is not the case). In ethics, a practice may be proscribed as not in harmony with the ethos of the faith, but often no positive solution is offered other than the need for patience and acceptance of the situation' (1980:19-20). Thus, the epistemological framework of apophaticism is not only the means by which one must understand Orthodox symbolism and relationship to the liturgical services and the materiality of worship, as we argue above, but also the way one must understand the Orthodox approach to medicine and medico-ethical situations.

This posture of 'patience and acceptance' is seen throughout the history of Orthodoxy in its relationship to science and medicine. As Harakas (1990:69) explains, a close relationship has existed between 'medicine and Orthodox Christian religious belief and practice throughout the centuries. In the background of this intimate relationship is the early church's general approach to culture and science, and in particular to medicine.' And while the advancement of medical science raises new bioethical dilemmas for the Orthodox Church,[5] the attitude of the Church authorities is still overwhelmingly to trust and support the expert knowledge of medical authorities. The Russian general practitioner and cardiologist Alexander Nedostup outlines the cooperative, but distinct, roles of doctors and priests, saying:

> 'let us emphasise that just as a doctor must be careful while interacting with a patient during interpretation of issues of the faith, so a priest must be careful while giving various recommendations which lie outside a priest's competence (to [tell a spiritual child to] have a surgery or not to have a surgery, to take pills or not, and so on). Doctors often find themselves in

> difficult situations when this rule is broken. I often observed how cautious the great elder Archimandrite Kirill (Pavlov) [was] in giving such advice when asked by the sick: he usually gave a blessing to the patient to find an experienced (better yet, Russian Orthodox) doctor and to trust their recommendations' (2011:444-445).

And, while there has been a proliferation of clerical, lay and scholarly opinion circulating throughout the course of the pandemic which challenges the relationship between the doctor and priest as Nedostup describes it, it is notable that the Synodical decisions of Local Orthodox Churches maintain this general and historical appreciation and respect for medical authority.

The Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch, based in Damascus, Syria, for example, specified in a statement released[6] on 8 February 2021 that:

> 'After scientists have prepared a set of Covid-19 vaccines and in reviewing various medical reports and consulting with specialists, the Church considers that the matter of vaccination is not the specialty of the field of theological and spiritual studies, but rather specific to the field of medical sciences and its authorities. The decision regarding taking the vaccine is a personal decision. Every faithful has the right to make this decision in consultation with his or her doctor.'

Similarly, the synodical instructions issued by the Patriarchate of Moscow on 17 March 2020 carefully outline the practices that are to be observed by every community under their spiritual direction. This not only curtails common devotional practice (such as the kissing of icons, the cross and the hand of the priest), but also specifies the types and alcohol content of virucide cleaners to be used within the temple and monastic spaces. As Agadjanian (2021) observes, this synodal decision demonstrates a duality in the official position of the Patriarchate of Moscow. In these communications the medical and the spiritual language co-exist in parallel without resolution nor integration. A curious example from Troitse-Sergiev Lavra is emblematic of this co-existence of two different paradigms (Luchenko 2020 quoted in Agadjanian 2021). There, at the start of the pandemic, parishioners were offered two chalices with the Eucharist. While having more than one chalice to serve the people is common in large parishes and cathedrals, here the Lavra offered the chalice in different manners – the traditional and the hygienic. We would emphasise that not only is there a duality in these communications and offerings, but there is a reserved deference (cf Bandak and Boylston 2014) in that they are willing to change religious practice in so far as they are able.

Within the apophatic epistemology of the Church, Orthodox congregations found themselves navigating an ethical terrain based on knowing what not to do, but not necessarily what to do. Governed by a sense of love of the neighbour (cf Agadjanian 2021), Orthodox ethical action led congregations and individuals to a heightened awareness of what the other person might see, need, or be harmed by. Normally, the love and celebration of the saints which are 'ours', as Stewart notes, dictates the sensuous and tactile religion, full of touching, kissing, hugging, and packing basilicas. While the veneration of icons is a doctrinal aspect of Orthodoxy, affirmed in the Triumph of Orthodoxy set down in 843CE, the specific custom is open to variation. One priest in Moscow affirms, 'In different historical periods people would come up to the icons differently. I recently saw someone touch the icon with their ear. That's new, never seen that before. [But] why do we kiss icons? Because it is our tradition.' The physical contact with icons is a tactile way to engage in the apophatic image

of the saint and grow in the empirical relationship of love. As St John of Damascus affirmed, if Orthodox can know God through material, then they must. 'All tools that are available to you are good' in the 'acquisition of the saintly spirit', says a Russian parishioner, alluding to St Seraphim of Sarov's teaching. In this logic, blessing passes to the person through this intimate tactile affection.

While the numbers of regular attending Orthodox may be small in comparison to the size of the temples, the swelling numbers for great feasts, and especially Pascha (Easter), often max out the space available. Hundreds of Orthodox, some deeply faithful, some with unwavering ethnic identity to certain parts of the Paschal tide tradition, overflow beyond the doors of many parishes in order to light a candle, carry some of the Holy Light home, and hear the Paschal proclamation of Christ is Risen. However, as Pascha approached in April 2020, Orthodox congregations globally were forced to respond to the legislation of social distancing and the closure of 'non-essential' events. The logic of blessing via proximity, the physical eating of the Eucharist from a common spoon, the routine touching and kissing of icons, and the overcrowding – all part of the celebration of the Resurrection – ran counter to the logic of public health. What is noteworthy, is that both blessing and viral contamination move on logics of contagion that require proximity and contact.

As the months progressed, and parishes started to open up, the ethical concern of the neighbour continued to manifest in a dual manner. On the one hand, parishes maintained some practices if, as one priest explained, 'some people still feel vulnerable.' There is an echo here of the biblical notion of conducting oneself for the 'sake of the weaker brother', in that a Christian should not take full advantage of their own freedom if it might harm another Christian's faith. Metropolitan Hilarion, a leading figure in the Russian Orthodox Church and Head of their External Relations Department, made headlines in July 2021 when he suggested that those who do not get vaccinated need to repent (Stolyarov and Auyezov 2021). The logic in this statement, often lost in the media attention, is that the choice to not be vaccinated could lead to someone else getting sick and dying. Similarly, the Church of Cyprus encouraged the vaccine, arguing that while 'no one will be forced to get vaccinated, love and concern for the protection of others impose vaccination' (Orthodox Times (News) 2021). Thus, while there is freedom, there is also the moral imperative of love. As in other ethical spheres, the apophaticism of Orthodox ethical logic does not dictate a specific 'yes' or 'no' answer, but rather highlights the relational logic of choice and forefronts what is already known as an ethical commitment. 'We do not have any restrictions,' says one woman in Moscow, 'In our temple, everyone is given the opportunity to do whatever they need.' Freedom is for 'need', though, not 'want.' What is needful in the temple is the assistance, especially through the image of the liturgy, to come into love with God through the Eucharist. This priority is what led parishes to commune in secret, to conduct liturgy behind closed doors.

However, love also means sacrifice, or passion, as Yannaras highlights, that takes on suffering for the sake of what is 'ours.' Thus, parishes manoeuvre to avoid disrepute. To avoid bringing the Church to shame, videography was carefully positioned to occlude things that might raise public ire. Parishioners wear masks in places where it appears to be local norm, not because of personal concern about the virus ('When God calls, I will go!'), but because of what Metreveli (2021) has called 'performative security' because people are aware that others are watching. As Carroll (2017) has noted, aesthetics is the local expression of ethics, and in the context of responses to the pandemic, this is no different. In quiet

neighbourhood parishes, where everyone knows each other, people relax and the icons can be kissed, and masks are not as commonly used. In urban centres, where 'someone' (with a gestured hand), an 'uninvited guest' (Holy Synod of Serbia 2020) or one of the *zakhozhane* might come by, and see, there is more concern. Concern, however, not for the virus, per se, as 'we believe that nothing can happen without God's concession', but for the reputation of the Church. For example, in Serbia, one woman in her early fifties adamantly never covers her mouth at liturgical services in the central Serbian town where she lives. However, just as she is dismissive of mask wearing during worship, she is also keenly aware of the negative public perception in Serbia at large about churchgoers not wearing masks. Thus, when she visits her sons in Belgrade, the capital city, she wears a mask when she attends the Liturgy. She does this to protect the image of the Church and, in her words, 'to not draw attention.' The unspoken implication is that she bears a responsibility of care to protect the reputation of the Church.

As the virus is also contagious through proximity, and new practices enter into the Liturgy – the priest using hand sanitiser between the Holy Doors, or the bishop donning a mask embroidered with the Orthodox tri-bar cross – one must ask if these will not be like the use of incense which, historically, gained prevalence in part because of its use as preventative medicine during the plague (cf Carroll 2019). Will these likewise 'catch' the blessed capacity of symbols to invite the apophatic disclosure and concealment of Orthodox passion, or will they be wiped away, as senseless, temporary accommodations to the government and public health policy? If, as Yannaras tells us, the apophatic process of 'empirical relation' is 'independent of any kind of *a priori* necessity' (2005:71-2), then it follows that it can only function properly without governmental imposition, as governance is an *a priori* injunction.[7]

It is our suggestion, then, that public health measures are not likely to be taken up by Orthodox communities if they are enforced by the state – and especially if they are enforced in a way that appears to be at the expense of access to the Eucharist. As the Moscow Patriarchate argued, 'the offering of the Bloodless Sacrifice can in no way be cancelled, for where there is no Eucharist, there is no church life' (Patriarchate of Moscow 2020). The imperative nature of the Eucharist is, in fact, a grammatical fact in the Gospels. 'Take and eat' and 'take and drink' is both an invitation for Orthodox Christians to enter into this apophatic relationship of love, but it is also an imperative command. And, ultimately, if put to the test, it is a command that has an urgency such that people will be willing to break the law to obey.

Throughout the pandemic, many religious groups have been vilified for organising large-scale religious gatherings (Özyürek and Kravel-Tovi 2020) and more recently for joining anti-vaxx movements. The Orthodox communities in our respective fieldsites, acting with an apophatic ethics of love, are no exception. It is important to remember that, as Ben Kasstan (2021) has shown in the Orthodox Jewish anti-vaxx context, there is a heterogony of secular and religious considerations taken into each individual person's decision. In our context, we found that those who are anti-vaxx, and likewise those who did not comply with governmental guidance earlier in the pandemic, face two forms of opposition. The first is from those who emphasise a secular public-health oriented ethics of care, within which non-compliance with governmental guidance – and the epidemiological preventative measures behind them – is unequivocally a disregard for the safety of the community. The second critique comes from their own Synods and spiritual elders, as shown above, who

share the same apophatic ethics, but nonetheless have arrived at a different conclusion regarding the practices of care. We observe a clash of paradigms of love and their interpretation. It is our understanding that because of how the first set of critiques arose, and the fact that governmental guidance was issued in such a manner as to limit Orthodox access to the symbols and images central to their pathic love for God and the Church, many laity and some spiritual elders saw their first duty of love to protect what is 'ours.' Thus, put on the offensive, Orthodox communities debated amongst themselves to find the appropriate responses to the love for God and the neighbour.

As such, we argue that public health measures are more likely to be accepted by Orthodox communities if the measures are presented by policymakers within an ethics of love, first to ecclesiastical authorities, and then through their own ethical concerns with the 'weaker brother' and the 'neighbour.'

Notes

1. For our purposes in this paper, the Church, capitalised, refers to the Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches as a family of local hierarchical structures that, though distinct due to their historical, ethnic, and administrative formation, are in communion with each other and in mutual acknowledgement of fellowship, having a common purpose, and shared theological basis. Due to limitations of space and the ethnographic contexts to which the authors had access, we do not address the Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches in this paper.
2. Depending on local practice and personal preference, communion wines are usually between 10 and 16% alcohol content by volume. Water is added at two stages, first while preparing the elements for the liturgy (in Proskomedia) and then hot water is added during the liturgy (the zeon). The sources we have checked, tend to mix the admixture at a 2/3 ratio of water to wine in Proskomedia. The volume of hot water is sometimes added in rough ratio to the number of people anticipated to commune, and sometimes simply the volume of the zeon cup (which can vary in size). While we can find no evidence of tests done on Orthodox intinction, we estimate the eucharist to be roughly 4-8% alcohol by volume.
3. It is worth noting that the Internet has afforded this more conservative voice to be heard loudly, often more loudly than more moderate or medically-informed voices.
4. While the Liturgy needs both a priest and a congregation (of at least one), the Typika is a short service that can be said in the absence of a priest.
5. Of particular note currently is the vaccine hesitancy expressed by many Orthodox voices – lay, clerical and scholarly – who rule out the ethical viability of inoculation because of the use of abortion-derived stem cells in vaccine development and testing. This is too large of an issue to address here, however it is worth highlighting that while this opinion is held by many individuals within the Orthodox Christian community globally, it has not been given official backing by any synodical body. Some, such as the Holy Eparchial Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church in North America, have gone so far as to explicitly declare "that there is no religious exemption from any vaccine, including the COVID19 vaccine. Any such letter written by any clergyman of the Holy Archdiocese of America is not valid. No clergy are to issue such religious exemption letters" (@Elpidophoros, Tweet, 16 September 2021).
6. This statement was released on various media outlets, including the Patriarchate's Facebook page.
7. In the Russian context, the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the Moscow Patriarchate's siding with the government's imposition of public health restrictions on the Church has laid bare the extent of heterogeneity of opinions within the Church. This effect has already spurred on the creation of new local Russian Orthodox discussion forums (Chapnin (ed) 2020, 2021) and a response from the Western political science academic audience (Berkley Forum 2021).

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