

DEEPENING GREECE'S DIVISIONS:  
COVID, RELIGION, POLITICS  
AND SCIENCE

by Sotiris Mitralaxis

# méta Working Papers

**Editor:** Dr Sotiris Mitralaxis

**Assistant Editor:** Kostas Raptis

## **Advisory Committee**

Dr Antara Haldar, University of Cambridge

Dr Kostas Kanellopoulos, University of Crete

Dr Athina Karatzogianni, University of Leicester

Dr Vasilis Kostakis, Tallinn University of Technology & Harvard University

Dr Lyndsey Stonebridge, University of Birmingham

Dr Nicholas Theocarakis, University of Athens

Dr Paul Tyson, University of Queensland

Dr Yanis Varoufakis, University of Athens

Dr Sissy Velissariou, University of Athens

Dr Mari Velonaki, University of New South Wales

The Centre for Postcapitalist Civilisation's working papers series, *méta Working Papers*, publishes peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research that explicitly or implicitly explores aspects of our liminal times, of our transition towards postcapitalist futures — be they dystopian or utopian, or anything in between. We are particularly interested in the exposure of academic works-in-progress to an audience of post-capitalism-oriented thinkers.

*méta Working Papers* welcomes solicited and unsolicited papers in English, Greek, or preferably both, on aspects of the nascent postcapitalist era and follows a single-blind peer review process. The Papers are on-line open-access publications under the [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license](#). An indicative word count would be around 3.500-7.000 words. Our non-binding suggestion for references is the Chicago Style system, either notes+bibliography or author-date. Submissions must include an abstract. Authors must include a biographical note of 60-100 words. The editorial team maintains final discretion over publication of all content. Publication does not entail an endorsement of méta Working Papers' contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and méta cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Correspondence and submission: [postcapitalism.centre@gmail.com](mailto:postcapitalism.centre@gmail.com), cc'ing [s.mitralaxis@metacpc.org](mailto:s.mitralaxis@metacpc.org), with 'méta Working Papers Submission' on the subject line.

# Deepening Greece's Divisions: COVID, Religion, Politics, and Science

Sotiris Mitralaxis

## Abstract

Instead of being a time of unity and solidarity, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a time of *disunity*, a time for deepening Greece's divisions after a decade of crisis — on a spectrum ranging from politics to religion, and more importantly on the *public discourse* on religion. The present article offers a perspective on recent developments — by (a) looking into how the Greek government weaponized science in the public square, by (b) examining the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece, by (c) indicatively surveying 'COVID-19 and religion' developments that would not be covered by the latter, and last but not least by (d) discussing the discrepancy between these two areas of inquiry in an attempt to explain it.

**Dr Sotiris Mitralaxis** is méta's Academic Director. Sotiris is Visiting Professor at IOCS Cambridge, Templeton Visiting Scholar at the University of Cambridge, and Research Fellow at the University of Winchester. He holds a doctorate in philosophy from the Freie Universität Berlin, a doctorate in political science and international relations from the University of the Peloponnese, a doctorate in theology/religious studies from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and a degree in classics from the University of Athens. Sotiris has been Seeger Fellow at Princeton University, Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge, Visiting Senior Research Associate at Peterhouse, Cambridge, Visiting Fellow at the University of Erfurt, Teaching Fellow at the University of Athens and Bogazici University, as well as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Istanbul Sehir University. His publications include the monograph *Ever-Moving Repose* (Cascade, 2017) and, inter alia, the edited volumes *Ludwig Wittgenstein Between Analytic Philosophy and Apophaticism* (CSP, 2015), *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher* (Cascade, 2017), *Polis, Ontology, Ecclesial Event* (James Clarke & Co, 2018), *Between Being and Time* (Fortress, 2019) and *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity* (Routledge, 2019), as well as books in Greek.

How to cite this paper:

Sotiris Mitralaxis, 'Deepening Greece's Divisions: COVID, Religion, Politics, and Science', *méta Working Papers* 11 EN 2022, pp. 1-36, doi: <http://doi.org/10.55405/mwp11en>.

\*An earlier and considerably shorter version was published on 7 February 2022 by *Eurozine*, titled '[Insurgent Orthodoxy? COVID-19 and the Greek Church](#)'.

---

Instead of being a time of unity and solidarity, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a time of *disunity*, a time for deepening Greece's divisions after a decade of crisis — on a spectrum ranging from politics to religion, and more importantly on the *public discourse* on religion. The present article offers a perspective on recent developments — by (a) looking into how the Greek government weaponized science in the public square, by (b) examining the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece, by (c) indicatively surveying 'COVID-19 and religion' developments that would not be covered by the latter, and last but not least by (d) discussing the discrepancy between these two areas of inquiry in an attempt to explain it.

## **Weaponizing Science:**

### **'Respectable citizens' versus 'the Sprayed Ones'**

Discussing the pandemic and religion in Greece necessarily passes through the country's conceptualisation of 'science and religion' — and, arguably, the commencement of this fierce public debate in

February 2020, even *before* either the institutional Orthodox Church of Greece or the religious ‘facts on the ground’ could provide any indication on how the ‘Church and COVID-19’ saga would unfold in practice, acts as an indication for how this conceptualisation *preceded* actual events. However, before embarking on an examination of the role of *religion* in this story, it is important to set the conceptual stage as far as *science* is concerned. It would be anything but controversial to note that, across a number of countries, European and otherwise, the tendency of governments to legitimise emergency measures by reassuring the public that they are ‘simply following the science’ effected a certain confluence of politics and science, much to the detriment of science’s authority as an essentially apolitical practice of strictly following the scientific method. However, Greece’s case was a rather extreme one (in tandem with the extremity of its particular COVID-19 measures in an EU context, at least as measured by the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker by the University of Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government<sup>1</sup>); not only did the government feel the need to justify its *every* action or omission as having been dictated by ‘the scientists’—something that the very medical scientists sitting at the governmental expert’s panel have at times publicly refuted<sup>2</sup>—, but every political disagreement with *particular* governmental measures were touted as a fruit of science-denying conspiracy theories. This science-

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘COVID-19 Government Response Tracker’, *Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University*, March 2020 - December 2022, Ongoing, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Politicians and governments are suppressing science, argues The BMJ’, *BMJ Journal*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/politicians-and-governments-are-suppressing-science-argues-the-bmj/>

undermining political strategy negated the very possibility of scientific counter-proposals to the handling of the crisis, since these *had* to be conspiracy theories (of which, of course, Greece also had ample quantities), or else an apolitically scientific government would have taken them into account: for example, Stanford University's Professor John P. A. Ioannidis (who was at some point professor and department chair at the University of Ioannina, Greece, and thus has an audience in the country) was explicitly named an 'enemy of the people' and a 'conspiracy theorist' (ψεκασμένος=sprayed one) by government-friendly media.<sup>3</sup>

As it happens, Greece has a peculiar vocabulary for 'conspiracy theorists', one more akin to 'tin foil hat enthusiasts'. Following an international trend (with the proper temporal delay for the arrival of trends in Greece), discussions on 'chemtrails' —αεροψεκασμοί— made their appearance in the farthest fringes of Greek public discourse in the early 2000s; the über-minuscule number of people actually claiming that chemicals are being used on the population via condensation trails, i.e. that 'they' [it's always an impersonal 'they'] 'are spraying us' via chemtrails, «μας ψεκάζουνε», were henceforth pejoratively named 'the sprayed ones', «ψεκασμένοι», or «ψέκες» more recently, in abbreviated form. (Interestingly, the 'chemtrails' conspiracy theories entered parliamentary debates: a Parliamentary Question to cabinet

---

<sup>3</sup> Λεωνίδας Καστανάς, 'Οι ψεκασμένοι είναι εχθροί του λαού', *Athens Voice*, 3 August 2020,

[https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/668420\\_oi-psekasmenoi-einai-ehthroi-toy-laoy](https://www.athensvoice.gr/politics/668420_oi-psekasmenoi-einai-ehthroi-toy-laoy).

ministers on ‘mysterious chemtrails’ was submitted<sup>4</sup> by an MP in November 2010. That MP, Makis Voridis, is today the Minister of the Interior in Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ government, occupying one of the top cabinet positions). Ψεκασμένοι, ‘the sprayed ones’<sup>5</sup> is a much more frequently used phrase than συνωμοσιολόγοι, ‘conspiracy theorists’<sup>6</sup> in Greece, as a Google search would readily indicate.

The issue here is that this terminology (again, the equivalent of ‘tin foil hats’ or ‘believers in reptilians’) has been officially used by the Greek government against the Greek people, or at least ‘some’ of them — rather than against a minuscule minority of actual believers in the most far-fetched conspiracy theories imaginable. None other than Greece’s Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, used the word on 31 October 2020, in one of his ever-more frequent TV ‘addresses to the nation’,<sup>7</sup> lambasting the ‘few sprayed ones’ who criticise ‘scientists’: ‘let us leave the scientists out of any controversy whatsoever ... legitimate political criticism is to be limited to politicians’.

The flagrant irony here, of course, is that the Greek government’s version of ‘trusting the Science’ acted as precisely one of the main agents of undermining science’s credibility in Greece’s public sphere at large. I am not referring here to the question of internal coherence

---

<sup>4</sup> Μάκης Βορίδης, ‘Αεροψεκασμοί Άγνωστης Προέλευσης’, Ερώτηση 6714, ΔΑ.Ο.Σ, Κοινοβουλευτικός Έλεγχος, Βουλή των Ελλήνων, 25 November 2010, [https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleftikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovουλευtikou-Elegxou?pcm\\_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b](https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleftikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovουλευtikou-Elegxou?pcm_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b)

<sup>5</sup> ‘ψεκασμένοι’, Google search.

<sup>6</sup> ‘συνωμοσιολόγοι’, Google search.

<sup>7</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 31 October 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/10/31/25151>.

in exclaiming that any government follows ‘the Science’ in the singular, with a capital S and in a purportedly apolitical way (or to the political reactions that such a claim of apolitical governance would engender *ipso facto*): after all, were there to be a singular Science which would be apolitically followed to the letter by responsible governments, then no variations in the handling of the crisis whatsoever would be encountered among the ‘responsible countries’, something which is countered by as simple observations of reality as the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker by the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government,<sup>8</sup> which points to Greece as one of the strictest EU countries as far as governmental COVID-19 measures are concerned. Rather than that, I am referring —purely indicatively, and among an archipelago of examples— to the Tsiodras-Lytras study scandal.<sup>9</sup> On 1 December 2021, Greece's PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis claimed, from the Hellenic Parliament's podium, that the existence or inexistence of an adequate number of Intensive Care Units does not make any difference whatsoever to the survival prospects of intubated COVID-19 patients in need of admission to an ICU;<sup>10</sup> Just a spare bed

---

<sup>8</sup> ‘COVID-19 Government Response Tracker’, *Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University*, March 2020 - December 2022, Ongoing,

<https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality’, *Το Βήμα*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/>.

<sup>10</sup> Γιάννης Μπασκάκης, ‘Ο Κ. Μητσοτάκης εθελotyφλεί για τις εκτός ΜΕΘ διασωληνώσεις’, *Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, 21 January 2022, [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/322063\\_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kybernisi/322063_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis).



and an intubation would perfectly suffice. ‘We have no indication whatsoever to that effect. I don’t have any indication whatsoever! Should the Opposition have any proofs to the contrary, we’re looking forward to receiving them’.<sup>11</sup> However, as the Greek people would happily come to know *post eventum*, the office of the Greek prime minister had been notified in advance<sup>12</sup> of his parliamentary address of a then forthcoming study by Professors S. Tsiodras and Th. Lytras — Prof. Sotiris Tsiodras being the equivalent Greece’s Anthony Fauci, and for all intents and purposes the government-picked ‘face’ of Greece’s management of the COVID-19 crisis for 2020 and a sizable portion of 2021—, published on 13 December 2021<sup>13</sup> in the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, which provided proof of precisely the opposite claim to the one defended by Greece’s prime minister on the parliament’s podium. A prosecutor’s investigation has been ordered on the scandal.<sup>14</sup> The political—and, indirectly, governmental—backlash on the two scientists, ‘Greece’s Fauci’ Prof. Tsiodras and Prof. Lytras, for undermining the PM’s claims has been too grim to describe; let it

---

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ο πρωθυπουργός στη Βουλή για τη θνητότητα στους εκτός ΜΕΘ’

Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών, *YouTube*, 15 December 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDZCi\\_d-NgE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDZCi_d-NgE).

<sup>12</sup> Κύριος Μάξιμος, ‘Αυτοί είναι οι δύο υψηλόβαθμοι του Μαξίμου που γνώριζαν για την έρευνα Τσιόδρα – Λύτρα’, *Newsbreak*, 17 December 2021, [https://www.newsbreak.gr/kurios-maximos/279783/aytoi-einai-oi-dyo-ypsilovathmoi-toy-maximoy-poy-gnorizan-gia-tin-ereyna-tsiodra-lytra/..](https://www.newsbreak.gr/kurios-maximos/279783/aytoi-einai-oi-dyo-ypsilovathmoi-toy-maximoy-poy-gnorizan-gia-tin-ereyna-tsiodra-lytra/)

<sup>13</sup> ‘Total patient load, regional disparities and in-hospital mortality of intubated COVID-19 patients in Greece, from September 2020 to May 2021’, *NIH-National Library of Health*, 13 December 2021, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34903101/>.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Εισαγγελική έρευνα για τη μελέτη Τσιόδρα – Λύτρα’, *in.gr*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.in.gr/2021/12/17/greece/eisaggeliki-ereyna-gia-ti-meleti-tsiodra-lytra/>.

suffice to quote a 2 January 2022 twitter comment by Prof. Lytras apropos of both the published paper and the hype surrounding the movie 'Don't Look Up': 'I'm grateful we tried... #DontLookUp #μελετη\_τσιοδρα'<sup>15</sup>.

Other examples include official statements, on 31 March 2020, that face masks are not only unnecessary,<sup>16</sup> but potentially dangerous as well;<sup>17</sup> later, this was turned into mandatory masks in all indoors *and outdoors* spaces<sup>18</sup> under penalty of a EUR 300 fine. Disagreeing with the former statement was criticised by government-friendly media as 'unscientific' in April 2020; disagreeing with the latter is criticized as 'unscientific' ever since. That this enforced confluence, to the point of identification, of governmental decisions and a purported singular, never-changing Science acts to the detriment of popular confidence in the scientific method should need no further explanation. Indeed, it has been pointed out by Greece's independent media platform The Press Project<sup>19</sup> that this usurpation of the voice of a singular Science

---

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Lytras, Tweet on 2 January 2022, 11:33, <https://twitter.com/TheodoreLytras/status/1477573864960012290>.

<sup>16</sup> 'Δεν χρειάζεται να φοράμε μάσκα', Τσιόδρας, You Tube, *antimnimoniakos*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diKCCVDvo1A>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Όχι σε χρήση μάσκας και γαντιών μιας χρήσης – Επικίνδυνες οι μάσκες με βαλβίδα' Τσιόδρας, ΣΚΑΙ, ΥΓΕΙΑ, 9 April 2020, <https://www.skai.gr/news/ygeia/tsiodras-oxi-se-xrisi-maskas-kai-gantion-mias-xrisis-epikindynes-oi-maskes-me-valvida>

<sup>18</sup> 'Νέα μέτρα – Επανέρχονται τα πρόστιμα για μη χρήση μάσκας και στους εξωτερικούς χώρους', ΤΑ ΝΕΑ, 24 December 2021, <https://www.ta-nea.gr/2021/12/24/greece/nea-metra-epanerxontai-ta-prostima-gia-mi-xrisi-mas-kas-kai-stous-eksoterikous-xorous/>.

<sup>19</sup> Δημήτρης Τσίρκας, 'Ο λόγος περί ψεκασμένων είναι ο λόγος της εξουσίας', ThePressProject, 18 November 2021, <https://thepressproject.gr/o-logos-peri-psykasmenon-einai-o-logos-tis-exousias/>.

by a government in a bipartisan political stage, with every criticism being labelled as the shrieks of the conspiracy-theorising ‘sprayed ones’, points to the ‘discourse on the sprayed ones as the hegemonic discourse of power<sup>20</sup>’ that, in practice, undermines the authority of the scientific method in the name of the political game.

This context acts as a crucial backdrop in understanding the nuances of the ‘Church and COVID-19’ *as a* ‘religion and science’ debate in Greece; how this was played out, and why the situation is indeed more complex than initially imagined. There is no two-dimensional spectrum of ‘accepting’ or ‘rejecting’ scientific evidence; rather than that, there is a two-year-long political weaponization of the authority of science (which, indeed, *undermines* the authority of the scientific method on a long-term basis), there are the problems, tensions, and polarisations that this engenders, and of course, on the fringes, there’s also a tiny yet merry minority of actual anti-science conspiracy theorists allegedly discovering microchips in COVID-19 vaccines. However, mistaking the latter atomic-particle-sized minority with Greece’s complex debate at large would play into the hand of a rather dangerous game.

## **Institutional Religion and Religion ‘in the Field’: COVID-19, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and Dissenting Voices**

---

<sup>20</sup>Δημήτρης Τσίρκας, ‘Ο λόγος περί ψεκασμένων είναι ο λόγος της εξουσίας’, ThePressProject, 18 November 2021, <https://thepressproject.gr/o-logos-peri-psekasmenon-einai-o-logos-tis-exousias/>.

The Greek public square and discourse is perpetually characterised by a tense relationship with the Orthodox Church of Greece. On the one hand, Greece regularly appears in surveys (from the Pew Research Center<sup>21</sup> to Greece's DiaNEOsis<sup>22</sup>) as having one of the highest EU scores in 'believing in God', 'trusting the Church as an institution', 'deeming religion as important' — while seven out of ten Greeks will readily reject statements such as 'when science and religion disagree, religion is right'.<sup>23</sup> The flip side of this coin is that the Church's prominence, impact, influence, and power engenders frictions and a certain discontent; for example, there is hardly a time in which demands of a France-style separation of Church and State are not present in Greece's public discourse (which are not always characterised by a firm grip on facts by either side, as the utterly chaotic 2018/19 debate on proposed Church-State relations reforms so aptly demonstrated). Greeks relish in firmly believing that there is a Greek exceptionalism in Church-State relations, in which *every other Western country* has a full Church-State separation, in which religion is hermetically banished from the public square, from politics, and from finances, while Greece, woefully, 'finds herself still in the Middle Ages' by not having achieved this. The problem, of course, in framing the question in such

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues', *Pew Research Center*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.

<sup>22</sup> 'WVS team in Greece releases analytical report based on WVS-7 survey findings', *World Value Survey*, 25 November 2018, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=388&ID=388>.

<sup>23</sup> 'WVS team in Greece releases analytical report based on WVS-7 survey findings', *World Value Survey*, 25 November 2018, p. 77, B10.3, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=388&ID=388>.

a way is that it becomes virtually impossible to successfully propose a political solution of a Greek Church-State separation based on European precedents and best practices, as it would ‘never be enough’ if it’s not French *laïcité*; the practical outcome of this is that nothing ever changes and the *status quo* is most successfully defended by those that purport to undermine it. And while Greece does not have as tight economic Church-State ties as other EU countries, e.g. the *de facto* capital of the European Union, Belgium, where the federal government pays the salaries and pensions of a number of religions’ clergy, municipalities pay for the upkeep of churches and provinces pay for larger buildings such as cathedrals,<sup>24</sup> its Church-State relations are indeed close-knit: article 3 of Greece’s constitution<sup>25</sup> describes the Eastern Orthodox Church as ‘the prevailing religion in Greece’, the salaries of a very sizable part of the clergy (~9.500, plus about half a thousand unsalaried clergy) are paid by the state (yet the state offers no other types of direct financial assistance, in contrast, for example, to Germany<sup>26</sup>), the commencement of a new parliamentary cycle after national elections is blessed by the Church in the parliament building, the religion course at school is predominantly Orthodox, etc. And, of course, Greece houses the monastic community of Mount Athos in the peninsula of Chalkidiki, ‘a self-governed part of the Greek State’ of ‘ancient

---

<sup>24</sup> ‘Taxpayers in Belgium support religion to the tune of €415 million a year’, The Bulletin, Belgium, 19 April 2017, <https://www.thebulletin.be/taxpayers-belgium-support-religion-tune-eu415-million-year>.

<sup>25</sup> The Constitution of Greece, §3, Hellenic Parliament, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Heneghan, ‘Germany continues payments to churches a century after deciding to stop’, RNS Religion News Service, 13 February 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/02/13/germany-continues-payments-to-churches-a-century-after-deciding-to-stop/>.

privileged status' according to article 105 of Greece's constitution.<sup>27</sup> (It is interesting to note that although this peninsula is inhabited by monks leaving 'the world' in order to die after a life of prayer and solitude in Athos' monasteries and hermitages, the COVID-19 situation in Mount Athos and the health status of monks regularly preoccupies the Greek media cycle during the pandemic, with abbots of Athonite monasteries accusing other monks as not being vaccinated<sup>28</sup> and so on.)

In this chaotic setting, it is important to distinguish between the institutional church's stance vis-à-vis the pandemic and further anecdotal evidence, duly explaining both. That is, in order for a proper critical assessment of the situation in Greece to be feasible, certain important distinctions need to be made: individual pronouncements and activities of this or that low- or higher-ranking cleric are of course to be taken into account, as anecdotal evidence of facts on the ground, in order for the big picture to emerge. However, in assessing the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece during the pandemic as an official, institutional body wielding a degree of social power and impact, one has to look at those having the *authority* to represent it. Who has the *authority* to represent the Church of Greece as an institutional, official body? The Holy Synod of 80+ bishops *as a body* and its official resolutions and decisions, the more versatile, 12-member 'Permanent Holy Synod', and the Archbishop of Greece, who *stricto sensu* is not

---

<sup>27</sup> The Constitution of Greece, §105, Hellenic Parliament, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20ag-gliko.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> 'Ηγούμενος Βαρθολομαίος: Να μην μένουν στο απυρόβλητο οι ρασοφόροι που παρσύρουν για τον ιό', Skai.gr, You Tube, 11 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifVoi\\_yO6to](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifVoi_yO6to).

Greece's primate but merely the chairman of the Synod and who was in line with the Synod's decisions throughout the pandemic (something which, by the way, was not the case during the 2018/2019 political turmoil on proposed reforms in Church-State relations; there, the Synod and the Archbishop seemed to be of different minds, the former opposing the reform, the latter endorsing it. The Synod won this battle, the Archbishop's proposal was rejected, and the Archbishop was subsequently called to act as a mere representative of the decision-making body — the Synod). This being the case, the stance of the Orthodox Church of Greece throughout the pandemic is to be located in the texts, decisions, resolutions, announcements and responses of the Holy Synod *as a body*, as well as of the Permanent Holy Synod and the Archbishop of Athens.

Thus, on the Church and the pandemic in Greece, a brief timeline would be in order here:

- February 2020: Greece welcomes its first official COVID-19 case and enters the pandemic proper.
- 28 February 2020: 'Encyclical of the Synod on COVID-19 Protective Measures'<sup>29</sup> decreeing, inter alia, (i) that the faithful should follow official, state sources of information and the recommendations of scientists; (ii) that social distancing and other protective measures are to be followed by the faithful; (iii) that persons exhibiting any symptoms should self-isolate

---

<sup>29</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, 'Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα', 28 February 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi.asp?id=2627&what\\_sub=egyklioi](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi.asp?id=2627&what_sub=egyklioi).

and not attend church; (iv) that frail, elderly and high-risk persons should isolate and not attend church.

- 10 March 2020: The Synod orders that<sup>30</sup> Encyclical no. 3013<sup>31</sup> should be read during Mass in all parishes of the Church of Greece, together with a Ministry of Health press release, as well as a prayer for the pandemic.
- 11 March 2020: The Synod publishes further measures<sup>32</sup> against the spread of COVID-19 in churches and other religious buildings and activities, including the closure of Sunday schools, Bible study groups, Byzantine music classes, etc.
- Also on 11 March 2020: In an ‘address to the nation’,<sup>33</sup> PM Mitsotakis informs the Greek people that ‘he knows that faith begins where science ends’ (‘Ξέρω ότι η πίστη αρχίζει, συχνά, εκεί που τελειώνει η επιστήμη’), thus including in the political weaponization of science its purported nature as being *by definition* in contradistinction to religious faith, at a time when official Church encyclicals would repeat ‘listen to the scientists’ as a mantra; however, he also noted that ‘he looks forward to the support of Church leadership in the common cause’.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 10 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498\\_10032020\\_diav.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498_10032020_diav.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιος 3013’, 10 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498\\_10032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498_10032020.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 11 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/508\\_11032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/508_11032020.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 11 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/11/23545>.



- 16 March 2020: Greece's PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweets<sup>34</sup> ('By decision of the government, the services in all spaces of religious worship of every doctrine and religion are suspended. Churches remain open only for individual prayer. The protection of public health requires clear decisions.') and then enforces via joint ministerial decree<sup>35</sup> a 'temporary ban on, and prohibition of, any and all religious worship services in Greece', initially up until 30 March 2020 (and extended well after Easter). Interestingly, the PM introduces the (novel, for Eastern Orthodox standards) theological notion of 'private/individual prayer' in an empty church building.
- Follow-up: The Church of Greece acquiesces to the full prohibition of worship services. Interestingly, and in spite of calls in public discourse to do so, the Church of Greece never challenged the total state ban on worship services at Greece's equivalent of a constitutional court (Συμβούλιο της Επικρατείας) on the basis of Greece's constitution §13 ('All known religions shall be free *and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of the law*') and §25 (principle of proportionality), as other Western European Christian churches successfully did in similar contexts

---

<sup>34</sup> Prime Minister GR, Tweet on 16 March 2020, 10:43, PM, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/PrimeministerGR/status/1239653497118875648>.

<sup>35</sup> ΦΕΚ 872 Β', 'Αριθμ. 2867/Υ1: Επιβολή του μέτρου της προσωρινής απαγόρευσης της τέλεσης κάθε είδους λειτουργιών και ιεροπραξιών στους θρησκευτικούς χώρους λατρείας για το χρονικό διάστημα από 16.3.2020 έως 30.3.2020', 16 March 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hhfP4QzJI5x2bLePBuXdZ3GMVn5okjrF>.

(examples include France: Conseil d'État 18 May 2020;<sup>36</sup> Germany, Bundesverfassungsgericht 29 April 2020;<sup>37</sup> Belgium, Raad Van State | Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak <sup>38</sup> 8 December 2020, a fate averted in the Netherlands due to the exemption of 'religious worship and public demonstrations' from any total ban at the time).

- 18 March 2020: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew notes that, as far as the pandemic is concerned, 'it's not the Faith that is in danger, but the faithful and their health'.<sup>39</sup>
- 22 March 2020: Greece's PM announces<sup>40</sup> the first lockdown.
- 10 April 2020: A Synodical Encyclical<sup>41</sup> lambasts those that 'scandalise the faithful with slander, fictions and insults' by criticising protective health measures and their adherence by the Church and asks the faithful to 'stay at home' (in general, since participation in worship services was either way

---

<sup>36</sup> Le Conseil d'État, 18 May 2020, <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/actualites/rassemblements-dans-les-lieux-de-culte-le-conseil-d-etat-ordonne-au-premier-ministre-de-prendre-des-mesures-moins-contraignantes>.

<sup>37</sup> Bundesverfassungsgericht, 20 April 2020, [https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2020/04/qk20200429\\_1bvq004420.html](https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Entscheidungen/DE/2020/04/qk20200429_1bvq004420.html).

<sup>38</sup> Raad Van State, Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak, 8 December 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EN5o6yW-cIugOfZ07PTi9eo24NvxvZN8/view>.

<sup>39</sup> Σοφία Καρεκλά, 'Οικουμενικός Πατριάρχης: Δεν κινδυνεύει η πίστη αλλά οι πιστοί', orthodoxia.info, 18 March 2020, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/οικουμενικός-πατριάρχης-δεν-κινδυνε/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 22 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/22/23615>.

<sup>41</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, 'Εγκύκλιος 3019', 10 April 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/764\\_10042020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/764_10042020.pdf).

prohibited at the time). At the same time, the Encyclical clarifies that its adherence to COVID-19 measures does not entail a conviction that partaking in the sacrament of the Eucharist itself (the foundational communal sacramental event of the Orthodox Church) might prove to be a cause of pestilence. This forms one of the episodes of a subsection of the present text that could be called ‘The Eucharist Wars’:

- **The Eucharist Wars** | From the start of the pandemic, a sizable portion of the Church & COVID debate centred on how the Orthodox Church administers the sacrament of the Eucharist, i.e., by a common spoon shared by all. While temporarily changing the mode of administration for the Eucharist was discussed in the public square, no change has been introduced as of yet; theological arguments put forth include that by Revd Prof. Nikolaos Loudovikos <sup>42</sup>, according to whom while the Church does not see the Eucharist itself as a potential *locus* of infection, the Church could very well change the mode of administration temporarily on the basis of pastoral discernment. On different instances in 2020, University of Athens immunologists Prof. Yamarellou and Linou somewhat reluctantly claimed either that ‘we don’t have definitive proof that the Eucharist can be contagious with COVID-19’ or that ‘this is a matter of one’s personal faith’, igniting the ire of many in Greece’s public debate: now, ‘listen to the credentialed scientists, medical professionals, health experts’ was implicitly followed by

---

<sup>42</sup> π. Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, Αντίφωνο, 26 March 2020, <https://antifono.gr/μεταλαμβάνοντας-σε-καιρούς-πανδημία/>.

the footnote 'with the exception of Professors Yamarellou and Linou of the University of Athens'. In spite of the fact that 'the Eucharist Wars' occupied much of the Church & COVID debate as already mentioned, my personal assessment is that such an overpowering focus on the matter was slightly off-topic: being in a crowded worship space, with or without masks, with or without adequate social distancing, *either way* entails a danger of COVID-19 infection, the question rather being what a person, a government or a church structure is willing to do with this reality in different contexts; the question of the Eucharist itself, however one is to frame it, does not make the difference between an imagined 'fully sanitised' church and an actual, more or less crowded one. Here, a sub-subsection of 'the Eucharist Wars' would be in order, as from the beginning of the crisis there were some voices on the fringes (including, among high-ranking clerics, that of Metropolitan bishop Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania, who later died of COVID, one of quite a few clergy casualties) claiming that somehow the church *building* is, miraculously, a sanitised space where there can be no COVID-19 infections due to its holiness. The *theological* problem here is that the Orthodox Church had never in the past<sup>43</sup> (in the past *twenty centuries*, that is) held such a view; this fringe theology was a *new* theology, more characteristic of atavistic reflexes than Orthodox Christian theological tendencies. In any way, this fringe position

---

<sup>43</sup> Rev. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko, 'Do the Sacraments prevent Illness?', *Public Orthodoxy*, 19 March 2020 <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/19/do-the-sacraments-prevent-illness/>.

was never the position of the Synod or the Archbishop during the pandemic.

- 19 April 2020: Orthodox Easter, Greece's most important religious feast, is for all intents and purposes cancelled as the faithful are banned from attending church services. Services take place behind closed doors, with only the priest and acolytes/chanters present.
- 26 October 2020: Apropos the celebrations of the fest day of Saint Demetrios, the patron saint of Greece's second most populated city, Thessaloniki, numerous media outlets reported that social distancing measures were not kept by the public,<sup>44</sup> and that as a consequence a Brobdingnagian spike in COVID-19 cases would emerge after two weeks. The Brobdingnagian spike failed to emerge, yet the arena for culture wars inaugurated by the accompanying brouhaha sowed divisions which follow Greece's public discourse to this day: a few weeks ago, on 7 October 2020,<sup>45</sup> 15.000 demonstrators outside Athens' Court of Appeal waited for the verdict of the Golden Dawn trial on Greece's criminal neo-Nazi party, on the assassination of Pavlos Fyssas and on numerous other Golden Dawn assassination attempts. A causally related spike in COVID-19 cases

---

<sup>44</sup> Θεώνη Σταματοπούλου, 'Άγιος Δημήτριος Θεσσαλονίκη: Μεγάλος συνωστισμός έξω από την εκκλησία – Ιερείς χωρίς μάσκες', Diakopes.gr, 26 October 2020, <https://www.i-diakopes.gr/eidiseis-live/aggios-dimitrios-thessaloniki-megalos-synostismos-exo-apo-tin-ekklisia-iereis-choris-maskes/>.

<sup>45</sup> 'Δίκη Χρυσής Αυγής: 15.000 κόσμος έξω από το Εφετείο χειροκρότησαν την απόφαση', iefimerida, 7 October 2020, <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/diki-hrysis-aygis-15000-exo-apo-efeteio>.

failed to materialise there as well, yet suddenly half the population were charging the Thessaloniki Saint Demetrios celebrations as the root of future COVID-related deaths, while the other half asked whether the Court of Appeal demonstrators were miraculously immune from such a grim fate. In a world of magnets and miracles, the ringing of the division bell had begun: for the following many months, right-wing and/or religious citizens would defend their right of worship while lambasting the danger that public political demonstrations entailed, while left-wing and/or secular citizens would shun places of worship as centres of pestilence while defending the sacred right to demonstrate. Different government-friendly media would fuel both tendencies.

Fast-forward to...

- January 2021: After enduring restrictions during Christmas 2020, the government extended restrictions to include the celebration of Epiphany on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January; this was the first, and to date the only,<sup>46</sup> full clash of the institutional church with the government, as the Synod announced that it *would* openly celebrate Epiphany with the faithful (rather than *not* do it, as the state had decreed), yet adhering to strict social distancing measures.

Fast-forward to...

---

<sup>46</sup> Μαρία Ευσταθίου, 'Θεοφάνεια 2021: Πώς θα γίνει ο εορτασμός – Τι ισχύει για εκκλησίες και αγιασμό υδάτων', Flash.gr, 5 January 2021, <https://www.flash.gr/greece/1749692/theofaneia-2021-pos-tha-ginei-o-eortasmos-ti-isxvei-gia-ekklisies-kai-agiassmo-ydaton>.

- July 2021: The Church of Greece issues an *urbi et orbi*-style pamphlet, 'To the People' («Προς τον Λαό #53<sup>47</sup>»), urging the faithful to get vaccinated with an extensive Q&A by doctors asserting the safety of vaccines. This pamphlet was distributed to all parishes of the Orthodox Church of Greece, and it ends with the assertion that 'vaccination is a supreme act of responsibility towards fellow human beings, while the vaccine against the coronavirus does not come into any contradiction with the hagiographic, paternal and canonical teaching of our Holy Church'. Meanwhile the Russian Orthodox Church decreed resistance to the vaccination programme as 'a sin'.<sup>48</sup>
- Also July 2021: The Synod summoned two Metropolitan bishops,<sup>49</sup> Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania and Seraphim of Kythera, in order to call them into deposition regarding their 'disobedience and lack of respect for the unanimous decision of the governing body of the Church of Greece concerning the measures taken for the celebration of Holy Services due to the pandemic'.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, «Πρός Τὸν Λαό». "Έκδοση τῆς Ἱεραῖς Συνόδου τῆς Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 19 July 2021, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/prostolao/53.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία Ρωσίας: 'Αμαρτωλοί όλοι αρνούνται να εμβολιαστούν', YouTube, Skai.gr, 6 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9CDz85VKdw>.

<sup>49</sup> 'Η Ιερά Σύνοδος καλεί Κυθήρων και Αιτωλίας για προφορικές εξηγήσεις', Romfea.gr, 15 July 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/44540-i-iera-synodos-kalei-kythiron-kai-aitolias-gia-proforikes-eksigiseis>.

<sup>50</sup> 'Metropolitans of Kythera and Etoloakarnania are called into deposition', Orthodox Times, 15 July 2021, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/metropolitans-of-kythera-and-etoloakarnania-are-called-into-deposition/>.

- 16 September 2021: On the initiative of Metropolitan Ieronymos, bishop of Larisa and Tyrnavos, the first COVID-19 vaccination programme outside of Larisa's churches was inaugurated.<sup>51</sup> When the mobile vaccination unit started administering doses a few days later, a number of anti-vaccine protesters appeared: <sup>52</sup>representatives of the Metropolitan bishop offered them chocolates, trying to convince them to get vaccinated.
- 18 November 2021: PM Mitsotakis announces that the faithful may enter churches only with a green pass,<sup>53</sup> i.e. either with a vaccination certificate or with a negative COVID-19 test result, otherwise a EUR 300 penalty would occur. Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 (that is, during the months in which religious worship was not prohibited), entrance to churches did not require a green pass; for some reason, PM Mitsotakis added that 'this, after all, is what the Synod's encyclical foresees, it's just that now the state will oversee the process'. However, the 4<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> 'Λάρισα: Εμβολιασμοί με Κινητή Μονάδα έξω από τις εκκλησίες', Πρώτο Θέμα, 16 September 2021, <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1161659/larisa-emboliasmoi-me-kiniti-monada-exo-apo-tis-ekklisies-deite-video/>.

<sup>52</sup> Λάρισα: Η Μητρόπολη τρολάρει τους... πικραμένους αντιεμβολιαστές με σοκολατάκια', Ethnos.gr, 24 September 2021, <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/175297/larisahmhtropolhtrolareitoyspikrame-noysantiemboliastesmesokolatakia>.

<sup>53</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 'Μήνυμα του Πρωθυπουργού Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη προς τους πολίτες για την πανδημία και τα μέτρα για την προστασία της δημόσιας υγείας', 18 November 2021, <https://primeminister.gr/2021/11/18/27977>.



November 2021 encyclical in question<sup>54</sup> once again urged the faithful to strictly adhere to health measures and *proposed* that the faithful be tested for COVID-19 before attending church; naturally, the Synod does not possess the legal power (or desire) to prohibit the entrance of anybody anywhere on the basis of a green pass—a prerogative of the state—, thus the reason for the PM’s assertion that ‘this is what the Synod decreed in its encyclical’ remains a mystery to this day.

- 13 December 2021: PM Mitsotakis meets with the Permanent Holy Synod and the Archbishop<sup>55</sup> on a Church-State relations agenda *sans* coronavirus. In his address to PM Mitsotakis, Archbishop Ieronymos remarked once again<sup>56</sup> that ‘the Holy Synod recognises the Greek government’s responsible stance in the struggle against the spread of coronavirus, the preservation of the National Health System and the protection of human life, forcing you to make difficult decisions. In this national effort, the Orthodox Church of Greece was from the very beginning (28.2.2020) and remains in support and solidarity with the Greek government. The Permanent Holy Synod and

---

<sup>54</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα, 4 November 2021, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi.asp?id=3080&what\\_sub=egyklioi](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi.asp?id=3080&what_sub=egyklioi)

<sup>55</sup> ‘Η προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη’, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, [https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskopou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5\\_iohB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk](https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskopou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5_iohB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk).

<sup>56</sup> ‘Η προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη’, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskopou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki>.

the vast majority of hierarchs and the clergy constantly urge the faithful with announcements, encyclicals, but also through personal pastoral care, so that they strictly observe the legislated measures, both inside and outside our churches. We want to make it clear once again that we are all working with the government and the medical community towards the common goal of eradicating the pandemic and returning to normal living conditions. That is why we reiterate at this time the appeal [that] all protective measures must be strictly observed [together with] the necessary diagnostic tests. In addition, we ask everyone, clergy and laity, to be vaccinated, because this is the essential measure of protection against the pandemic, as suggested by the medical community. All the above constitute the official position of the Church of Greece'. A joint press release<sup>57</sup> underscored the Church's role in urging citizens to get vaccinated and to observe all public health measures and the PM's congratulatory remarks on how the Church helped in countering the pandemic.

- Late December 2021, on 'deepening Greece's divisions': A brouhaha emerged over a public Facebook post by Professor Elias Mosialos, official representative of the Government of the Hellenic Republic to international organisations on coronavirus, with a sarcastic meme on the belief of Christians in Mary's virginity; the meme posted just before Christmas was 'part of the

---

<sup>57</sup> 'Κοινό ανακοινωθέν ΔΙΣ – Γραφείου Πρωθυπουργού, Orthodoxia info.gr, 24 January 2022, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/koino-anakoinothen-dis-grafeioy-prothy/>.

COVID-19 awareness campaign’,<sup>58</sup> as he later clarified on ΣΚΑΪ TV, also noting that ‘the true meaning of Orthodox Christianity consists in guarding one’s [biological] health’. The Synod responded to the Christian outcry that emerged with a press release<sup>59</sup> noting the timing of Prof. Mosialos’ intervention and remarking drily that ‘fanaticism is not the exclusive prerogative of religions ... but of many, be they conservative or progressive’. Opponents described the Church’s press release as an obscurantist attempt at censorship, pointing to a return in the (always historiographically opaque yet ubiquitous in the public discourse) ‘return to the Middle Ages’.

\*

### Schrödinger’s church?

In assessing the situation at large, one would be safe to say that, in spite of occasional bumps in the road, the Orthodox Church of Greece as an institution has been one of the government’s strongest allies in securing an acceptance rate for the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and in rolling out the vaccination programme; at the time of writing this, Greece’s fully vaccinated amount to 66,3%<sup>60</sup> of the

---

<sup>58</sup> ‘Ο Η. Μόσιαλος μιλάει για τις αντιδράσεις της εκκλησίας για την σατιρική του ανάρτηση’, Skai.gr, 25 December 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl5klMRd1EE>.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Η Ιερά Σύνοδος για την προσβλητική ανάρτηση του κ. Μόσιαλου’, Romfea.gr, 24 December 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47504-i-iera-synodos-gia-tin-prosvlitiki-anartisi-tou-k-mosialou>.

<sup>60</sup> Εμβολιασμός κατά της COVID-19, gov.gr, <https://emvolio.gov.gr/>.

population, while the EU/EEA average is 68.7%.<sup>61</sup> Many factors contribute to this, perhaps the main one being that, together with its influence on Greek society, Greece's Orthodox Church is also in a very close relationship with the state apparatus in the context of a Church-State separation that leaves much to be desired; in many primarily indirect rather than institutional ways, it can be seen as *part* of the state apparatus as things currently stand, a reality which the Greek state relishes in making good use of. Not *every* government is meant by 'state apparatus', of course; the conservative New Democracy, Greece's governing party, represents the reinstatement of the *ancien régime* after the failed experiment of SYRIZA's 2015–2019 'government of the left' following PM Alexis Tsipras' spectacular U-turn after the 2015 referendum. When the SYRIZA government unsuccessfully attempted to reform Church-State relations in 2018/19 (with what *was* a very well-thought and coherent plan, but was not *recognised* as such from either side, partly due to the chaotic state of any slice of the Greek public's overview of the specifics of Church-State relations), it faced religio-political sanctions from hell by bishops, clergy, and faithful, in spite of the Archbishop's desire to follow through with the proposed reforms. The simple act of hypothetically imagining the Church's reaction (particularly under a different Archbishop) to these same 2020/21 COVID-19 health measures, restrictions, and worship bans, were these to have been put forth by the previous SYRIZA government instead of the current ruling party, is a veritable nightmare.

---

<sup>61</sup> 'Total doses distributed to EU/EEA countries', *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control*

COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker, <https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab>.

However, New Democracy's PM Mitsotakis has proven that the weaponization of Greece's media<sup>62</sup> and the weaponization of Greek scientists<sup>63</sup> do not in any way fall short of the weaponization of the Church in the battle against COVID-19.

At the same time, it is often reported that the Orthodox Church in Greece forms an *impediment* to countering COVID-19 and completing the roll-out of the vaccines. How is this to be explained?

There are several factors at play here. And some of them indeed describe a reality. Other factors do not. To begin with the easy part, sometimes it's just sloppy reporting: for example, last July Politico<sup>64</sup> ran a piece entitled 'Science vs. religion as Greek priests lead the anti-vax movement: with COVID-19 cases on the rise, influential clerics are urging people not to get vaccinated'. The piece is first and foremost about priest Vasileios Voloudakis, who is described as 'prominent', 'influential', having 'a lot of supporters'; this description of one of Greece's about 10.000 low-rank clerics, whom I had to google in order to find out that his existence is indeed an established fact (and also to find out an array of rather colourful pronouncements of his on any conceivable topic throughout the years), may seem to be somewhat

---

<sup>62</sup> 'Freedom of the Press in Greece-Critical analysis of the index of Reporters Without Borders', *Friederich Naumann Foundation*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.freiheit.org/greece/freedom-press-greece>.

<sup>63</sup> 'Αποκάλυψη Δοιμωξιολόγου της Επιτροπής: Το 50%+1 δεν ήταν εισήγηση των επιστημόνων', *Alfa Vita*, 4 January 2022, [https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/367207\\_apokalypsi-loimoxiologoy-50i-denitan-eisigisi-ton-epistimonon](https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/367207_apokalypsi-loimoxiologoy-50i-denitan-eisigisi-ton-epistimonon).

<sup>64</sup> Νεκταρία Σταμούλη, 'Science vs. religion as Greek priests lead the anti-vax movement', *Politico*, 20 July 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/science-vs-religion-greece-priests-anti-vaccine-coronavirus-movement/>.

economical with the truth among those in the know. Furthermore, Metropolitan bishop Seraphim of Kythera is credited as 'one of the country's most powerful clerics', failing to mention that he was one of the two bishops summoned by the Synod to be chastised for disobeying the body's decision on matters pandemic (the other being Metropolitan bishop of Aetolia and Acarnania Kosmas, who had refused to get vaccinated against the virus and who died of COVID-19 in January 2022). The irony here, of course, is that Kythera is one of the tiniest dioceses in Greece (and nobody really knows why and how it is a jurisdictionally distinct diocese), with nominally 3.000 inhabitants; the country's most powerful clerics usually have a different background — or audience. But that was the easy part.

On more serious matters, a distinction needs to be made which often eludes the overview of observers. Greece has a minority of various and disparate Old-Calendarist groups<sup>65</sup> or 'Genuine Orthodox Christians' (Γ.Ο.Χ. — Γνήσιοι Ορθόδοξοι Χριστιανοί), usually at odds with one another and differing in acronymical ways as far as their official titles are concerned, in a manner often reminding an outsider of the difference between the pythonesque 'Judea People's Front', the 'People's Front of Judea' and the 'Judean Popular Front'. 'Old-Calendarist' does not here entail the mere adherence to the 'Old', Julian calendar (as this is either way the case with numerous canonical Orthodox churches: the churches of Russia, Jerusalem, Greece's Mount Athos monastic communities, etc.), but the separation, rupture and schism from the official Orthodox Church following its early 20<sup>th</sup> century

---

<sup>65</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Calendarists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Calendarists).

adoption of the *revised* Julian calendar, in the context of Greece's division between royalists and republicans at the time.

While suffering in numbers and impact, Old-Calendarist groups are particularly active in conservative and ultra-conservative public demonstrations in Greece's streets or over the internet — including, for example, the demonstrations against the Prespes Agreement on North Macedonia in recent years. The vast majority of media articles featuring photos of clergy demonstrating against coronavirus restrictions or against COVID-19 vaccines depict clerics not belonging to the official Orthodox Church of Greece and sporting stereotypically Old-Calendarist-groups attire (such as the one in this article here,<sup>66</sup> among many others); editors are usually unaware of the distinction.

Thus, while the activity of the various Old-Calendarist groups falls very well within the subject of 'Greece and religion' or 'COVID-19 and religion in Greece' as a religious minority, it would be erroneous to include them in the 'Greece's Orthodox Church and the pandemic' bundle. And this activity is, indeed, excitingly convenient in the context of a particular narrative: who is it that could voice second thoughts to the handling of the pandemic, given that this handling is allegedly apolitical and solely dictated by a singular Science? It cannot be respectable citizens in the context of a democratic process. And while 'the sprayed ones' provide a handy starting point for media-managing this, it does not provide an explanation in the way that a proper scapegoat would. However, 'religious fanatics' and 'obscurantists' trying to

---

<sup>66</sup> 'Συγκεντρώσεις διαμαρτυρίας με λάβαρα και εικόνες κατά του υποχρεωτικού εμβολιασμού', Lifo.gr, 17 July 2021, <https://www.lifo.gr/now/greece/sygkentroseis-diamartyrias-kata-toy-yphreotikoy-emboliasmoy-kai-ton-diahorismon-se>.

take us 'back into the Middle Ages' because they 'deny Science' due to their 'faith' in the context of a 'perennial battle between Science and Religion': that would be truly impeccable. Thus, fringe Old-Calendarist fanatics (presented by the media as priests of the Orthodox Church of Greece) do not merely form *part* of a dissenting crowd; they *characterise* the crowd and a *representative* thereof — better still, they are the crowd's *leaders*, according to the narrative.

It is in no way the fact, however, that there are no Orthodox Church of Greece clerics (or Greek citizens at large, for that matter) who publicly oppose either coronavirus restrictions and measures or COVID-19 vaccines or both, calling upon their flocks to act accordingly. And the situation in monasteries is by definition a lot more complicated, given the very nature of these establishments as promised places of *exit* from 'the (secular) world', while a certain amount of friction with their local overarching ecclesiastical authorities is often to be observed. Again, however, the reader would be imprudent to draw a distinction between the 'official Church line' versus 'everything/everyone else' (from individual bishops to monasteries, parishes, grassroots clergy) in which the former supports public health measures and the vaccination programme whereas the latter reject or undermine it.

It is simply impossible to have reliable, quantifiable data on *who does/says what* on the ground, as far as percentages are concerned. If the present author's day-to-day observations hold any value as 'empirical data', the overwhelming, vast even, majority of Athenian parishes surveyed adhere to the state-designated health measures to a tee, from social distances to face masks and disinfecting agents. However, in a country of about 10.000 active parishes, exceptions of COVID-denying or anti-vaccine priests and flocks cannot but by definition



numerous in absolute numbers, most probably in a way proportional to the same tendencies in the general population — even if bishops such as the Metropolitan Bishop of Dodoni go as far as to claim that ‘vaccine-denying and COVID-denying priests should be hanged’,<sup>67</sup> in a somewhat unrestrained bout of enthusiasm live on government-friendly ΣΚΑΪ TV, since ‘by opposing COVID-19 vaccines they exclude themselves from the Church and become minions of Satan’.<sup>68</sup> In any case, however, these exceptions to the rule enforced by the institutional church (*sans* hanging, hopefully) appear augmented in Greece’s conservative government-friendly media,<sup>69</sup> finding an unexpected ally in voices of the Greek Left often keen to identify an obscurantist ecclesial counter-example to an Enlightened progressivist cause. Not to put too fine a point on it, from September 2021 to the time of writing this I have struggled to single out three or four instances of ΣΚΑΪ TV’s news (usually presented by Sia Kosioni, ΣΚΑΪ TV’s main anchor-woman who —to put this into Greece’s media-political perspective— is also the spouse of the mayor of Athens, who in turn is the nephew of the prime minister, the son of the former minister of foreign affairs Dora Bakoyannis, the grandson of the late prime minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis and the cousin of the prime minister’s Chief of Staff) that would not include a story on ‘anti-vaccine priests spreading

---

<sup>67</sup> ‘Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος για αρνητές ιερείς: Κρέμασμα θέλουν’, VimaOrthodoxias.gr, 24 November 2021, <https://www.vimaorthodoxias.gr/eipan/dodonis-chrysostomos-gia-arnites-iereis-kremasma-theloy/>.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Μητροπολίτης Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος: Οι αρνητές ιερείς γίνονται όργανα του σατανά’, Skai.gr, 23 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6UHq5ZFoJc>.

<sup>69</sup> Alice Taylor, ‘EU media watchdogs and associations urge Greece to protect press freedom’, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/eu-media-watchdogs-and-associations-urge-greece-to-protect-press-freedom/>.

outrageous lies' <sup>70</sup>(3/12/21), on 'COVID-denying priests in a battle against the vaccines' <sup>71</sup>(16/9/21), on Metropolitan bishops informing the audience that 'COVID-denying/anti-vaccine priests are heretics' <sup>72</sup>(6/11/21), on a 'priest attacking a schoolmaster for wearing face masks' <sup>73</sup>(14/09/2021), on 'priests having been spotted without masks' <sup>74</sup>and so on. By regularly watching the news, one gets the impression that the country is under an anti-vaccine mass insurgency spear-headed by hundreds of combative science-denying priests in COVID-infected cassocks. By visiting 50 or 100 random Athenian parishes, one gets a very different picture, according to which state-dictated measures are adhered to in the vast majority of cases, exceptions notwithstanding. Thus, perspective is everything: there *are* anti-vaccine priests in Greece; the question is whether these are *more* in number than anti-vaccine *Greeks*, proportionally to the population; an educated guess would highly doubt that. And, as far as exceptions are concerned, their politico-religious dimension might induce a certain hilarity at times: for example, the Metropolitan bishop of Zakynthos

---

<sup>70</sup> 'Αρνητές ιερείς διασπείρουν εξωφρενικά ψεύδη', Skai.gr, 03 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laSShBSa7fo>.

<sup>71</sup> 'Αρνητές ιερείς πολεμούν τα εμβόλια', Skai.gr, 16 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78LEOoGhQ6M>.

<sup>72</sup> 'Μητροπολίτης Πειραιώς: Σχισματικοί οι ιερείς που είναι κατά του εμβολιασμού', Skai.gr, 06 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-qP-p\\_ZEM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-qP-p_ZEM).

<sup>73</sup> 'Το σχόλιο του Βασιλή Χιώτη - Επίθεση ιερέα σε λυκειάρχη για τη μάσκα', Skai.gr, 14 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7TNvcmiUC8>.

<sup>74</sup> 'Παπάδες και ψάλτες χωρίς μάσκες στον Αγ. Δημήτριο Θεσσαλονίκης', Skai.gr, 26 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay9f6f--y5g>.

wrote a letter to the PM<sup>75</sup> on 4 January 2022 complaining to him that one of the governing party's parliamentarians, MP Aktypis, is politically courting the very anti-vaccine priests and monks that the bishop is trying to contain...

After all is said and done, however, one has to somehow account for the reality that there are *some* priests that defy the decisions of the state-friendly Church's governing body — and even a minority in a population of about 10.000 priests can prove to be quite a substantial number indeed. How is this to be explained, given that the Church of Greece is usually thought to be a tight and strict hierarchical structure with a top-down flow of decisions rather than an anarchist collective in which the governing body's decisions may not amount to much? The Orthodox Church is not 'Schrödinger's cat': we cannot be content with the explanation that it is *at once* tightly top-down hierarchical *and* anything-goes, or to resort to conspiracy theories implying that the Church desires to appear as if it defends the state's policy vis-à-vis the pandemic while in actuality is intends to undermine it. One might have to look for the answer in this seeming discrepancy by taking into account certain class considerations. The pandemic brought with it a blitzkrieg of radical changes to social life and life in general, as well as a number of vaccines developed in hitherto unforeseen speed, with which the entire population has to be vaccinated — together with the government's claim that it is simply, and apolitically, following the science, a claim with which reality has not proven to be very kind, as

---

<sup>75</sup> Επιστολή Μητροπολίτη Ζακύνθου Διονύσιου στον πρωθυπουργό, Newsbreak.gr, 4 January 2022, <https://www.newsbreak.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CE84A80F-D753-49B7-9329-821358F94B83.jpeg>.

the Tsiodras-Lytras scandal<sup>76</sup> so aptly demonstrated. To think that this violent situation would not engender dissenting voices in the population would be an apolitical folly: we become happily polarised in much less challenging settings, with the halo effect<sup>77</sup> entailing a change in our opinions and perspective even when the issue is whether we find a politically-charged feline aesthetically pleasing. <sup>78</sup>In the case of the pandemic and its class consideration, dissenting citizens from, say, the upper middle class, or higher still, have a voice of their own in the public square in order to articulate their dissent, and require no collective, or communal, way to do so. However, claiming the same for the working class would not be factually correct. It would not be oversimplistic to state that there are only roughly two kinds of institutional communities (apart from political parties) where working-class people throughout Greece, and particularly in Greece's provinces beyond the all-consuming capital of Athens, may join their voices with the voices of others: the local church, when pious citizens are concerned, and football clubs usually belonging to Greece's oligarchs, when sports fans are concerned. Football clubs can be political at times,<sup>79</sup> but

---

<sup>76</sup> 'Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality' Το Βήμα, 15 December 2021, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/>.

<sup>77</sup> 'Halo Effect', Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_effect).

<sup>78</sup> Philip Cowley, 'Don't believe in tribal politics? Take a look at how people respond to Downing Street's cats', The Spectator, 4 November 2014, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/don-t-believe-in-tribal-politics-take-a-look-at-how-people-respond-to-downing-street-s-cats>.

<sup>79</sup> '«Βράζει» η Μακεδονία κατά της κυβέρνησης: Χιλιάδες οπαδοί του ΠΑΟΚ εν χορώ εξυβρίζουν τον Κ.Μητσοτάκη', Paskedi.gr, 2 November 2021,

analysing coronavirus measures and the state of vaccines wasn't quite their thing; all of Greece's parliamentary parties support the COVID-19 vaccination programme (perhaps apart from the far-right 'Greek Solution', which tries to play it both ways); thus, the only kinds of *local* communities where the minority of dissenting citizens could bundle up (from sceptics, to groups that suffer financially from COVID-19 restrictions, to proper conspiracy theories) would be *those* local churches and parishes where a priest would be willing to lead them and to take on the microphone; a minority of priests, in a country with a minority of dissenters, if we are to judge from Greece's full vaccination percentages being roughly equivalent to the EU/EEA average. To put it otherwise: the only community that's *already there* and *could*, under certain circumstances, give voice to dissenters without it needing to be set up *ad hoc* (as has been the case with various organisations calling for anti-COVID demonstrations etc.) would be a local church *in which there's a priest of similar opinions*. Perhaps this offers some kind of preliminary explanation as to why clerics are indeed visible in the anti-COVID and anti-vaccine crowd in spite of the fact that the official Church of Greece via its governing body so staunchly defends COVID-19 health measures and the vaccination programme: reality is not always as simple and as one-dimensional as we would like it to be.

\*

Sometime in the future, the pandemic will be a thing of the past. Yet the divisions sowed by the handling of the crisis —on top of a decade of *financial* crisis— will persevere within Greek society. One could

---

<https://www.paskedi.gr/vrazei-h-makedonia-kata-ths-kyvernshshs-xiliades-opadoi-toy-paok-en-xorw-exyvrizoy-n-ton-k-mhtsotakh-video/>.

argue that, during the pandemic, Greece's media,<sup>80</sup> Greece's scientists<sup>81</sup> and Greece's 'prevailing religion', the Orthodox Church, faced the danger of becoming weaponized as servants of political power, or *ancillae potestatis*, in the name of a common and noble cause: public health. After the pandemic recedes and leaves us with its bitter memories, one way for Greeks to heal the divisions inflicted upon them would be to re-articulate certain realities of foundational importance: the centrality of the freedom of the press, the integrity of the scientific method as a *scientific* rather than political enterprise in the bipartisan arena, and the liberation of the Church from the claws of the state — as an accurate description of a Greek Church-State separation would have it.

---

<sup>80</sup> Dr Athanasios Grammenos, 'Freedom of the Press in Greece', *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.freiheit.org/greece/freedom-press-greece>.

<sup>81</sup> 'Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality' *To Βήμα*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/>.

## méta Working Papers

The Centre for Postcapitalist Civilisation's working papers series, méta Working Papers, publishes peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research that explicitly or implicitly explores aspects of our liminal times, of our transition towards postcapitalist futures – be they dystopian or utopian, or anything in between. We are particularly interested in the exposure of academic works-in-progress to an audience of postcapitalism-oriented thinkers.

It has been noted that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, invoking the need for serious reflection on the end of the existing order and a transition to a postcapitalist way of life. Yet the future of the world economy is but one of the aspects of postcapitalism. After all, capitalism itself might be *prima facie* an economic system, but it has evolved into a comprehensive political, cultural, anthropological and international order. Postcapitalism, however it might evolve, is not merely the modification of an economic system; it will prove to be a new political, cultural, anthropological, civilisational paradigm – a new era indeed. A dystopian one, a utopian one, or anything in between. And the turbulences of the gradual transition are to be witnessed by all. The oligarchic decline of liberal democracy engenders countless variations of authoritarian tendencies; the supply chain of tributes for the global minotaur are increasingly interrupted; novel desiderata for emancipation are articulated; the chasms between megacities and provinces nurture silent, cold civil wars; the emergence of a non-Anglophone, non-Atlantic, non-liberal, non-bipartisan state as the planet's largest economy is just around the corner, overturning a two-centuries-old order; the changes in global demography and geopolitics are vertiginous; climate change is threatening our very existence. Transformations of gigantic proportions radically reshape the world before our very eyes.

With social sciences and the humanities as our main launching pad, disciplines that are of interest to the méta Working Papers series include, but are not limited to, political economy, political science and international relations, history of ideas, sociology, law, religious studies, innovation and governance, area studies, and so on – provided that the research in question is of relevance to a *lato sensu* postcapitalist enquiry.

méta Working Papers welcomes solicited and unsolicited papers in English, Greek, or preferably both, on aspects of the nascent postcapitalist era and follows a single-blind peer review process. The Papers are on-line open-access publications under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license. An indicative word count would be around 3.500-7.000 words. References should follow the Chicago Style system, either notes+bibliography or author-date. Submissions must include an abstract. Authors must include a biographical note of 60-100 words. The editorial team maintains final discretion over publication of all content. Publication does not entail an endorsement of méta Working Papers' contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and méta cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. Correspondence and submission: [postcapitalism.centre@gmail.com](mailto:postcapitalism.centre@gmail.com), cc'ing [s.mitralexis@metacpc.org](mailto:s.mitralexis@metacpc.org), with 'méta Working Papers Submission' on the subject line.