

# RELIGION AS SCIENCE, SCIENCE AS RELIGION, AND AN UNWELCOME REFORMATION: SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE DURING COVID-19 – A GREEK OR- THODOX CASE STUDY

SOTIRIS MITRALEXIS

*University of Cambridge, UCL & IOCS Cambridge*

The present paper comments upon certain (mis)understandings concerning science and religion *in Greece's public discourse* during 2020 and 2021. The *first* half consists of a theoretical commentary on what transpired in Greece, focusing on 'science' and 'religion' morphing into one another in the public square apropos the pandemic—with religion presenting itself as science, science presenting itself as religion, and an unwelcome 'Reformation' in science emerging out of dissent. The *second* half of the paper provides a report on Greece's public square during the pandemic, on the basis of which the theoretical part was formed.

The years 2020 and 2021 will linger in memory as the *anni horribiles* of the COVID-19 pandemic—with 2022 passing the baton to global security concerns of war and peace while the pandemic is still ongoing. During those years, the meaning, power, method, efficacy, independence and politicisation, and capacities and limitations of 'science' as a generic term dominated global public discourse, both directly and indirectly—in discussions not only about the virus itself or the vaccines and medicines developed to counter its spread and effects, but also about social distancing, various restrictions and policies, lockdowns, 'green passes', vaccinations/testing certificates, and so on. 'Religion' featured heavily in the public square as well—less as a promise and a hope in times of collective distress, and more as a question concerning the safety of collective worship and of certain worship practices, as well as in the context of the unavoidable 'perennial' battle between science and religion' trope.

*Part I: Commentary*

The present paper comments upon certain (mis)understandings concerning science and religion *in public discourse* during 2020 and 2021, apropos Greece as a case study in particular and in the context of a wider collaborative project studying the experience of the pandemic in a number of predominantly Orthodox Christian countries, and taking into account the peculiarities and particularities of those countries: their largely distinct historical trajectories, as well as how the relationship between science and religion has been historically (mis)understood and (mis)conceived in those countries.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the article concerns itself primarily with the *public (mis)representations of 'science' and 'religion'* rather than with the *realities* of science and religion per se. Pondering how to weave together a report of the developments in the field from what could be described as a mainly discourse-analytic and ethnographic perspective and a theoretical analysis and commentary thereof, I ended up with a slightly uncommon structure for this paper: the *first* half consists of an analysis of—and commentary on—what transpired in Greece, which is detailed in the *second* half of the paper, with the analysis preceding the report analysed, lest the reader be burdened with a pages-long detailed description of events, voices, and developments at the very start of the paper. However, elements of analysis have been included into the report and elements of reporting in the analysis, together with certain purposeful repetitions of central points in my argument.

In attempting the approach highlighted above, a large part of my theoretical framework derives from a wave of scholarship revisiting the category of 'religion' as a problematic and anachronistic category when applied to pre-modern or non-Western societies,<sup>2</sup> but particularly from

<sup>1</sup> This publication was initially made possible through the support of a subgrant from the John Templeton Foundation and its 'New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe' project. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the John Templeton Foundation. During the latter stages of this publication's completion, the author was funded by the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, Grant Ref: MR/S031669/1, titled 'Orthodox Christian Material Ecology and the Sociopolitics of Religion'.

<sup>2</sup> Indicatively, see Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2017); Nathan J. Ristuccia, *Christianization and Commonwealth in Early Medieval Europe: A Ritual Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University

Peter Harrison's 2011 Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh, revised, reworked and published as *The Territories of Science and Religion*.<sup>3</sup> In this book about the history of science and religion in the West, Harrison diligently traces how the current conceptualisation of science and religion as two distinct spheres and domains of knowledge (i) is a decisively modern one that (ii) cannot be projected onto the pre-modern past, where *religio* and *scientia* represented *moral values of the individual*, whereas (iii) any attempt to trace the development of science as a domain that would ideally be hermetically sealed from religion runs counter to the very development of science within history, given how, for example, modern physics stems from 'natural philosophy'. In Harrison's words, his work consists in

a consideration of the fortunes of the Latin terms *scientia* and *religio*. These two notions both begin as inner qualities of the individual —'virtues', if you will— before becoming concrete and abstract entities that are understood primarily in terms of doctrines and practices. This process of objectification is the precondition for a relationship between science and religion. In addition to a consideration of the Latin terms from which our modern English words 'science' and 'religion' derive, [this work also traces] changing constellations of other conceptions that are genealogically related to our modern ideas of science and religion. They include 'philosophy', 'natural philosophy', 'theology', 'belief', and 'doctrine', all of which had meanings for past historical actors that are quite unfamiliar to us today. One

Press, 2018); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Nathan J. Ristuccia, 'Eastern Religions and the West: The Making of an Image', *History of Religions* 53, no. 2 (2013): 170–204, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673185>. On earlier approaches to this, see John Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *Past and Present* 95, no. 1 (1982): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/95.1.3>; Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1963). On certain nuances in questions of secularism and disenchantment, see Todd H. Weir, 'Germany and the New Global History of Secularism: Questioning the Postcolonial Genealogy', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 6–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2014.986431>; Hans Joas, *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

of my suggestions will be that there is a danger of systematically misconstruing past activities if we mistakenly assume the stability of meaning of these expressions.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the book explores (iv) how the modern conceptualisation of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ tends to function as an antithetical pair, in contrast to earlier realities, and (v) how speaking of ‘science’ in the singular, or of *the* ‘scientific methodology’ in the singular, is problematic when carefully taking historical, intellectual, and epistemological developments into account—an observation that is quite dominant in the work of contemporary historians and philosophers of science.

Given that my task here concerns the representations of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in public discourse,<sup>5</sup> particularly during the pandemic and in predominantly Orthodox countries such as Greece, what is particularly germane here is the constructed nature of the prevalent ‘perennial battle between science and religion’ narrative. As an indicative example of the more irenic versions thereof, allow me to point to Ian Barbour’s schema<sup>6</sup> of four possible science-religion relations (conflict – independence – dialogue – integration), which asserts the mutually exclusive nature of ‘religion’ and ‘science’, irrespective of the options for their encounter ranging all the way from hostile, open confrontation to peaceful, mutual accommodation.

I have attempted to elaborate on how Peter Harrison’s insights help us better understand the problems, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in a pre-pandemic paper titled ‘An Unfortunate *Communicatio Idiomatum*: On the Curious Spectacle of Two Modern Inventions Morphing into One Another in the Public Square.’<sup>7</sup> Therein the reader may find an analysis on how the prop-

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, x.

<sup>5</sup> For brevity, in this paper I shall henceforth envelop ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in inverted commas when referring to their representations in public discourse rather than to actual scientific practices or the life and identity of religious communities.

<sup>6</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘An Unfortunate *Communicatio Idiomatum*: On the Curious Spectacle of Two Modern Inventions Morphing into One Another in the Public Square’, in *New Directions in Theology and Science: Beyond Dialogue*, ed. Peter Harrison and Paul Tyson, Routledge Science and Religion Series (London & New York: Routledge, 2022), 96–114, 10.4324/9781003240334-6. This paper was authored in the context of the ‘After Science and Religion: Rethinking the Foundations of Science-Religion Discourse’ project.

erties usually thought of as belonging to religion are projected onto science, and vice versa, in public discourse — and how we witness the emergence of messianic and eschatological secular techno-religions in the name of science and technology. This is e.g. the case in the writings of the immensely influential public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari. The remarks therein form a background to the present paper, which is written in the perpetual astonishment of the chasm between the realities of science and religion and the problems of their public representations. In order to underscore how scientific practice and the religious life, communal or otherwise, are of a very different nature than their representations in the social imaginary, allow me to point to Alister McGrath's *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*,<sup>8</sup> detailing the different *modes* of reason and rationality applicable to domains such as the sciences and theological enquiry, a deeper understanding of which further enables a meaningful dialogue. The book constitutes an in-depth exploration of the very nature of reason in its plurality. Perhaps the first impression of a reader concerned with the representation(s) of science and religion in the public square and the social imaginary is how hermetically sealed and averse to opening up to the concerns of philosophy of science and philosophical theology these representations are; distorted idols of the realities they profess to represent—and thus how difficult it is to avoid the 'simplistic reductions to allegedly "essential" or "universal" characterisations of either "science" or "religion"'.<sup>9</sup> McGrath strives to counter on the level of the public discourse at large, rather than only on the level of scholarly discussion between experts, where it often seems to still be feasible.

Examining all this together, one can see the deeper roots of a phenomenon that was particularly pronounced in Greece's case: the 'scientification' of religion and the 'religionization' of science, a phenomenon I examine *not* in conjunction with an assessment of objective and/or medical realities of COVID-19, the pandemic, vaccines, public health policies *per se*, and so on. In what follows—which is a commentary

<sup>8</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*, Ian Ramsey Centre Studies in Science and Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> McGrath, 14.

on what transpired in Greece, which I detail in the second half of this paper—I touch on four mutations in Greece’s public discourse during the pandemic: (a) the mutation of ‘religion’ into ‘science’; (b) the mutation of ‘science’ into ‘religion’; (c) the reception of COVID-19 as a peculiar form of religion, and (d) dissent as a form of (a rather unwelcome) Reformation. A new entry building upon the wave of scholarship revisiting the category of ‘religion’ and applying these insights on contemporary developments is Tara Isabella Burton’s *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, which examines ‘America’s new spirituality: the cults, practices, high priests and prophets of our supposedly post-religion age’.<sup>10</sup> From New Age to wellness culture, from sexual utopias to fandom in popular culture and culture wars/identity politics, Burton traces novel *de facto* religious communities in realities that would normally be thought of to be beyond the scope of religion as it is usually understood, or even irreligious in the ‘spiritual but not religious’ variety. In doing this, Burton sums up what makes a social reality identifiable as ‘religious’ (with all the problems that this terminology carries, even when said reality is not packaged as a ‘religion’) in four elements, or pillars: meaning, purpose, community, and ritual.<sup>11</sup> This identification of the religious as that which is characterised by—and conjoins—meaning, purpose, community, and ritual will be employed throughout my analysis.

There is already some literature on the question of science and religion during Greece’s encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic, as was to be expected: two edited volumes in Greek, examining the topic from a mainly critical theological perspective,<sup>12</sup> a book-length sociological essay approaching the matter from the familiar and anticipated perspective of organised religion as an agent of anti-scientific obscu-

<sup>10</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Burton, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Nikos Asproulis and Nathaniel Wood, eds., *Καιρός Τον Ποιήσαι: Η Ορθοδοξία Ενώπιον Της Πανδημίας Του Κορωνοϊού [Time to Act: Orthodoxy Encounters the COVID-19 Pandemic]*, Volos Academy for Theological Studies (Volos: Ekdotiki Dimitriados, 2020); Petros Vassiliadis, ed., *The Church in a Period of Pandemic: Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in Our Churches?*, CEMES 25 (Thessaloniki: CEMES, 2020).

rantism,<sup>13</sup> a number of long reads,<sup>14</sup> and so on. A thorough analysis of Greece's public discourse on these matters, however, has not been properly attempted yet.

### *Religion as Science*

The partial mutation of 'religion' into 'science' is arguably the easiest of the phenomena in question to discern. For example, towards the beginning of the pandemic there were certain arguments on the fringe of ecclesiastical discourse to the effect that the church building *itself*, by virtue of it being sacred, is akin to a sanitised space, in which infection with COVID-19 is impossible. (The late Metropolitan bishop Kosmas of Aetolia and Acarnania was among the few church figures that voiced such opinions, as will be detailed in Part II of this paper.) As Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko note, and as has been observed by myself as well, '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'.<sup>15</sup> Seeing that this is not a position having any basis in the theology, tradition, prior discourse, and historical experience of the Orthodox Church, i.e. that this is not a position in any way intrinsic to Orthodox Christianity as a religion or pre-existing in it in any discernible way, this novelty must be somehow interpreted. The novel element is precisely the scientification of religion in public discourse, i.e. the claim, otherwise quite alien to Orthodox Christianity, that the Church offers something *more scientific than science and more medical than medicine*, and indeed not in the extraordinary circumstance of a supernatural and unanticipated miracle, but regularly, by design and by definition—as implied by the

<sup>13</sup> Alexandros Sakellariou, *Θρησκεία Και Πανδημία Στην Ελληνική Κοινωνία: Σχέσεις Εξουσίας, Θρησκευτικός Λαϊκισμός Και η Μετέωρη Εκκοσμίκευση [Religion and the Pandemic in Greek Society: Power Relations, Religious Populism and the Pending Secularisation]* (Athens: iWrite, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Sotiris Mitralaxis, 'Eat the Christians: Για Τη Μολυσματική Παρουσία Των Χριστιανών Στο Δημόσιο Χώρο [Eat the Christians: On the Presence of Christians as Centres of Pestilence in the Public Square]', *ZHN* 35 (March 2020), <https://thepressproject.gr/eat-the-christians-gia-ti-molysmatiki-parousia-ton-christianon-sto-dimosio-choro>.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Carroll, Nicholas Lackenby, and Jenia Gorbanenko, 'Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance: Orthodox Christian Responses to the Global Pandemic', *Anthropology & Medicine*, 10 August 2022, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2022.2080180>.

fringe ‘sanitised Church building’ position equating being *sacred* with being medically *sanitised*. Essentially, the implicit claim here is that the Church and science and/or medicine are indeed ‘competing systems of knowledge’,<sup>16</sup> of applied knowledge in this case, rather than non-competing endeavours—and that the Church is *better* at being scientific or medical than science or medicine, as well as that it is so *automatically*; by virtue of it being sacred, a physical space cannot be the *locus* for the transmission of infections. Apart from this novel, non-traditional position turning out to be—to put it euphemistically—not empirically verified during the pandemic, the combination of the *nature* of this discourse with the fact that it remained on the fringes, encountering resistance in achieving a wider adoption among the faithful or their religious leaders, points us to a hypothesis. Instead of it being a position stemming from within the traditional reserve of the actually existing Orthodox Church, it is indeed a *reflection* of the modern *misconception* about ‘religion’—as a body of knowledge, practice, and truth-claims that competes with ‘science’ as another body of knowledge, practice, and truth-claims—that emerges *from within* religion. That is, it is as if a small part of the community of the faithful and of their religious leaders responds to the externally dictated modern identity of religion (as a reality that is by definition in juxtaposition to science) by *adopting* this identity, by playing the role reserved for it, resulting in an exercise in self-orientalisation. To formulate this with the help of another example, uttering something like ‘the only protection we need is Christ’<sup>17</sup> can be read in two distinct and deeply differing ways. The traditionally religious one would frame this along the lines of an awareness that diseases do exist, that Christians, however virtuous or faithful, can be infected by them and are often infected by them, leading even up to their death, *yet* this is to be approached in a context of providence and the divine will, while seeing that what is ultimately at stake is salvation or the lack thereof, and Christ can be the only hope. And the *second*, rather novel reading, is the *literal* one: that ‘the only

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> As Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko report, and as I have witnessed in similar situations, ‘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’. Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko, ‘Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance’, 5.



protection we need is Christ, *over and against*, and *instead of*, sanitising wipes, masks, medicines, doctors, hospitals, ICUs — *if* one is faithful enough, or truly faithful. The latter position is, again, not to be found in the historical experience of the Church, in which Christians *do* get sick, *do* get infected, *do* resort to doctors without thinking that this is at the expense of their faith and its reality or of the providence of their creator, while at the same time being open to the extraordinary possibility of a miracle. It *is*, however, a position corresponding to a modern caricature of faith in the context of an assumed perennial juxtaposition of faith to science; this caricature of faith, so deeply embedded in the very fabric of our modern intellectual culture, may be at times adopted by some faithful and some of their leaders, appropriated and indeed perversely celebrated.

A slightly different iteration of the mutation of religion into science consists in what I call ‘the Eucharist wars’ in Part II of this paper, i.e. the question of whether the Eucharist itself may be a *locus* of contagion or not—either in contrast to the chalice and spoon which do not form part of ‘the body and blood of Christ’, or together with them. While this ignited fierce debates in Greece during 2020, the debate proved to be misplaced altogether, since COVID-19 is not foodborne and ‘research has shown that the virus is inactivated in the acidic environment of the stomach, [it] is unlikely to reach the gastrointestinal tract and cause illness’ and ‘there remains no known cases of anyone contracting COVID-19 from food’.<sup>18</sup> Thus, irrespective of the holiness of the Eucharist and the real presence of Christ in it or lack thereof, infection via edibles of any nature—sacramentally transubstantiated or not—is either way ruled out, in contrast to waiting in the queue to receive communion, attending a crowded church or kissing icons. This, however, did not stop a months-long fierce debate from erupting

<sup>18</sup> Australian Government, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, ‘Transmission of COVID-19 by Food and Food Packaging’, September 2021, <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/Pages/Can-COVID-19-be-transmitted-by-food-or-food-packaging.aspx>, citing; Ruochoen Zang et al., ‘TMPRSS2 and TMPRSS4 Promote SARS-CoV-2 Infection of Human Small Intestinal Enterocytes’, *Science Immunology* 5, no. 47 (19 May 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciimmunol.abc3582>; Lulin Zhou et al., ‘SARS-CoV-2 Targets by the PscRNA Profiling of ACE2, TMPRSS2 and Furin Proteases’, *IScience* 23, no. 11 (20 November 2020): 101744, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2020.101744>; see also World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, ‘COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for Food Businesses’, Interim guidance, 7 April 2020, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses>.

concerning the Eucharist *in particular*, in what was essentially a culture wars arena between a misplaced religion and a misunderstood science.

*Science as Religion: The reception of science as a profession of faith by the public imagination*

As examined in Part II of this paper below ('the report'), from the very onset of the pandemic and well before the Greek lockdowns, Greece's public debate was inundated with the 'religion *versus* science' debate, according to which the alleged obscurantist disposition of organised religion will form (and, later, 'is forming' or 'has formed') a potent wave of resistance to the benevolent march of science and medicine. For example, the information that the scientist spearheading Greece's public health campaign at the time, Prof Sotiris Tsiodras, was privately a pious Orthodox Christian and a chanter in his local parish was immediately read by a large section of the commentariat as an 'unholy alliance' that would almost by definition undermine public health measures, igniting hefty amounts of irony: Tsiodras' private faith was seen as a much more potent indicator of his true allegiances than his scientific, medical, and professorial credentials. The discombobulating element in this lies in the fact that this COVID-related 'religion *versus* science' debate proliferated *well before* there was a chance to see whether reality would confirm its premises, and the actions and decisions of the institutional church, as we shall see later in this paper, did not confirm this ominous premonition. In this context, approaching Greece's COVID-related 'religion *versus* science' debate *prima facie*, i.e. as a 'religion *versus* science' debate indeed seems to lead to an impasse. Which alternative could share more light on this? Should we approach this as a public battle between science and religion? Or, rather, as a battle between *different* religions, as an attempt of a *new* religion to dethrone an *old* one — i.e., as an *interreligious* issue?

This and the following section will attempt to approach the version of 'science' and of the pandemic itself as a *religion*: i.e., as something granting meaning, purpose, community, and ritual, as defined above, in Greek public discourse— adding to it elements such as hierarchy/priesthood, faith/belief, and initiation. It is worth underscoring once again that our object of scrutiny in this quasi-sociological, ethnograph-

ic, and discourse-analytical exercise is ‘*science*’ in the public debate, not the actuality of scientific and medical practices, measures and advice during Greece’s encounter with the pandemic: the *reception* of science in the public’s imagination.

The emergence of science *as a religion, as a faith* in Greece’s public imagination was quite explicit from the start: the proliferation of phrases denoting ‘belief/faith in science’, either as a public profession of faith (‘I believe in Science!’ – «Πιστεύω στην Επιστήμη!») or as an injunction (‘Believe in Science!’) and an urgent appeal (‘We/you must believe in Science’) framed the issue as something one needs to *believe in*—rather than, e.g., acknowledge its efficacy or promote its application. In this context, and so far as the written word is concerned, science would more often than not appear as *Science*, with the first letter capitalised («Επιστήμη»), *reifying it as an exalted, quasi-sacred* yet also arcane object. Given that most Greeks demonstrably ‘believe in science’, medicine, and technology—they use electricity, smartphones, and the internet without ascribing these to miraculous causes, they drive cars, they visit doctors when needed, and they usually avoid falling from high balconies, acknowledging the force of gravity—the question remains: what is the *desideratum* that such an injunction and/or profession entails? In other words, one is to ‘believe in Science’ vis-à-vis *what*, in juxtaposition to *what*? It is precisely here that an invocation of ‘religion’ as an adverse force emerges, even in the face of the institutional church’s campaign promoting the state’s public health measures (cf. Part II, ‘report’). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic naturally entailed a lack of specialised knowledge on the matter on behalf of the general public—a knowledge that would either way gradually unfold, and is still in the process of unfolding, within the international medical community in the course of the pandemic, given the novelty of the virus.

In this context, ‘believing’ emerges as the antithesis to ‘knowing’: following the well-known faith versus knowledge *topos* in its particular iteration during modernity (as this was so aptly demonstrated by Peter Harrison in *The Territories of Science and Religion*), one now has to ‘believe in Science’ precisely because one cannot *know*, particularly during an early stage in which even expert knowledge on COVID-19 was far from comprehensive. In the coordinates of Greece’s public imag-

ination, this *believing* rather than *knowing* entailed a certain amount of mystification around a by now religionized science, which is to be approached in awe: we can only believe rather than know, yet we do know *by proxy*, since ‘the scientists’ (i.e. priests and initiates, disciples of Science, hierarchs and councils) do have a privileged access to this arcane knowledge that is inaccessible to laypersons without proper discipleship —and laypersons do ‘know’ as well and by proxy by remaining in communion with the body of experts, or initiates. Since we do not encounter this knowledge face to face, but through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12), the work of *exegesis* should be applied, so that we laypersons may hold steadfast in the correct faith. For there are also false prophets, which come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves (Matt. 7:15): credentialed yet minority scientists and medical doctors spewing heresies, just like Presbyter Arius or Patriarch Nestorius did in more traditionally religious contexts and in times long past. Following them would lead the people to their doom, yet there are international medical organisations and authoritative institutions such as renowned universities and government ministries that, like the ecumenical councils of old, would separate the wheat from the chaff (Luke 3:17), saving the unity of Science, and by extension of its flock, via urgently needed schisms. For religions entail schisms, and this theme shall be revisited below, in the section on ‘An unwelcome Reformation’. Yet before that, and although further details on the religionization of science in Greece’s public imagination during COVID-19 would demonstrate the argument more fully, examining the pandemic itself as religionized demands our attention.

### *COVID-19 as Religion*

While the religious texture of the public vocabulary on science is interesting in itself, the implicit religionization of COVID-19, or of the experience of the pandemic, during 2020–21 was even more pronounced in the public imagination. Of the four core elements of religion as defined above, i.e. meaning, purpose, community, and ritual, first came *meaning*. It is not only that the defence and preservation of biological life (not only of the individual, but also of the community via solidarity) now became a central priority and of paramount importance in

novel ways: this goal was now indeed an axis of *meaning* and a *purpose* to aspire to, both for the individual and for the community, however the latter is defined.

Being COVID-19 aware, and believing in science, now entailed participating in a *community* that guards the ‘sanctity’ of human life, a value above and beyond all inferior values. This *community* was also defined in juxtaposition to an external yet also internal *enemy* of this highest value, i.e. the preservation of life: this *enemy* was also *within* the national or local community and, as detailed in the report in Part II, it consisted of those that were ‘irresponsible’ by not (properly) following public health measures (and, later, by refusing to be vaccinated), of the ‘deniers’ (i.e. the unbelievers: the ‘atheists’) or ‘conspiracy theorists’ (i.e. the ‘heretics’) —and, of course, by the perennial arch-antagonist of ‘science’ since the beginning of days: ‘religion’.

The *purpose* consisted in collectively (and, at times, individually) surviving the pandemic relatively unscathed. Yet this *purpose* would also be updated from time to time. Initially, the *purpose* was to arrive relatively unscathed at that point in time when COVID-19 vaccines would be available: these vaccines would immediately stop the pandemic, as initially presented in Greece’s public discourse by public figures and state actors (yet, thankfully, not by authoritative medical professionals), and we would collectively return to a *prelapsarian* state. Greece’s time *before* the pandemic—i.e., a decade of crushing financial crisis—was often remembered as *prelapsarian* indeed: by comparison, it was seen as idyllic, devoid of problems and cares, *sans souci*. And the community had the capacity to arrive at this eschatological protology again by transforming its *values* and *meaning* into *purpose* and *action*.

In this context, the transformation of society during the pandemic in general and the lockdowns in particular, together with the individual observance of public health measures, became highly ritualised. Actions such as wearing a mask, using sanitiser and so on became imbued with meaning, rather than being boringly seen as necessary protective measures. They became a ritual, a tactile and externally visible profession of belonging to the community, of holding steadfast in the faith, of observing all prescribed rites. They became a visible object of *piety*, signalling the individual’s piety and allowing for the recognition of the pious by his fellows, much like baptismal or pectoral

crosses—and, considering that most Greeks wore their masks improperly, either by using single-use masks for a number of days or weeks in a row or leaving their nose uncovered, one could easily arrive at the conclusion that masks in particular were approached more like *talismans* than protective measures. In the public imagination, masks and sanitisers seemed to acquire an importance and symbolic *gravitas* that would go far beyond the scope of these items' utility as protective measures.

So did the virus itself. In a very mystical manner, it was often underscored by politicians (including the prime minister) and state authorities, journalists and professors, public intellectuals and the average person on social media that the virus is *invisible*—invisible to the naked eye, that is. This rather self-evident reality and otherwise axiologically neutral piece of information imbued the virus with an arcane, quasi-mystical aura; countering the virus's march acquired religious connotations, as 'we are at war with an invisible enemy',<sup>19</sup> yet the eschatological promise of final victory can be achieved. Several artists' depictions of this otherwise invisible virus particle, usually featured as a background in daily televised news broadcasts, functioned as the *icon* of the vengeful deity of COVID-19: as the depiction of a *mysterium* that is both *tremendum* and *fascinans*.

A final remark on this, before addressing an 'unwelcome Reformation in science', concerns the overtly religious connotations that the public imaginary afforded to its cardinal sacrament during the pandemic: COVID-19 vaccines. In tandem with the promise of the collective return to a prelapsarian state, the public profession of 'reclaiming freedom' on social media upon visiting the vaccination booth could quite easily be compared to a theological ransom theory of atonement—while the requirement of a 'green pass' in order to enter nominally 'COVID free' spaces could be seen as reminiscent, in the public imaginary, of the prohibitions in Leviticus 15 concerning those that are 'unclean'. Yet delving deeper into this would be beyond the scope of the present paper and its limited length.

<sup>19</sup> Hellenic Republic, The Prime Minister, 28 April 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/04/28/23850>.

*An unwelcome Reformation in 'science'? Examining dissent as a claim to individual authority*

Continuing with the argument on 'science' and 'religion' further morphing into one another in the public square apropos the pandemic, and especially on 'science' being received as a form of religion by the wider public, a different aspect should be examined—focusing on dissent taking the form of science-related conspiracy theories, COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, and so on. In order to do this, an oversimplifying historical parallel would perhaps be in order.

The correlation of the sixteenth-century ('Protestant' or 'European') Reformation with the earlier invention of the printing press, along with increased literacy, is a well-established historical phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Up until that point, the source of religious knowledge/truth, the Bible, was largely inaccessible, in spite of the liturgical use of biblical passages: the Bible was in a language other than the vernacular, and actual copies were scarce compared to the new developments and realities afforded by the invention of the printing press. Access to the textual source of knowledge and truth was theretofore exclusively mediated by (i) an institution, i.e. the church, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, and (ii) by a class, the clergy—a class of *initiates*, of persons with the *authority, training, and ability* to (study and) interpret the textual source, as well as a *professional* class, in a sense. Thus, not only the texts of knowledge/truth themselves, but also the *correct interpretation* of the texts containing knowledge and truth was a privilege of, and mediated by, an institution and a class of professionals and initiates; an institution and class having both the *means* to do this (copies of the Bible, for instance) and being trusted with having the necessary preparation, pedigree, education, and training to do this.

However, dissent was accumulating on how the institution and its professional class of initiates were professing the implications of the correct interpretation of the truth encapsulated in the textual source; the sale of indulgences would be a prime example. An integral part of the Reformation and its aftermath lies precisely in the assertion that the

<sup>20</sup> Purely indicatively, and for more sources on this, see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

individual, exercising her intellectual powers, is *at least as* well-positioned to study, understand, and correctly interpret the textual sources of religious truth as the institutional church of Rome and its corresponding professional class of initiates, i.e. the clergy. Equipped with an individual intellect illuminated by a God who does not by default withhold the possibility of illumination and truth from a layperson, anyone could study the Bible—a Bible both readily accessible and translated into the vernacular—and reach conclusions that were deemed to be more accurate than the falsified ones propagated by the institution and its representatives. Summing up, the *practical* means that made this Reformation possible were, *inter alia*, the printing press, i.e., the accessibility of the textual source to be interpreted, the linguistic aspect of the vernacular versus the Vulgate—although it goes without saying that all this is a crude oversimplification of much more nuanced developments.

My argument here is that a not too dissimilar development is taking place in our modern times concerning an unwelcome Reformation in ‘science’—and that the COVID-19 pandemic brought this out in the open to an unprecedented degree and has turned it into a *crisis*. However, in order for this argument to make sense, the observation that we are witnessing a religionization of science (and, to a lesser extent, a scientification of religion) ought to be taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> In modernity, the sciences—or, as they are presented in the social imaginary, science in the singular—are being taught, practiced and applied in universities, laboratories, dedicated institutions and/or companies, by properly trained and specialised persons. It is expected in the cultures and societies tracing their modern lineage back to the Enlightenment that the wider public *trusts* science and, by extension, scientists as representatives of both scientific knowledge and the correct application of the scientific method (in the singular),<sup>22</sup> while at the same time individual critical thinking is encouraged, if not considered a *sine qua non* and a value or ideal in itself. Meanwhile, the notion that correct scientific

<sup>21</sup> On a pre-pandemic reflection on this, see Mitralaxis, ‘An Unfortunate Communicatio Idiomatum’.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, the same applies to *other* societies as well, *mutatis mutandis*; yet in the cultures and societies tracing their modern lineage back to the Enlightenment it is often preferred to consider this arrangement as a particular prerogative of the Age of Reason and Rationality, and of its corresponding societies and cultures.



conclusions in complex matters may be reached *without* proper scientific training in the respective discipline is usually, and quite sensibly, considered as partly defeating the purpose of the edifice of scientific knowledge and progress.

The medium of the world wide web—the internet—affording an unprecedented and mass accessibility to sources, scientific papers, documents, facts or (mis)representations of facts, and so on, combined with increased literacy, has brought about the possibility of laypersons challenging this mediating function of scientists and scientific institutions to a novel degree. Of course, the phenomenon itself pre-exists both the internet and the pandemic and is, in part, a seemingly inevitable part of the fine balancing act between, on the one hand, defending the accessibility of the scientific method (in the, rather problematic, singular) and encouraging individual critical thinking, and, on the other hand, upholding the fact that scientific disciplines require specialised, rigorous training designed and taught by scientific peers. However, the sheer scale and mass accessibility of sources made possible by the internet—the equivalent of the printing press in our historical parallel—points to qualitative and not merely quantitative change.<sup>23</sup> During the pandemic, and in the wake of the shock to (Western) societies due to COVID-19 itself, social distancing and other measures, a speedy rollout of novel vaccines, and so on, this phenomenon skyrocketed.

To illustrate this by an example from the pandemic: dissenters labelled as conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers very seldom have science *per se* as the object of their critique or refutation (and the ones refuting science *in toto* in favour of a purely *religious* or even philosophical truth seem to form a tiny minority of dissenters). Rather, more often than not, dissenters speak *in the name of* science and scientific evidence, invoking what they consider as evidence or interpretations that are *more* accurate and as such *more* scientific than the (according to dissenters falsified, corroded, politicised, weaponised, or simply wrong) ‘official version’ as presented by ‘mainstream’ scientific institutions and individual scientists. In other words: (i) dissenters are on the receiving end of the

<sup>23</sup> After all, to quote a *dictum* often misattributed to a number of historical figures, from Napoleon to Joseph Stalin, ‘quantity has a quality of its own’...

provision and/or interpretation of scientific data, results, conclusions, and proposals by bodies and experts deemed as appropriate for providing and interpreting—i.e., having the institutional authority to provide and interpret—scientific evidence: a near consensus of the scientific, or in the pandemic’s case medical, community, for instance. Additionally, this provision and interpretation is not direct, i.e. from the source to the individual, but is of course mediated by mass media and, particularly during the pandemic, governments as well. (ii) For whichever reason(s)—the variety and analysis of which is beyond the scope of our examination—dissenters mistrust this provision and interpretation and reject it, either in full or in part. As highlighted above, most usually *do not mistrust the ability of ‘science in the singular’, or of scientific methodology per se, to arrive at correct conclusions*. They mistrust either the *institutional mediation* from a source of knowledge to themselves—institutions such as universities, the medical establishment, governments, i.e. *the institutional church* in our parallel here, or they mistrust the objectivity of the media seen as serving said institutions—or particular scientists and experts having the authority to speak in the name of ‘science in the singular’, i.e. initiates, *the clergy*. (Of course, in the case of science there is no *magisterium*, not a singular ‘teaching’ on any given subject that divides orthodoxy from heresy, but questions such as repeatability and reproducibility, and so on. Yet this is not so much the case *on the public square*, particularly during crises in which scientific evidence are invoked.)

However, there is no Reformation up until this point in this itinerary. Next, (iii) dissenters deem it possible to reach data, interpretations, and conclusions that would be *correct*, or in any case ‘more correct’ than the erroneous/falsified/corroded version provided by the ‘institutional church’ and ‘the clergy’: to cut out the middleman that falsifies the source or fails to properly interpret it and reach the source directly, the source being scientific data and evidence—or at least better, non-falsified interpretations thereof. This is done either by directly dealing with sources *of choice*, yet without the institutional aegis and training usually deemed necessary in order to make sense of them, and depositories like *PubMed*,<sup>24</sup> for example, a Google of biomedical litera-

<sup>24</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

ture amassing oceans of scientific papers of vastly varying quality and peer-review rigour that are often available in open-access mode entails that the sky is the limit for such an undertaking—or by opting for non-standard (‘non-mainstream’ in the common tongue) interpreters of the sources, who may or may not have scientific training and credentials, but who are (presented as) *excommunicated* by the scientific community, or *heretics vis-à-vis* institutional orthodoxy. Be it via a direct claim to accessing and correctly interpreting the sources of what is taken as scientific knowledge and truth by the individual layperson, however, or via placing one’s trust on individuals professing a reading of scientific data over and against the authority of ‘the church’ and ‘its clergy’, the common denominator of all this is that it is being undertaken in the name of, precisely, ‘science’ rather than against it: *sola scientia*, a striving for scientific knowledge and truth that prioritises the individual intellect’s ability to correctly interpret the source of knowledge/truth over the institutions and initiatives vested with the authority of an accredited and correct interpretation, since the latter are seen as falsifying the truth and knowledge hidden in the source, i.e. scientific data, experiments, evidence.

And, if there is a kernel of truth in the description of science in the public square as having become a form of *religion* during modernity and especially late modernity, then this form of dissent marks this religion’s Reformation—a long-winded process that, however, was fuelled by the power of the world wide web and the accessibility it afforded and massively erupted during the pandemic. It is important to note that this ‘Reformation in science’ refers, once again, to science’s representation(s) in the public square—not to scientific practice *per se*. Dissenters do not counter-propose a different or revised way of doing science, differing methodological considerations, and so on. At best, their critique and their reclaiming of science is premised on an affirmation of science *qua* science, however (mis)understood, and is being voiced *in the name* of science—this reification of science in the singular being in itself a staple of science’s representation in the public square—, thus corresponding to how science is presented, used or mis-used, politicised or weaponised, cherry-picked or ‘objectively’ presented. This aspect reinforces rather than undermines the parallel drawn here, as sixteenth-century reformers did not challenge the authority of scripture or the divinity

and authority of Jesus Christ, but the mediation via which their truth was presented to ‘the people’, a mediation seen as corroding. In many ways, *sola scientia* (versus its allegedly politicised, mediated, corroded, weaponised, commodified form) is the battle cry of modern dissenters, corresponding to *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*.

The question is, why does all this matter? What does this attempted historical parallel offer, apart from theoretical speculation? I would like to argue here that it offers a better interpretative framework for understanding the nuances in certain developments, particularly so far as the whole ‘conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers versus believing in science’ discourse is concerned. This discourse, particularly during the pandemic, unfolded as a narrative of light versus darkness: the powers of rationality, of science, of the Enlightenment even, against the powers of darkness, of obscurantism, of unintelligibility, of populism, of chaos. This was the case, in varying degrees, not only in the public discourse, but in scholarly literature as well. However, such a schematisation does not seem to *explain* a phenomenon or to shed light on it, or to offer an epistemological reading. Apart from setting a rather political, or politico-cultural, framework around it, in many ways it constitutes an exercise in *explaining away*. It could be argued that it is more ideological than interpretational in nature. Yet if one:

- i. takes into account the vast difference between scientific endeavours and the representation of ‘science’ in public discourse, as well as the role it plays in the social imaginary,
- ii. discerns the developing religionization of science in the public square throughout modernity, and
- iii. reads the mass emergence of dissent as a ‘Reformation’, i.e. as an attempted appropriation of the institutional prerogative of the relay of scientific knowledge by the individual intellect of a layperson and by its capacity to access and interpret ‘sources’ (or to opt for alternative interpreters) in a way that is allegedly *better, purer, more correct* than that of the institution, and all this precisely *in the name of scientific knowledge and truth*,

then, perhaps, a more nuanced picture emerges. A picture that paints more parts of the itinerary and adventure of science when it is grounded in (late) modernity’s public discourse and social imaginary.

A picture that sees quasi-religious public turbulences, developments, and schisms where other readings offer metaphysical epic tales of light versus darkness, progress versus obscurantism, incandescent rationality versus regressive barbarism—tales that, in themselves, are quite religious in nature as well. Let us not forget that, by and large, dissenters do not challenge the religionization of ‘science’ or identify it as such: rather than that, they produce a *schism* in that religionized version of ‘science’. To put this in a different way: it is easy to tread the standard path of approaching these developments as a ‘perennial battle between science/rationality and obscurantism/irrationality’, yet this reading has its limits. What other horizons does an approach that reads all this as a *religious* battle inaugurate?

In the beginning of this section, I have termed this Reformation an ‘unwelcome’ one. Wouldn’t this be an ideological choice as well? The reader should note that in the same way that I do not need to choose sides in the sixteenth century debates on whether the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Reformers were ‘right’, my task in sketching this historical parallel here is not to choose sides on whether either the institutional relay of scientific conclusions or the decidedly heterogenous archipelago of dissenters<sup>25</sup> (again, usually labelled as conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, populists, COVID-19 deniers, or science deniers—and it is somewhat tempting to examine parts of the literature on this as the more apologetic aspect of an attempted *Counter-Reformation*) has any claim to the *plenitudo veritatis*—and, in any case, that is a political question, not an epistemological one. This is beyond my purview and remit here. Thus, what does naming this Reformation ‘unwelcome’ entail, if not choosing sides?

The problem here is that this dual development, which peaked during the pandemic, this Reformation and its corresponding Counter-Reformation, further aggravates the discrepancy and disparity between scientific practice(s) and the representations of ‘science’ in the public square, and does so in ways that potentially threaten the very viability of an otherwise delicate balance. In a public arena, in which the one extreme dismisses the institutional relay of scientific knowledge *in toto* and opts for individual and idiosyncratic interpretations of scientific

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that contemporary dissenters and their claims are neither more nor less decidedly heterogenous than the differing readings of Scripture.

knowledge, and the other extreme literally sanctifies a reified science and projects upon it messianic and eschatological promises à la Yuval Noah Harari—while speaking for *the advance of technology* as the quintessence, plenitude, and epitome of science (yet this would be the topic of a wholly different paper), *real* scientific practices and advances stop making sense: the gap between scientific practice and the public representation of science becomes an abysmal chasm, thus showcasing the *limits* of the religionization of science.

In the wake of the shock to societies by the particularly rapid developments during the pandemic—from lockdowns to green passes, and beyond—and by the fervent invocation of science as the authority dictating unprecedented political decisions, mistrust over speedily developed COVID-19 vaccines, for example, spills over to mistrust of vaccines *in general* and dynamically boosts a tendency towards vaccine hesitancy. Instead of attempts at a truce, new ‘European (and American) wars of religion’ have erupted over the prerogative to the correct interpretation of *scientia*: this has the potential to steadily lead to a generalised bifurcation of how scientific practices are represented in the public sphere and in the societal imaginary—and the practical, societal, and political side of this is anything but merely philological in nature. Thus, the ‘unwelcome’ nature of this Reformation is not limited to this Reformation itself, but to the wider turn that the modern religionization of science in the public square is currently taking—and to its ominous sides in particular. To put this with an aphorism: the greatest casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic might be, in the final analysis, the extent of the authority of science in the public square—a development that came about via indirect routes.

A number of the observations above are premised on discourse-analytic and ethnographic work I did in Athens, Greece during the pandemic. The report on this forms Part II of this paper, as previously noted. An earlier and draft version of the following report appeared as a working paper earlier in 2022.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘Deepening Greece’s Divisions: Religion, COVID, Politics, and Science’, *Méta Working Papers* 11 (2022): 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.55405/mwp11en>.

*Part II: Report**Dispatches from Greece's public square during the pandemic*

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. This report offers a perspective on recent developments—by (a) looking into how the Greek state 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>27</sup>). Not

<sup>27</sup> 'COVID-19 Government Response Tracker', *Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University*, March 2020-December 2022, Ongoing, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/re->

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>28</sup>—,but every political disagreement with *particular* governmental measures were touted as the fruit of science-denying conspiracy theories. This science-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>29</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 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 ministers on ‘mysterious chemtrails’ was submitted<sup>30</sup> by an MP in November 2010. That MP, Makis Voridis, is today the Minister of the Interior in Kyriakos Mitsotakis’s government, occupying one of the top cabinet

search-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker.

<sup>28</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/>

<sup>29</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).

<sup>30</sup> Μάκης Βορίδης, ‘Αεροψεκασμοί Αγνώστης Προέλευσης’, Ερώτηση 6714, ΛΑ.Ο.Σ, Κοινοβουλευτικός Έλεγχος, Βουλή των Ελλήνων, 25 November 2010, [https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleutikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovouleutikou-Elegxou?pcm\\_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b](https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Koinovouleutikos-Elenchos/Mesa-Koinovouleutikou-Elegxou?pcm_id=cd592b64-f7e6-4874-a46b-b6115ca2438b)



positions). *Ψεκασμένοι*, ‘the sprayed ones’<sup>31</sup> is a much more frequently used phrase than *συνωμοσιολόγοι*, ‘conspiracy theorists’<sup>32</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. Greece’s Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, used the word on 31 October 2020, in one of his televised addresses,<sup>33</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 irony here is that the Greek state’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 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, if there were a singular Science that 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 that is countered by such simple observations of reality as the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker by the University of Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government,<sup>34</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>35</sup> On 1 December 2021, Greece’s PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis

<sup>31</sup> ‘ψεκασμένοι’, Google search.

<sup>32</sup> ‘συνωμοσιολόγοι’, Google search.

<sup>33</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 31 October 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/10/31/25151>.

<sup>34</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>. Unfortunately, this strategy did not deliver, since Greece is one of the top EU countries in COVID casualties per million inhabitants (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

<sup>35</sup> ‘Tsiodras-Lytras paper: 1,500 fewer patients would have died with less NHS pressure, inequality’, *To Βήμα*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.tovima.gr/2021/12/15/international/tsiodras->

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>36</sup> just a spare bed 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>37</sup> However, as the Greek people would haplessly come to know *post eventum*, the office of the Greek prime minister had been notified in advance<sup>38</sup> of his parliamentary address of a then forthcoming study by Professors S. Tsiodras and T. Lytras—Prof. Sotiris Tsiodras being the scientist spearheading Greece's COVID-19 public health campaign for 2020 and a sizable portion of 2021, Greece's equivalent of Anthony Fauci—, published on 13 December 2021<sup>39</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>40</sup> The political—and, indirectly, governmental—backlash on the two scientists, Prof. Tsiodras and Prof. Lytras, for undermining the PM's claims has been too grim to describe; let it suffice to quote a 2 January 2022 twitter comment by Prof. Lytras apropos both the published paper and the hype surrounding the movie 'Don't Look Up': 'I'm grateful we tried... #DontLookUp #μελετη\_τσιοδρα'<sup>41</sup>.

lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/ .

<sup>36</sup> Γιάννης Μπασκάκης, 'Ο Κ. Μητσοτάκης εθελουφλεί για τις εκτός ΜΕΘ διασωληνώσεις', *Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, 21 January 2022, [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kyber-nisi/322063\\_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis..](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/kyber-nisi/322063_o-k-mitsotakis-ethelotyflei-gia-tis-ektos-meth-diasolinoseis..)

<sup>37</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>38</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/kuri-os-maximos/279783/aytoi-einai-oi-dyo-ypsilovathmoi-toy-maximoy-poy-gnorizan-gia-tin-ereyna-tsiodra-lytra/..>

<sup>39</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>40</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/>.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Lytras, Tweet on 2 January 2022, 11:33, <https://twitter.com/TheodoreLytras/status/1477573864960012290>.

Other examples include official statements on 31 March 2020 that face masks are not only unnecessary,<sup>42</sup> but potentially dangerous as well;<sup>43</sup> later, this was turned into mandatory masks in all indoor *and outdoor* spaces<sup>44</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.

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 minority of actual anti-science conspiracy theorists allegedly discovering microchips in COVID-19 vaccines. However, mistaking the latter minority with Greece’s complex debate at large would be a rather pernicious exercise.

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

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

<sup>42</sup> ‘Δεν χρειάζεται να φοράμε μάσκα’, Τσιόδρας, You Tube, *antimnimoniakos*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diKCCVDv01A>.

<sup>43</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-xrissi-maskas-kai-gantion-mias-xrissi-epikindynes-oi-maskes-me-valvida>

<sup>44</sup> ‘Νέα μέτρα – Επανερχονται τα πρόστιμα για μη χρήση μάσκας και στους εξωτερικούς χώρους’, ΤΑ ΝΕΑ, 24 December 2021, <https://www.tanea.gr/2021/12/24/greece/nea-metra-epanerxontai-ta-prostima-gia-mi-xrissi-maskas-kai-stous-eksoterikous-xorou/>.

Center<sup>45</sup> to Greece's DiaNEOsis<sup>46</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' (p. 77, B10.3<sup>47</sup>). The flip side of this coin is that the Church's prominence, impact, influence, and power engenders frictions and a certain amount of 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 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>48</sup> its Church-State relations are indeed close-knit. Article 3 of Greece's

<sup>45</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>46</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>47</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>.

<sup>48</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>.

constitution<sup>49</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 500 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>50</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 privileged status’ according to article 105 of Greece’s constitution.<sup>51</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 the monasteries and hermitages of Mount Athos, the COVID-19 situation there and the health status of monks regularly preoccupied the Greek media cycle during the pandemic, with abbots of Athonite monasteries accusing other monks of not being vaccinated<sup>52</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 who have 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

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

<sup>50</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/>.

<sup>51</sup> The Constitution of Greece, §105, Hellenic Parliament, <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Ηγούμενος Βαρθολομαίος: Να μην μένουν στο απυρόβλητο οι ρασοφόροι που παρασύρουν για τον ιό’, Skai.gr, You Tube, 11 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fVo1\\_yO6t0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fVo1_yO6t0).

decisions, the more versatile, 12-member ‘Permanent Holy Synod’, and the Archbishop of Greece, who *stricto sensu* is not 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>53</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 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>54</sup> Encyclical no. 3013<sup>55</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>56</sup> against the spread of COVID-19 in churches and other

<sup>53</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).

<sup>54</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>55</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>56</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, ‘Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα’, 11 March 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498\\_10032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/498_10032020.pdf).

religious buildings and activities, including the closure of Sunday schools, Bible study groups, Byzantine music classes, etc.

- Also on 11 March 2020: In a televised address,<sup>57</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 the injunction to ‘listen to the scientists’; however, he also noted that ‘he looks forward to the support of Church leadership in the common cause’.
- 16 March 2020: Greece’s PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweets: ‘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’<sup>58</sup> and, following this, then enforces via joint ministerial decree<sup>59</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

[www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/508\\_11032020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklioi/508_11032020.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 11 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/11/23545>.

<sup>58</sup> Prime Minister GR, Tweet on 16 March 2020, 10:43, PM, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/PrimeministerGR/status/1239653497118875648>.

<sup>59</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>.

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 (examples include France: Conseil d'État 18 May 2020;<sup>60</sup> Germany, Bundesverfassungsgericht 29 April 2020;<sup>61</sup> Belgium, Raad Van State | Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak <sup>62</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>63</sup>
- 22 March 2020: Greece's PM announces<sup>64</sup> the first lockdown.
- 10 April 2020: A Synodical Encyclical<sup>65</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 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':

<sup>60</sup> Le Conseil d'État, 18 May 2020, <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/actualites/assemblements-dans-les-lieux-de-culte-le-conseil-d-etat-ordonne-au-premier-ministre-de-prendre-des-mesures-moins-contraindantes>.

<sup>61</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>62</sup> Raad Van State, Afdeling Bestuursrechtspraak, 8 December 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EN5o6yW-clugOfZo7PTi9eo24NvxvZN8/view>.

<sup>63</sup> Σοφία Καρεκλά, 'Οικουμενικός Πατριάρχης: Δεν κινδυνεύει η πίστη αλλά οι πιστοί', orthodoxia.info, 18 March 2020, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/οικουμενικός-πατριάρχης-δεν-κινδυνεύει/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, Πρωθυπουργός, 22 March 2020, <https://primeminister.gr/2020/03/22/23615>.

<sup>65</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, 'Εγκύκλιος 3019', 10 April 2020, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egykliai/764\\_10042020.pdf](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egykliai/764_10042020.pdf).



- 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>66</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’,<sup>67</sup> igniting the ire of many in Greece’s public debate: now, ‘listen to the credentialed scientists, medical professionals, health experts’ was implicitly followed by 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, even *before* we knew that COVID-19 is *not* a foodborne virus: 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

<sup>66</sup> π. Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, Αντίφωνο, 26 March 2020, <https://antifono.gr/μεταλαμβάνοντας-σε-καιρούς-πανδημία/>.

<sup>67</sup> (This was before it became public knowledge that it is also a matter of one’s stomach acids.)

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, as touched upon in Part I of this paper. Again, the *theological* problem here is that the Orthodox Church had never in the past<sup>68</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, and this fringe position 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: Regarding the celebrations of the feast day of St 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>69</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 that follow Greece's public discourse to this day: a few weeks ago, on 7 October 2020,<sup>70</sup> 15,000 demonstrators outside Athens's Court of Appeal waited for the verdict of

<sup>68</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/>.

<sup>69</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/agios-dimitrios-thessaloniki-megalos-synostismos-exo-apo-tin-ekklesia-iereis-choris-masks/>.

<sup>70</sup> 'Δίκη Χρυσής Αυγής: 15.000 κόσμου έξω από το Εφετείο χειροκρότησαν την απόφαση', iefimerida, 7 October 2020, <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/diki-hrysis-aygis-15000-exo-apo-efeteio>.

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 failed to materialise there as well, yet suddenly half the population were charging the Thessaloniki St 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 6th of January; this was the first, and to date the only,<sup>71</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...

- July 2021: The Church of Greece issues an *urbi et orbi*-style pamphlet, 'To the People' («Προς τον Λαό #53<sup>72</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

<sup>71</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-isxuei-gia-ekklisies-kai-agiasmo-ydaton>.

<sup>72</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, «Πρὸς Τὸν Λαό». Ἐκδοση τῆς Ἱερᾶς Συνόδου τῆς Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ἑλλάδος, 19 July 2021, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/prostolao/53.pdf>.

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 to be 'a sin'.<sup>73</sup>

- Also July 2021: The Synod summoned two Metropolitan bishops,<sup>74</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>75</sup>
- 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>76</sup> When the mobile vaccination unit started administering doses a few days later, a number of anti-vaccine protesters appeared:<sup>77</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>78</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 18 November 2021 (that is, during the months in which religious

<sup>73</sup> Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία Ρωσίας: 'Αμαρτωλοί όλοι αρνούνται να εμβολιαστούν', YouTube, Skai.gr, 6 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9CDz85VKdw>.

<sup>74</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>75</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/>.

<sup>76</sup> 'Λάρισα: Εμβολιασμοί με Κινητή Μονάδα έξω από τις εκκλησίες', Πρώτο Θέμα, 16 September 2021, <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1161659/larisa-emvoliasmoi-me-kiniti-monada-exo-apo-tis-ekklisies-deite-video/>.

<sup>77</sup> Λάρισα: Η Μητρόπολη τρολάρει τους... πικραμένους αντιεμβολιαστές με σοκολατάκια, Ethnos.gr, 24 September 2021, <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/175297/larisahmhtropolitrolareitoyspikramenoysantiemboliastesmesokolatakia>.

<sup>78</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>.

worship was not prohibited), entrance to churches did not require a green pass; 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 November 2021 encyclical in question<sup>79</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>80</sup> on a Church-State relations agenda *sans* coronavirus. In his address to PM Mitsotakis, Archbishop Ieronymos remarked once again<sup>81</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 February 2020) and remains in support and solidarity with the Greek government. The Permanent Holy Synod and 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

<sup>79</sup> Ιερά Σύνοδος της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, Εγκύκλιον Σημείωμα, 4 November 2021, [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=3080&what\\_sub=egyklloi](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi.asp?id=3080&what_sub=egyklloi).

<sup>80</sup> Ἡ προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, [https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5\\_i0hB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk](https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki?fbclid=IwAR2sBdEAivnP2vtmtnEW3rFNvQWq4zRis5_i0hB-UOZF7q43Qy4A5hEeApk).

<sup>81</sup> Ἡ προσφώνηση του Αρχιεπισκόπου στον Πρωθυπουργό Κ. Μητσοτάκη, Romfea.gr, 13 December 2021, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/47277-i-prosfonisi-tou-arxiepiskou-ston-prothypourgo-k-mitsotaki>.

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>82</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 the topic of deepening Greece's divisions: A minor storm 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 COVID-19 awareness campaign',<sup>83</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>84</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'.

<sup>82</sup> 'Κοινό ανακοινωθέν ΔΙΣ – Γραφείου Πρωθυπουργού, Orthodoxy info.gr, 24 January 2022, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/koino-anakoinothen-dis-grafeioy-prothy/>.

<sup>83</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>84</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-prosvliti-ki-anartisi-tou-k-mosialou>.

*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 71.2%<sup>85</sup> of the population, while the EU/EEA average is 72.8%.<sup>86</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, and the enlistment of the Church in the battle against COVID-19 may be seen in this context. 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. For example, last July Politico<sup>87</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 a particular priest, Revd 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 did not know about prior to looking him up (also finding out an array of rather colourful pronouncements of his on any conceivable topic throughout the years), may seem to be somewhat economical with the truth among those with an overview of the clerical field. 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

<sup>85</sup> Εμβολιασμός κατά της COVID-19, 28/9/2022, gov.gr, <https://emvolio.gov.gr/>.

<sup>86</sup> 'Total doses distributed to EU/EEA countries', *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*, 28/9/2022, <https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab>.

<sup>87</sup> '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/>.

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.

On more serious matters, a distinction needs to be made that often eludes the overview of observers. Greece has a minority of various and disparate Old-Calendarist groups<sup>88</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. '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 twentieth century 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 on 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>89</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

<sup>88</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Calendarists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Calendarists).

<sup>89</sup> 'Συγκεντρώσεις διαμαρτυρίας με λάβαρα και εικόνες κατά του υποχρεωτικού εμβολιασμού', Lifo.gr, 17 July 2021, <https://www.lifo.gr/now/greece/sygentroseis-diamartyrias-kata-toy-ypohreotikoy-emboliasmoy-kai-ton-diahorismou-se>.



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 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': this would support said narrative in more potent ways. Thus, fringe Old-Calendarist supporters (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 distancing 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 be, 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>90</sup> in a somewhat unrestrained bout of enthusiasm live on conservative ΣΚΑΪ TV, since ‘by opposing COVID-19 vaccines they exclude themselves from the Church and become minions of Satan.’<sup>91</sup> In any case, however, these exceptions to the rule enforced by the institutional church (*sans* hanging, hopefully) appear augmented in Greece’s conservative media,<sup>92</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, for the whole duration of September 2021 I had struggled to single out three or four instances of ΣΚΑΪ TV’s news that would not include a story on ‘anti-vaccine priests spreading outrageous lies’<sup>93</sup> (3/12/21), on ‘COVID-denying priests in a battle against the vaccines’<sup>94</sup> (16/9/21), on Metropolitan bishops informing the audience that ‘COVID-denying/anti-vaccine priests are heretics’<sup>95</sup> (6/11/21), on a ‘priest attacking a schoolmaster for wearing face masks’<sup>96</sup> (14/09/2021), on ‘priests having been spotted without masks’<sup>97</sup> and so on. By regularly watching the news, one gets the impression that the country is under an anti-vaccine mass insurgency spearheaded by hundreds of combative science-denying priests in COVID-infected cassocks. By visiting fifty or a hundred

<sup>90</sup> ‘Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος για αρνητές ιερείς: Κρέμασμα θέλουν’, VimaOrthodoxias.gr, 24 November 2021, <https://www.vimaorthodoxias.gr/eipan/dodonis-chrysostomos-gia-arnites-iereis-kremasma-theloyn/>.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Μητροπολίτης Δωδώνης Χρυσόστομος: Οι αρνητές ιερείς γίνονται όργανα του σατανά’, Skai.gr, 23 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6UHq5ZFoJc>.

<sup>92</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/>.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Αρνητές ιερείς διασπείρουν εξωφρενικά ψεύδη’, Skai.gr, 03 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laSShBSa7fo>.

<sup>94</sup> ‘Αρνητές ιερείς πολεμούν τα εμβόλια’, Skai.gr, 16 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78LEOoGhQ6M>.

<sup>95</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>96</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>97</sup> ‘Παπάδες και ψάλτες χωρίς μάσκες στον Αγ. Δημήτριο Θεσσαλονίκης’, Skai.gr, 26 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay9f6f-y5g>.

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 wrote a letter to the PM<sup>98</sup> on 4 January 2022 complaining to him that one of the governing party's parliamentarians 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 it 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 with 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 the Tsiodras-Lytras scandal<sup>99</sup> so aptly demonstrated. To think that this

<sup>98</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>.

<sup>99</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/tsio->

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>100</sup> entailing a change in our opinions and perspective even when the issue is whether we find a politically-charged feline aesthetically pleasing.<sup>101</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 most powerful businessmen, when sports fans are concerned. Football clubs can be political at times,<sup>102</sup> but analysing coronavirus measures and the state of vaccines was not quite their primary calling; all of Greece's parliamentary parties support the COVID-19 vaccination programme (perhaps and only partly apart from the minor far-right party 'Greek Solution', «Ελληνική Λύση»); 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

dras-lytras-paper-1500-fewer-patients-would-have-died-with-less-nhs-pressure-inequality-2/.

<sup>100</sup> 'Halo Effect', Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_effect).

<sup>101</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>102</sup> «Βράζει» η Μακεδονία κατά της κυβέρνησης: Χιλιάδες οπαδοί του ΠΑΟΚ εν χορώ εξυβρίζουν τον Κ.Μητσοτάκη, *Paskedi.gr*, 2 November 2021, <https://www.paskedi.gr/vrazei-h-makedonia-kata-ths-kyvernshshs-xiliades-opadoi-toy-paok-en-xorw-exyvrizoy-n-ton-k-mhtso-takh-video/>.

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 argue that, during the pandemic, Greece's media,<sup>103</sup> Greece's scientists,<sup>104</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.

*Concluding Remarks: Is there an Orthodox distinctiveness in the 'science' and 'religion' debate during the pandemic?*

Returning to the question of predominantly Orthodox countries and Greece in particular, and in the light both of the above and of the more detailed overview of developments during Greece's experience of the pandemic I have attempted elsewhere as preparation for this paper,<sup>105</sup> I would like to argue that there is, indeed, *no true distinctiveness* in the Orthodox case, or at least Greece's case: the narratives, my-

<sup>103</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>104</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/>.

<sup>105</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, 'Deepening Greece's Divisions: Religion, COVID, Politics, and Science', *Méta Working Papers* 11, no. 2022 (2022): 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.55405/mwp11en>.

thologies, representations, and ideological wars that were played out in the public discourse centring around the notions of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ were not *substantially* different from the ones encountered in countries with different Christian denominations predominating. This is interesting on its own, *precisely* because of the largely distinct historical trajectories of Orthodox countries vis-à-vis countries of a Western Christian religious pedigree—and I am referring to distinct historical trajectories *in the plural*, since Greek Orthodoxy’s Byzantine and post-Byzantine/Ottoman historical experience, the historical itinerary of Slavic countries, and in the twentieth century the experience of the USSR and its stance towards religion form trajectories that are substantially different from the Western European historical schematisation of the Middle Ages leading to modernity and the Enlightenment via the Reformation. If there was a distinctiveness in Greece’s case during the pandemic, this was to be observed in how its different historical trajectory was weaponised in public discourse<sup>106</sup> in the context of a narrative of negative exceptionalism. According to this narrative, *other* countries, *Western* societies—with Greece excluding itself from Western societies only when *problematizing* itself—possess the maturity to deal with the pandemic in a *scientific* way, ‘believing in science’, yet Greece being lamentably pre-modern is plagued by religious obscurantism and regressive populism. The problem with this narrative, of course, lies in the mere fact that it is factually incorrect, both from a historical and from a contemporary perspective relating to the pandemic: for example, the vaccine uptake percentage in Greece equals almost precisely the EU/EEA countries’ average (in all categories: at least one dose, primary dose, booster/additional dose),<sup>107</sup> there is no indication whatsoever that ‘populism’ or ‘COVID deniers’ scored better in Greece than in Western European countries whereas there are indications to the contrary, as mass demonstrations on COVID-19-related issues did not take place in Greece in contrast to, e.g., Germany, and so on. Thus, these narratives in the public square seem to have much more to do with Greece’s

<sup>106</sup> For a more general overview of the corresponding narratives in Greece, see Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘Studying Contemporary Greek Neo-Orientalism: The Case of the “Underdog Culture” Narrative’, *Horyzonty Polityki / Horizons of Politics* 8, no. 25 (2017): 125–49, <https://doi.org/10.17399/HP.2017.082508>.

<sup>107</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>.

national soul-searching as a liminal country and society between a number of ‘worlds’—religious, geographical, historical, political, and so on—than with a Greek and/or Orthodox peculiarity and particularity in the domain of science and religion in the public square during the pandemic.

One of the conclusions we may draw from this is that the modern Western conceptual adventure of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ has been adopted in countries such as Greece to the same extent and in the same way as it is to be encountered in Western European countries that had begotten it on the basis of truly different historical circumstances, trajectories, developments, and conflicts. Thus, we see here a successful cultural and conceptual transplant, of cardinal importance, of the *outcomes* of historical, cultural, and intellectual developments on societies *without* the itineraries to which these outcomes owe their formation, as well as the wide adoption of these cultural and conceptual outcomes in those countries’ social imaginary. Be that as it may, it seems that the modern conceptual adventures of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ are by now common to countries of varying historical and cultural trajectories, both in times of calm and tempest.