

The Impact of Covid-19 on Orthodox Groups and Believers in Russia

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Abstract

This chapter intends to discover how Orthodox groups and believers of different ideological orientations in Russia reacted to the 2020 world health crisis. Its focus lies on the groups and individual believers from the field of Russian Orthodoxy who could be labelled as ‘fundamentalists’. Therefore, an analysis of the official ecclesiastical reaction to the pandemic will be provided, that underlines how some contradictory messages from above caused significant numbers of believers to sympathize with the so called “corona-dissidents” within the Church. Under the topic ‘dissidents’, various other groups apart from the fundamentalists such as the moderate traditionalists, liberals, or individuals who usually follow the mainstream ecclesiastical opinion, can be subsumed.

Furthermore, it could be observed that fundamentalists mostly discuss themes that might be common for all “dissidents”, although they are more open towards their criticism in view of the mainstream reactions. They stick to the assumption that both mundane and ecclesiastical leaders have discredited themselves and need to be replaced.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity, Covid-19, Ecclesiastical Lockdown, Corona-Dissidents, Fundamentalist Networks, Traditionalism, Russian Orthodox Church

1. Introduction

This chapter intends to discover how Orthodox groups and believers of different ideological orientations in Russia reacted to the 2020 world health crisis. It focusses on groups and individuals who are labelled as “fundamentalists”, because they believe for instance that the entire socio-political life should be changed in terms of

collective religious salvation.¹ Apart from the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate («the patriarchal platform»), Irina Papkova distinguishes three informal political ideologies within the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC): liberal (associated with intra-church movements initiated by late Fr. Aleksandr Men' and Fr. Georgii Kochetkov), traditionalist, and fundamentalist. Traditionalists are more conservative than the patriarchal platform, and, unlike fundamentalists, willing to work constructively with the post-Soviet regime; their position is prevalent among the majority of clergy and active believers.² The situation with Covid-19 confirms that it should not be automatically associated with the official position.

There is no strict border between the traditionalist and fundamentalist platforms and sometimes they share each other's ideologies; but the former remain loyal to mundane and ecclesiastical authorities, while the latter are in the opposition to both hierarchies.³ Fundamentalists are not ultra-traditionalists; paradoxically, they have many things in common with liberals: both platforms show distrust towards the church hierarchy and the mundane authorities, because both groups refuse the current administration of the church and want to expand the role of laity.

According to Papkova, liberals are reformists, while fundamentalists follow invented traditions.⁴ In fact, the latter are no less reformist than the former: fundamentalists often appear as the most radical reformists with revolutionary intentions in comparison to the liberals who seem to be more interested in «restoring traditions» in view of an ecclesiastical reform.⁵

Though the ROC's jurisdiction covers many countries, the present chapter concentrates on the discussion of the various positions of believers and groups who are operating on the territory of the Russian Federation. Because of this focus, opinions of the other Orthodox Churches will not be considered. In addition, other opinions don't represent a common position in view of the pandemic, whereas the policy of ROC mostly bases on the decisions of Russian authorities.

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- 1 Anastasia V. Mitrofanova (2014). Orthodox Fundamentalism: Intersection of Modernity, Post-modernity and Tradition. In K. Tolstaya (Ed.). *Orthodox Paradoxes: Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, p. 101.
 - 2 Irina Papkova (2011). *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*. New York: Oxford UP and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, pp. 47, 51-53.
 - 3 Some scholars use both terms to characterize social movements like Sorok Sorokov, e.g. Roman Lunkin (2017). Dvizhenie «Sorok Sorokov»: pravoslavnyi fundamentalizm vo vrazhdebnom okruzenii. *Religiya i pravo*. September 18. See: http://www.sclj.ru/news/detail.php?SECTION_ID =484&ELEMENT_ID =7677&fbclid= lwAR12Bz_ Pb81 f SwLtki8NKrpQ8YOs0efMe7jnYiNt3PoDDmem2lHBZJpkO5A
 - 4 Lunkin, 2017, pp. 53, 61.
 - 5 For instance, liberals promote a restored Liturgy of Saint James as a more laity-centered but also the oldest known form of liturgy.

Apart from a loose network of communities and individuals known as «non-commemorating» believers, who e.g. insist on remaining part of the ROC, while refusing to commemorate Patriarch Kirill and/or other bishops liturgically, alternative Orthodox groups in Russia will neither be analysed. Many fundamentalists, although not all of them, are part of this network. It exists no single ecclesiastical community nor a “church” solely for the fundamentalists. Some of the not so radical believers often attend mainstream, “commemorating” communities. Generally speaking, fundamentalists are less interested in the formal relationship between a priest and the hierarchy, but in terms of his decisions in view of sensitive religious-political issues.

The chapter’s methodology is based on the analysis of open access materials produced by Orthodox groups and individuals responding to the emerging challenge of the global pandemic. With regard to immediate reactions of people and groups to that topic, video blogs (mostly YouTube-hosted) and social media (Facebook, Telegram, V Kontakte) are extensively examined. Last years’ most important speakers issued more videos than texts, although most of them were “talking heads videos”. The fact that people present most of their ideas rather visually than verbally can be partly explained by the general popularity of social media that hardly overran traditional blogging. Furthermore, videos are less likely to be monitored and removed from the Internet than texts. With respect to some of the aforementioned points, the author refers to her own observations according to the national lockdown in Russia.

The analysis of the official patriarchal position is based on documents that have been issued by the Patriarch’s Office, the Working group for the coordination of the activities of ecclesiastical bodies according the circumstances of the transmission of the infection with the coronavirus, or by separate bishoprics. Further sources are the Patriarch’s public speeches and sermons, statements released by Vladimir Legoyda, the Chairman of the Synodal Department for the Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media and official spokesperson for the Church in view of mass media, and Legoyda’s official Telegram-account. To demonstrate that the Patriarch’s policy of ecclesiastical lockdown has provoked mixed reactions, the author turns to diverse public figures representing positions from total support of the patriarchal platform to critical evaluations but without invectives against ecclesiastical or mundane authorities. Generally speaking, people who distrust official information about the pandemic have become known in Russia as “corona-dissidents”, or “corona-sceptics”. Conspiracy theories, propagated by some of them, such as the idea that the disease is being caused by 5G wireless technologies, are

loaned from Western anti-Covid discourses, because in Russia 5G is not in use so far.⁶

Finally the author analyses various positions within fundamentalist networks by showing a broad spectrum of their opinions. Therefore, she firstly discusses the position of these individuals who balance between traditionalism and fundamentalism such as Andrei Kormoukhin, the leader of *Sorok Sorokov*, a social movement, Schemahegumen Sergii Romanov, the founder and former spiritual father of a convent in the Urals and Sergii (Ruslan) Aliev, a sportsman, philanthropist and entrepreneur from Yekaterinburg. In a second step, the ideas of non-commemorating believers such as Schemahegumen Daniil (Filippov), a spiritual leader of a non-commemorating community that hides in a remote abandoned village and spreads its ideas via YouTube⁷ will be discussed. Furthermore, the concept of militant, highly politicized activists such as Andrei Saveliev, the leader of an unregistered party called “Great Russia”, as well as the ideas of Colonel Ret. Vladimir Kvachkov, the informal leader of the most radical fundamentalists and Russian nationalists, who developed a specific ideology of “Russian Christian Socialism”,⁸ are debated. In this context it is noteworthy, that the website “Moscow the Third Rome”, owned by Aleksei Dobychin, provides an aggregator of the news from around the world and has become an important source of various opinions.

2. The Patriarchal Stay-at-home Policy and its vulnerabilities

Ecclesiastical leaders in Russia were aware of the approaching challenges well beforehand: already in the midst of March 2020 divine services were suspended in the ROC’s parishes located in Europe.⁹ For instance the Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in Spain and Portugal discontinued public worships on March 14th,

6 Russian corona-dissidents developed this theory quickly: it was reported that at least one mobile mast had been set on fire in the region of North Ossetia. The perpetrators were, most likely, not religiously motivated. Participants of a major anti-lockdown meeting that took place in the same region and was organized by the neo-Communist Vadim Chaldiev were also not religiously motivated.

7 Viktor Shnirelman (2017). *Koleno Danovo. Eskhatologiya i antisemitizm v sovremennoi Rossii*. Moscow: BBI, pp. 523-524.

8 Colonel Kvachkov spent twelve years in detention in total: The first time he was arrested for preparing an assassination on Anatolii Chubais in the year 2005 (vindicated by a jury), the second time he went to prison because of an attempt to initialize an armed revolt in the year 2010, and the third time he was imprisoned for public extremist declarations in the year 2017. Kvachkov was released in early February 2019 because hate speech had been decriminalized and reclassified as minor offence in Russia.

9 Roman Lunkin (2020). *Mekhanizmy religioznoi reaktivatsii na pandemiyu koronavirusa*. In *Nauchno-analiticheskii vestnik IE RAN*, No. 2, pp. 104-109.

the Latvian Orthodox Church (autonomous within the ROC) did so on March 15th. At that moment, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Russia were officially estimated by only 48; no severe lockdown measures had been discussed so far within Russia.

Nevertheless, some monasteries, such as Sretensky in Moscow, started online video streaming of their divine services. On March 18th, all spiritual schools of the ROC went online, following the example of the secular universities. On March 23rd, the Patriarch's Office established a Working group for the activities of ecclesiastical bodies according the circumstances of the transmission of the infection with the coronavirus under the leadership of the Metropolitan Dionisii (Porubai), Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchy.

From the very beginning, the official position of the ROC assumed demonstrating its loyalty to the state and its willingness to obey the public health regulations. Potentially it was a source of misunderstandings, because Orthodox Christian rituals and daily practices imply multiple physical contacts between people, as well as between people and sacred objects. Believers usually kiss icons, relics, hands of priests; priests kiss each other in the altar during the Divine Liturgy and in consolidated parish communities existed also the exchange of the "kiss of peace". Church buildings are often overcrowded (especially in big cities) and poorly ventilated. Usually, all of the believers share glasses of water mixed with wine as well as cups for holy water that they drink separately after they have received the communion. In view of the pandemic, the tradition to receive the communion from one chalice and the use of one liturgical spoon, pose a specific threat to the believers. To prevent the Blood of Christ from spilling all lips after Communion are wiped with a single piece of red cloth. Some parishes, well before Covid-19, introduced the practices of using disposable post-communion cups, or wet-wiping icons after each worshiper's kiss. Still, the practice of using shared spoons and clothes with regard to the communion remained inviolable and non-discussible, at least in public.

Coronavirus abruptly changed everything. On March 17th, the Patriarch issued instructions for all parishes and monasteries in Moscow that demanded sterilizing liturgical spoons with ethanol after each communion and the use of disposable paper napkins for wiping lips that must be burned subsequently.¹⁰ This order, later reproduced by most bishops in their dioceses, has led to many troubles that will be discussed in the following.

In early April 2020, special rules were introduced for giving communion to people presumably infected with Covid-19; priests had to wear disposable personal

10 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. (2020). Instruksiya nastoyatelyam prikhodov i podvorii, igumenam i igumeniyam monastyrei Moskovskoi eparkhii v svyazi s ugrozoi rasprostraneniya koronavirusnoi infektsii. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. March 17. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608418.html>

protection equipment (PPEs) and the communion was allowed to be given only in the form of the Presanctified Gifts¹¹. In addition, the Patriarch announced that penalties would be given to clerics who have not been following these hygienic rules of procedure by the Ecclesiastical court.¹²

In June, when the lockdown in Moscow was close to the end, the Metropolitan Dionicii additionally issued a letter, demanding all priest to wear face masks, also during the confessions.¹³

More troubles for the Church were ahead as the national epidemic situation worsened and state officials were leaning towards introducing the lockdown that was commonly called “self-isolation regime”¹⁴ in Russia.

Due to the fact that Russia is a federation, epidemic situations in its regions varied. Therefore, on April 2nd the President granted additional rights to the heads of federal subjects and enabled them with a right to establish protective measures they might find appropriate in terms of their territories. As a result, the national lockdown was established in March 30th, but in some parts of Russia regional authorities suspended public divine services earlier, for instance in the Republic of Karelia, where it was established on March 27th or in St.-Petersburg where it has been established on March 28th. Local bishops had to make their decisions about ecclesiastical lockdowns depending on their personal relations with regional officials. In some bishoprics public worships continued – either with the permission of regional authorities, e.g. in Novosibirsk oblast, or without it, in Sverdlovsk oblast.¹⁵

Moscow, the capital city, inhabited by 13 million people and constituting a separate federal subject, was affected increasingly and earlier by Covid-19 than other

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- 11 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (2020). Pravila dlya soversheniya treb na domu i v lechebnykh uchrezhdeniyakh pri poseshchenii lyudei, nakhodyashchikhsya v rezhime izolatsii, svyazannoi s opasnostiyu zarazheniya, ili zarazhennykh koronavirusnoi infektsiei. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. April 6. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5618000.html>
- 12 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (2020). Rasporyazhenie Svyateishego Patriarcha Kirilla ob otvetstvennosti za nesoblyudenie ukazanii, napravlennykh na ogranichenie rasprostraneniya koronavirusnoi infektsii. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. April 27. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5629099.html>
- 13 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (2020). Tsirkulyarnoe pismo Mitropolita Voskresenskogo Dionisiya. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. June 1st. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5645698.html>
- 14 This term was also in use in Great Britain, but its meaning was different; in Russia the whole lockdown became known as self-isolation.
- 15 The impact of these local ecclesiastical lockdowns, their peculiarities and consequences on the believers are currently the subject of various sociological and ethnographical examination. See, e.g. Irina Kuznetsova (2020). Traditions and Technologies: a Change in the Practice of Orthodox Worship During COVID-Pandemic: The Case of the St. Elias Church of Krasnodar (Russia). Virtual presentation within the 7th LUMEN online conference NASHS. June 25-26. *Editura Lumen*. June 24. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHOMz uwSumY>

Image 1: Priest, wearing PPE, gives communion to a sick woman.



Photo from the public Facebook page of Fr. Vasilii Gelevan. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/padrebasilio/posts/3513566135325185>

regions. A city lockdown was established on March 30th and initially implied no public church service restrictions. Nevertheless, on March 29th, the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the Patriarch, addressing a small number of worshippers (some of them used face coverings) in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. In this context, he emphasises the story of St. Mary of Egypt in order to testify that a believer could be saved without attending churches or public divine services. The Patriarch even compared St. Mary's life with the present situation by pointing out that she went on "full isolation"¹⁶. The necessity to address the need for believers to stay away from the Church in order to protect themselves, by simultaneously expressing that the believers will receive salvation despite of the receiving of the communion, was extremely challenging the for ROC.

On April 11th, the Chief Sanitary Officer of Moscow ordered to suspend public divine services in the city starting on April 13th – this ban was only lifted only

16 Cf. Telekanal Spas (2020). Patriarkh prizval veruiushchikh molitsya doma, sleduya podvigu Marii Egipetskoi. *Telekanal Spas*. March 29. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uztpNFvco>

on June 6th. Thus, Palm Sunday of April 12th, the last Sunday before Easter, became also the last day of unrestricted church attendance for ordinary believers in Moscow. The Patriarch's Office issued a circular letter, signed by the Metropolitan Dionisii (Porubai), and demanding all services from now on to be conducted without parishioners, only in the presence of clergy and needful "co-workers and volunteers"¹⁷. Above all, the co-workers and volunteers were needed to organize video streams of the altar. Since this moment the parishes of Moscow went online – at least, officially. Bishopricks located in some other federal subjects, e.g., the Republic of Udmurtia, Kemerovo oblast, managed to keep churches open nearly until Easter (April 19th), or even to celebrate Easter with public divine services that had not been formally suspended.

On April 12th – when the number of the infected people in Moscow had reached ten thousand – Patriarch Kirill celebrated the Divine Liturgy in a nearly empty cathedral and once again repeated his call to the believers to stay at home. It was evident that the Patriarch not just took public health concerns seriously, but personally perceived Covid-19 as a severe danger. It was also clear that this year in Moscow, as well as in most of the federal regions, Easter would be celebrated at home.

On April 15th, the Patriarch allowed to bless Paschal foods at home and introduced a special prayer to be accompanied by holy water sprinkling, "if one has it"¹⁸. This decision contradicted all the previous experiences of believers, including the late Soviet practices, because the Easter blessing of the ritual food such as cakes, eggs and sweetened cottage cheese, was a longstanding tradition observed even by some non-believers, as a popular custom.

Therefore, the Easter Sunday of 2020 was painful for most of the Orthodox in the federal subjects of Russia who have been affected by the lockdown. Worshipers were not allowed to visit the Patriarchal Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, although the event was, as usual, televised and commented. At some point the commentator mentioned that the Patriarch proceeded "surrounded by hypodeacons"; however, everyone was able to notice that he walked surrounded by empty space that reflected the policy of social distancing.¹⁹ A tiny group of priests

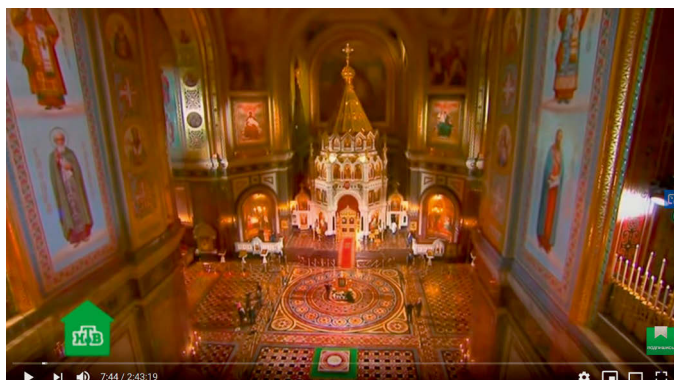
17 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (2020). Tsirkulyarnoe pismo Mitropolita Voskresenskogo Dionisiya. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. June 1st. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5645698.html> Many believers understood the fact that the letter was signed not by the Patriarch himself, but by his First Vicar, as a sign of distress.

18 Cf. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (2020). O blagoslovenii kulichei i paskh v domashnikh usloviyakh. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. April 14. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5621930.html>

19 Cf. NTV (2020). Paskha Khristova. Bogosluzhenie v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya. *NTV*. April 18. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Himz9wrsUwg>

and nuns who have been standing in the huge cathedral, watched only by the Patriarch's bodyguards from the Federal Protective Service, looked as if the Doomsday was approaching. The Ambassador Vladimir Yakunin, who delivers every Easter the Holy Light from Jerusalem to Moscow and hands it over to the Patriarch, stood near the Patriarch and wearing a face mask and blue rubber gloves posed a surrealist picture. Even people working at Patriarchy-sponsored organizations could not help expressing their distress. For example, Elena Zhosul, a popular broadcaster from the ecclesiastical TV-channel *Spas* (Saviour), shared the indignation against a Paschal service without parishioners on her Facebook page: "That empty church floor was beautifully tiled. We will not forget these tiles for the rest of our lives"²⁰.

Image 2: *Naked floor of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour during the 2020 Paschal Liturgy*



Source: Paskha Khristova. Bogosluzhenie v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya. NTV. 18 April 2020. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Himz9wrsUwg>

The digitalization of the Easter service was shocking but it also engendered some previously unknown opportunities, such as “jumping” from one liturgical stream to another to attend virtually remote churches, dear to one’s heart. But even having this in mind, the patriarchal position on church attendance was, indeed, very vulnerable. In the post-Soviet period, the liturgical attendance and Eucharist celebrated at least once per month, became the cornerstone of the missionary philosophy of the Church. Fr. Georgii Breev, one of the most respected clerics in Moscow, said in an interview in the year 2013: “One cannot be a Christian without Eucharist [...] A community, not built around Eucharist, is hardly an ecclesiastical

20 Cf. Elena Zhosul (2020). *Facebook*. 18 April. See: <https://www.facebook.com/ezhosul>

community”²¹. Physical access to churches for everyone was behind an ambitious “Program-200” initiated by Patriarch Kirill in 2010. This program implies building at least two hundreds new “walking distance churches” in the remote districts of Moscow. Vladimir Legoyda explained that they should make attendance easier for “senior parishioners, the disabled, people with health problems, and new mothers”²². The same idea of church attendance as a necessity was an argument in favour of the restitution of the church property, nationalized after the revolution, and other projects, such as constructing a magnificent Orthodox complex in Paris.

Not only clerics, but also scholars often considered church attendance as one of the main parameters of religiosity, while what was happening outside the church walls was frequently labelled as vernacular, popular, or folk religion.²³ This way of practicing faith was assumed to be somehow “simpler” than institutionalised religious behaviour.

In contrary to this established vision of what is right and wrong for an Orthodox Christian, Patriarch Kirill suggested rethinking self-isolation as a God’s blessing: “this virus has destroyed a sinful human idea of our full mightiness, of our central place in the whole civilization [...] It is really a chance for the human race to change itself in order to regain God’s grace”²⁴. Some speakers were fully supportive of this patriarchal position. Aleksei Osipov, professor of the Moscow Spiritual Academy and one of the leading secular theologians in Russia, said that the coronavirus is a God-given *epitemia* (Greek: penance), which believers need because they “got used” to receive the communion and therefore lost the awe towards this mystery²⁵. The same ideas were articulated by Bishop Pitirim (Tvorogov), rector of the

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- 21 Cf. Aleksandra Kuzmicheva & Georgii Breev (2013). Fr. Protoierei Georgii Breev ob anatomii tserkovnoi obshchiny, nastoyashchei družbe i glavnom interese v zhizni. December 3. See: <https://www.pravmir.ru/protoierej-georgij-breev-ob-anatomii-cerkovnoj-obshhiny-na-stoyashhej-družbe-i-glavnom-interese-v-zhizni/#ixzz3clJl7kRb> ; Fr. Georgii Breev, 83, died from double pneumonia on April 29, 2020.
- 22 Cf. Vladimir V Legoida (2010). Moskve stroyat tserkvi shagovoi dostupnosti. September 15. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1275696.html>
- 23 Critical reception of this approach may be found in: Yulia Sinelina (2001). O kriteriyakh opredeleniya religioznosti naseleniya. *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, No. 7, 95-96.; Olga Kazmina (2009). Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov i novaia religioznaia situatsia v Rossii. Moscow: Izdatelstvo MGU, pp. 130-133; Svetlana Riazanova (2018). Vot lyudi-to tam stoyat, a ty ne moshesh: poseshchenie tserkvi v sovremennom permskom pravoslavnom soobshchestve. Perm: PCIK, pp. 29-31.
- 24 Cf. Patriarch Kirill (2020). Slovo Svyateishego Patriarcha Kirilla v den pamayti prepodobnogo Sergiya Radonezhskogo posle Liturgii v Troitse-Sergievoi lavre. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov. Official web site of the Moscow Patriarchy*. July 18. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5665266.html>
- 25 Cf. Telekanal Spas (2020). Reaktsiya professora Alekseya Osipova. May 20. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1SYxOJCxYM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR28wKo-tZ_YGIIIPPXD4TETJzQzPISV9z1ADPIbM8dRB9PsWTjN-fpy6U

Academy, initially a corona-dissident, who changed his position after his own hospitalization with Covid-inflicted pneumonia. “We have forgotten about living God, having replaced him with the continuous communion” – he wrote in his Telegram account.²⁶

3. From dissidents to reformers: reactions to the ecclesiastical lockdown

For the first time in the post-Soviet history of the ROC, its speakers officially declared that the communion and the church attendance in general were not necessary conditions with regard to the salvation. It was no surprise that many bishops, clerics and lay, normally supportive of the patriarchal platform, openly stated that the ecclesiastical lockdown was, in their eyes, an exaggerated measure. These inner-church related Covid-dissidents embraced people of different ideological orientations, who remained basically loyal to ecclesiastical and mundane authorities, but reserved their right to be sceptical towards these measures. Some of the dissidents did not believe in the pandemic at all, considering it a cloak for a global conspiracy; the majority admitted the existence of the virus, but viewed measures taken against it as redundant. Some limited their objections to verbal polemics; some, despite the prohibition, continued public church services.

Expressing formal loyalty to the patriarchal policy, some bishops and ordinary priests, spoke, in fact, against it. Hieromonk Feodorit Senchukov, medical doctor, openly claimed: “we have not a coronavirus pandemic, but a pandemic of fear”²⁷. Just before the ecclesiastical lockdown Daniil (Dorovskikh), Metropolitan of Kurgan and Belozerskoe, said:

“This thought that we can avoid sickness only hiding in our homes and, vice versa, that it is more likely that we will fall ill after attending the churches is not the thought of the Holy Fathers [...] the coronavirus is the consequence of our sins, God’s punishment for our people. It reminds us to trust not in ethanol and other disinfecting solutions, but first of all in God”.²⁸

26 Cf. Episkop Pitirim (2020). Official channel of the rector of the Moscow Spiritual Academy, 24-25 April. See: <https://t.me/pitirimtvorogov>

27 Cf. Pyotr Selinov (n.d.). Pandemiya strakha. COVID-19 glazami svyashchennika-vracha. Intervyu s Feodoritom Senchukovym. *Prikhozhanin*. See: <https://prihozhanin.msdm.ru/home/pogovorit/2733-pandemiya-strakha-covid-19-glazami-svyashchennika-vracha.html>

28 Cf. Mikhail Tyurenkov and Daniil Metropolitan (Dorovskikh) (2020). Koronavirus – nakazanie Bozhie nashemu narodu. *Tsargrad TV*. April 7. See: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/mitropolit-daniil-dorovskikh-koronavirus-nakazanie-bozhie-nashemu-narodu_246712

Some priests were reported to renounce lockdowns in their dioceses in spite of the perspective to be examined by ecclesiastical courts. Fr. Nikolai Boldyrev from Nizhegorodskaya oblast, where public worship services were suspended since April 15th, refused to close the church and to wipe the liturgical spoon with ethanol, calling the patriarchal recommendations “blasphemous”.²⁹ Fr. Aleksandr Zakharov from Tikhvin diocese issued a video where he said that “never and not for anything” he would take two of the prescribed anti-Covid measures: to sterilize the liturgical spoon with ethanol and to keep church doors closed for worshippers.³⁰

A specific form of dissidence was offered by Andrei Kormoukhin, the head of a para-ecclesiastical social movement *Sorok sorokov* (Forty of Forties – a reference to the number of churches in pre-revolutionary Moscow). The organization’s ideological position sways from traditionalism to fundamentalism, but in this case Kormoukhin spoke not on behalf of the movement, but as a private citizen. In this capacity he, first of all, expressed his respect and obedience to the patriarchal instructions. Then, Kormoukhin explained that his personal choice is, nevertheless, to go to the church for the Paschal service, even risking not to gain access to it: “Christ my Lord will wait for me on Easter Sunday at the church, not online, or at the TV-set. That is why I will go to the church [...] The church is more of vital necessity for me than a grocery store or a pharmacy”³¹.

On April 14th, a couple of days before Easter, Kormoukhin initiated a flash mob consisting of postings from social media, one photo portrayed himself holding a placard that reads: “Christ will help” (with a hashtag).

There were at least two reasons why so many believers, who usually were obedient to the Patriarch, refused to accept his policy in view of the ecclesiastical lockdown.

First of all, the idea to receive the salvation at home, promoted as a strategy against the pandemic, contrasted historical experiences of anti-faith persecutions of the 20th century, when even a simple opportunity to gather in public for the divine service in a church building was priceless. The presence of venerated icons that could have been kept in the same building for centuries, or continuity of clerics and parishioners of this particular church, was even of greater value. Suspending public services, especially Paschal Liturgy, was painful for most believers, because “anti-

29 Cf. Volga. MBKh Media. (2020). Eto khula na Boga». Svyashcenniku iz Nizhegorodskoi oblasti zapretili sluzhenie posle otkaza zakryt khram dlya prikhozhan. *Volga. MBKh Media*. April 16. See: <https://vk.com/@volgambk.media-eto-hula-na-boga-svyashcenniku-iz-nizhegorodskoi-oblasti-zap>

30 Cf. Aleksandr Zakharov (2020). Batyushka Aleksandr o koronavirusu. June 7. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juYj-vRvhRo>

31 Cf. Andrei Kormoukhin (2020). Pochemu ya poidu v khram na Paskhu. April 14. See: https://vk.com/wall209290103_3657

Image 3: *Andrei Kormoukhin's flash mob.*

URL: https://sun1-88.userapi.com/mzbupVvj1Xs_AbiYYO954oWF9E8rPPlvt-dYSw/W84mc4bJN9o.jpg

sanitary” conditions in churches were a noticeable part of Soviet anti-religious propaganda. Stories were invented about microbes found in baptism bowls, or about outbreaks of infectious diseases during pilgrimages³². Fr. Vladimir Rozhkov, who served in Orenburg bishopric, recalled how in 1964 a sanitary commission came to the city cathedral: “They took ‘smears’ from the icons, most venerated and kissed by believers, from the altar crosses, chalices, spoons. They demanded Presanctified

32 Cf. Liubov Soskovets (2005). Fenomen sovetskogo antireligioznogo Agitpropa. *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, No. 288, p. 190.; Cf. Daria Makarova (2013). Ateisticheskaya propaganda v SSSR v 1954–1964 godakh (na materialakh Kurskoi oblasti). *Izvestiya Saratovskogo gosuniversiteta. Seriya Istoriya. Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* 13, No. 3, p. 36.

Gifts for analysis, but Fr. Aleksandr... refused”³³. Fr. Vladimir cites sanitary regulations issued by the former bishop: they included disinfecting crosses and liturgical vessels with eau-de-cologne after each use.

Apart from direct references to anti-sanitary conditions in churches, Soviet anti-religious propaganda utilized some clichés, portraying religion (not necessarily Orthodoxy) as “poison”, “deadly breath”; “infection”; believers and clergy – as “parasites” (i.e. insects or mice), inflicting “harm”³⁴. This discourse is a result of the famous statement coined by Karl Marx that religion is the opium of the people (*Opium des Volkes*), later repeated by Lenin³⁵. Soviet clichés about “religious infection” are parodied and summarized by a Russian rock-band “Elysium” that issued in 2018 a composition “Religion is poison” with the following verses, repeating anti-religious slogans:

“Protect kids from the claws of priests! [from a 1962 poster]
 Faith is harmful, more harmful than wine. [from a 1933 brochure]
 Religion is poison. Protect kids! [from a 1930 poster]”³⁶

Many corona-dissidents draw parallels between suspending public divine services because of the pandemic and closing churches by the Soviet government in the period of persecutions. The aforementioned Fr. Aleksandr Zakharov stated:

“All this totalitarianism, when someone, somewhere decided for us where we should go, and where not; what we should want and what we shouldn’t; how we are allowed to think and how we aren’t allowed at all – we have been fed up with it in the Soviet Union”³⁷.

Andrei Kormoukhin also referred to the «satanic terror» of the early 20th century and reminded that the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia “were afraid nei-

33 Cf. Ahilla (2020). «Sanitarnyi terror»: tserkvi kak «rassadniki epidemicheskikh zabolevanii». Iz knigi protoiereya Vladimira Rozhkova «Zapiski svyashchennika». Ahilla. February 27. See: <https://ahilla.ru/sanitarnyj-terror-tserkvi-kak-rassadniki-epidemicheskikh-zabolevanij/>

34 Aleksei Gorbatov (2014). Propaganda i SMI v period khrushchovskoi antireligioznoi kampa-nii (1954 1964 gg.). *Vestnik Kemerovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 2, No 3, 157f.; Aleksan-dr Panchenko (2013). «Religioznye infektsii» i «dukhovnye kaleki»: tema detstva v sovetskoj ateisticheskoi propagande 1960-kh gg. M. Balina (Ed.). «Ubit Charskuyu...»: *paradoksy sovetskoj literatury dlya detei (1920-e – 1930-e gg.)*. St. Petersburg: Aleteiya, pp. 310–329.; Kseniya Kol-kunova (2013). Ateisticheskaya propaganda v khudozhestvennoi literature 1950–1960-X gg. *Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya 1: Bogoslovie. Filosofiya*. No. 5, pp. 113-132.

35 In the age of Marx opium was seen as a basically harmless pain-relief; in the 1920s, however, this label associated religion with a dangerous, or even lethal, narcotic drug.

36 The composition may be found at the band’s Youtube channel: Elysium (2018). ‘Religion is poison.’ *YouTube*. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPIOCM3orpw>

37 Cf. Zakharov (2020).

ther of a virus, nor of the real terrorists killing them for their Christian faith.”³⁸. Conservative journalist Mikhail Tyurenkov³⁹, belonging to a community of Old Believers within the jurisdiction of the ROC, reminded the others of the fact that public divine services continued even in the 1930s, in the period of the “godless five year plans”⁴⁰, and that the victims of abortion, which is not restricted in Russia, outnumbered the victims of the virus. Encouraging believers to obey the hierarchy, Tyurenkov, nevertheless, wrote:

“No one can forbid a believer to meet... [Easter] in a church of the Lord. Neither a policeman nor an official or a priest. And if you (yes, I mean you personally) strive to come to church in the Easter night, I cannot imagine who is able to deter a believer”⁴¹.

Official ecclesiastical speakers tried to prevent the tracing of parallels between the Soviet persecutions and the lockdown. Instead, they stressed that believers who strived to be in a church were unsocial and rampant. Vladimir Legoyda declared that comparing contemporary believers, staying comfortably at home, with the New Martyrs would be forged or even “slightly indecent”⁴². Fr. Aleksandr Volkov, the former Head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Press Service, said on his Facebook page that believers who do not follow the regulations should not compare themselves neither with the first Christians in the catacombs nor with those persecuted in the 20th century. Accusing such people of pride and blasphemy, he questioned the purity of their intentions: “Can anyone really say about himself that one actually needs to meet Christ that strongly and that this person cannot wait for a couple of weeks to do so?”⁴³. Bishop Pitirim (Tvorogov) emphasized savagery of believers who did not observe sanitary regulations, blaming them for the spread of Covid-19 in his monastery:

38 Cf. Kormoukhin (2020).

39 Tyurenkov is not in the opposition either to the ecclesiastical hierarchy nor to mundane authorities; nevertheless, on his Facebook page he writes that «It is not at all embarrassing for me, when someone labels me as 'Orthodox fundamentalist'...». See Tyurenkov (2020). *Facebook*. May 25. See: <https://www.facebook.com/tyurenkov/posts/3197908793592950>.

40 A godless five year plan was announced by the Union of the Militant Godless in 1932 with a purpose to exterminate religion in the Soviet Union by 1937.

41 Cf. Mikhail Tyurenkov (2020). Paskha bez prikhozan": kak perezhit koronavirusnoe ispytanie, *Tsargrad TV*. April 13. See: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/pasha-bez-prihozhan-kak-perezhit-koronavirusnoe-ispytanie_247838?fbclid=IwAR1CdyqLc_BCL5GOHTtBJFciv_ocVWjHEAMPDle_bF3BxoY8jLWj34ZMlyxc

42 Cf. Legoyda (2020). Neumestno sravnivat situatsiyu v Tserkvi seichas i v nachale 20 veka. April 17. See: <https://ria.ru/20200417/1570191862.html>

43 Cf. Aleksandr Volkov (2020). O bogoslužebnoi partizanshchine. *Facebook*. April 5. See: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3932984456742489&id=100000-929212448

“Holy Monday. Morning. The gates of the Trinity – St. Sergius Lavra⁴⁴ are closed. There is an exited mob in front of them, demanding to open the Lavra. The protesters behave very aggressively; they use obscene words. [Vicar] Vladyka Paramon opens the Lavra for the whole Passion Week and Easter. On Good Friday the plague has begun”⁴⁵.

The second reason why some believers and priests considered ecclesiastical lockdown harmful was the problem conceptualized by sociologist Ivan Zabaev as “sacral individualism”. This concept implies that contemporary believers in Russia see the Church primarily as individual communicating with God, not a community of people.⁴⁶

Many people attend public worships on an individual basis whenever they need them and join no steady ecclesiastical communities. This type of congregation is known as «the temple model», fully acceptable for other faiths, for example Hinduism, but not for Christianity.⁴⁷ This absence of a shared parish life has been noticed by many researchers, such as Jeanne Kormina with her concept of “the Orthodox nomads” who “carefully avoid the very chance to become a community”⁴⁸. Aleksandr Agajanian theorizes that an average Orthodox parish consists of an active core of constant attendees, whom local priests mostly know personally, and a scattered periphery consisting of people, who attend the parish from time to time and basically remain anonymous for priests and steady parishioners.⁴⁹ Both priests and scholars suggest that lack of solidarity between the believer dates back to the anti-church policies of the past: “the whole life of a parish in the Soviet period was aimed at admitting one, separately attending [...] parishioner. One comes, confesses, takes the communion and leaves – no contacts”⁵⁰. Eventually, the very idea of a «parish community» became suspicious in terms of them probably being

44 Lavra is an ancient title of honour for the most respected Orthodox monasteries.

45 Cf. Episkop Pitirim (2020).

46 Ivan Zabaev (2011). “Sakralnyi individualizm” i obshchina v sovremennom russkom pravoslavii [“The sacral individualism” and community in today’s Russian Orthodoxy]. In Aleksandr Agajanian and Kathy Rousselet (Eds.). *Prikhod i Obshchina v Sovremennom Pravoslavii*. Moscow: Ves mir, p. 347.

47 R. A. Cnaan and D. W. Curtis (2012). Religious Congregations as Voluntary Associations: An Overview. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42, No. 1, pp. 16-17.

48 Jeanne Kormina (2012). Nomadicheskoe pravoslavie: o novykh formakh religioznoi zhizni v sovremennoi Rossii. *Ab Imperio*, No. 2, p. 217.

49 Aleksandr Agajanian (2011). Prikhod i obshchina v russkom pravoslavii: sovremennye protsessy v retrospektive poslednego stoletiya. Aleksandr Agajanian and Kathy Rousselet (Eds.). *Prikhod i obshchina v sovremennom pravoslavii*. Moscow: Ves mir, p. 33.

50 Oksana Golovko and Fr. Fyodor Borodin (2019). «Esli svyashchennik ne umeet družhit, obshchiny ne poluchitsya». I pochemu inogda v khrame ne gotovy prinyat postoronnikh. *Pravmir*. September 26. See: <https://www.pravmir.ru/esli-svyashchennik-ne-umeet-druzhit-obshchiny-ne-poluchitsya-i-pochemu-inogda-v-hrame-ne-gotovy-prinyat-postoronnikh/>

a «sect»⁵¹. This situation is far from the Christian norm, especially in the light of the Patriarch's repeating calls to involve the newcomers into communities.⁵²

Vladimir Legoyda renounced this argumentation by saying that believers do not lose the connection with their parishes, and that they continue communicating with priests and practice common prayers from a distance.⁵³ This position seems overly optimistic, because suspending a church attendance can potentially destroy the existing fragile ties between at least some believers. At the same time, the digitalization of parishes could as well be constitutive for more consolidated communities: people who are involved in new practices, such as studying the Bible on Zoom, get to know each other's names, backgrounds and experiences. Unfortunately, digital communication leaves too many people on the side simply because they are not Internet users, and this is particularly true with regard to senior parishioners.

Apart from Covid-dissidence, there emerged another inner-church reaction in view of the lockdown that is a source of ambivalent potential. Introducing new techniques of the communion provoked a discussion about the possibility of transmitting diseases through sacred objects. This discussion had been long overdue; some believers and even priests did raise the topic of church practices (including the communion) being inconsistent with modern sanitary rules.⁵⁴ A standard reaction was that communion bread and wine are safe⁵⁵. Actually, priests answered not the questions, because for Orthodox Christians it is out of the question that an infection could be transmitted via the Blood and Body of Christ; there were, however, material mediators (spoons, clothes, and chalices) to which no attention had been paid until the pandemic began. Discussions about the holy water, icons, and the like were not fierce, because the Church never denied that such objects can transmit infections, and some parishes took measures in order to prevent infections. Latent hygienic concerns became visible when the ecclesiastical hierarchy, by suspending Eucharist nationwide, legitimated them in a way. Unfortunately, the

51 Fr. Fyodor Kotrelev (2012). Chto delayet prikhod obshchinosi? Opyt pastyrei i prikhozhan. *Neskuchnyi sad*. January 7. See: <http://www.nsad.ru/articles/chto-delaet-prihod-obshhinosi>; Agadjanian, 2011, p. 31.

52 Patriarch Kirill (2014). Na prikhodakh dolzhna byt pravilno postavlena rabota po priobshcheniyu k obshchine tekhnicheskoy, kto tolko vkhodit v khram. December 23. See: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3888293.html>

53 Cf. Legoyda (2020). Paskhu prazdnovali i vo vremya chumy – otprazdnuem i seichas. *Ria*. April 4. See: <https://ria.ru/20200404/1569577073.html>

54 Cf. Sergii Fr Adodin (2017). Mikrobiologiya. *Pravoslavie*. March 15. See: <https://pravoslavie.ru/101843.html>

55 Cf. Anna Utkina and Evgeniya Nun (Senchikova) (2020). Kak prichashchatsya vo vremya epidemii grippa? *Pravmir*. February 2nd. See: <https://www.pravmir.ru/prichashhenie-vo-vremya-epidemii-est-li-risk-1/>; Fr. Andrei Efanov (2020). Kak prichashchatsya vo vremya epidemii koronavirusa? *Foma*. March 7. See: <https://foma.ru/kak-prichashchatsya-vo-vremya-epidemii.html>

Patriarchy has not yet provided any clear answers for the believers that would reconcile the new normality of the pandemic with “if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them” (*Marcus* 16.18).

In the absence of official clarifications, discussions about liturgical techniques soon took an unexpected turn: streaming liturgies together with social distancing brought into the surface the idea of a digital communion. On May 11th two clerics from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine⁵⁶, Dmitrii Vaisburd and Igor Savva, who had to stay at home, provided the communion remotely by using Hangouts, a platform for video-conferences. Lay, also staying in their homes, positioned bread and wine in front of their cameras to be distantly transfigured into the Blood and Body of Christ. Then each of them consumed the Holy Gifts individually.

Explanations given later by Igor Savva show that his reasons were much more profound than providing the communion in emergency. The discussion about sacramental techniques was actually a template of the discussion about the communities as opposed to the individualism of believers. Savva emphasized that off-line Divine Liturgy is attended, but not participated by lay, who observe it distantly, while priests are celebrating in the altar:

“The main diverge for a real community regarding a solemn Liturgy in a full church and in a videoconference is not based on the use of the Internet, but that in the case of an **real** Liturgy most of the attendees, although faithful and reverent, remain observers of how the sacrament is performed, while in the **online** Liturgy, the assembly, faithful and reverent, becomes a direct part of the sacrament”.⁵⁷

Dmitrii Vaisburd added that, in his opinion, iconostasis that divides the altar from the nave of the church “is a much more substantial barrier for full value communication than the Internet”⁵⁸.

Some people obviously prefer being a digital community rather than being a collection of atomized church-attendees. Their choice, however, is at odds with the whole Orthodox tradition, and has a potential of undermining the foundations of

56 The Orthodox Church of Ukraine splitted from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (autonomous within the ROC) in 2018; it is at the moment recognized as an autocephalous Orthodox Church by several other sister-Churches, but not by the ROC (see: Jeanne Kormina and Vlad Naumescu (2020). A new 'Great Schism'? Theopolitics of communion and canonical territory in the Orthodox Church. *Anthropology Today* 36, No. 1, 7-11).

57 Fr. Igor Savva (2020). *Gospod otvechaet na Evkharisticheskuyu molitvu distantsionno na kazhdoi liturgii*. *Cerkvarium*. May 16. See: <https://cerkvarium.org/ru/spetstemy/tserkov-i-koronavirus/otets-igor-savva-gospod-otvechaet-na-evkharisticheskuyu-molitvu-distantsionno-na-kazhdoi-liturgii>

58 Dmitrii Vaisburd (2020). *Evkharistiya onlain: predvaritelnye itogi*. *Ahilla*. June 10. See: https://ahilla.ru/evkharistiya-onlajn-predvaritelnye-itogi/?fbclid=IwARoXV-E84fQ-pjeW3-MRzG5F74kd8 doZM 25GTZljQPQXFK2AM_9DyeSKQs8

the Church. Unfortunately, Vaisburd and Savva, the two clerics who are involved in the digital communion case, belonged to a non-canonical (at least, for the ROC) jurisdiction. As a result, the ROC simply refused to continue serious theological discussions on this issue. Vladimir Legoyda made an ironical statement about a liturgical “breakthrough”⁵⁹; Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) compared this distant worship with notorious tele-healers of the early 1990s and said that it “cannot be taken seriously”⁶⁰. Other commentators, instead of discussing the topic of preserving liturgical communities during the lockdown, preferred to discuss how digitalization might assist in getting rid of what they envisioned as “folk” religion.⁶¹

4. Fundamentalist reactions to the corona-crisis

Generally, fundamentalists share the discourse of the other corona-dissidents, but, apart from being more radical in expressing their vision, they also accentuate things in a slightly different way than the speakers who belong to the other ideological platforms.

Fundamentalists use the concept of “corona-possession” (*koronabesie*) considering the worldwide lockdown and other safety measures as an analogy to being possessed by evil spirits. Most of them do not deny that some epidemic exist, but perceive it as an “ordinary infection” backed with a “disinformation”, or as a “psychobiological occupation”⁶². Measures taken by state to ensure social distancing and stay-at-home policies represent the real threat in their eyes. Sergii Aliev labelled Covid-19 as a “hoax” saying that “there is no threat of coronavirus; there is a pandemic of fear created with the help of the mass media”⁶³. Fundamentalists do not trust testing, assuming that via tests people get infected.

Suspending public worship was less important for fundamentalists, because many of them do not attend mainstream church services, considering the hierar-

59 Cf. Vladimir Legoyda (2020). *Telegram*. May 12. See: <https://t.me/vladimirlegoyda>

60 Cf. Vesti (2020). Tserkov i mir. Broadcast of 30.05.2020. Ekaterina Gracheva asks questions. *Vesti*. May 30. See: https://vera.vesti.ru/video/show/video_cid/2152528

61 Cf. Novaya gazeta. (2020). Kogda RPTs perestala byt tserkoviyu? Strim s Andreem Kuraevym. *Novaya gazeta*. May 10. See: <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/10/85321-kogda-rpts-pe-restala-byt-tserkovyu-strim-s-andreem-kuraevym>

62 Cf. Andrei Saveliev (2020). Beseda 58. Koronavirus. Sotsialno-ekonomicheskie posledstviya. *Live*. March 24. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSWDei9z204>; Pryamoi efir s Andreevym Kormoukhinyam. Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov. *DSS*. April 6. See: https://vk.com/video-53664310?z=video-53664310_456240982%2Fpl_-53664310_-2; Cf. Vladimir Kvachkov (2020/2). Koronavirus, Trump, biologicheskoe oruzhie, tsifrovoi kartser. *Svobodnaya pressa*. April 29. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ni6h-Pos8A>

63 Cf. Aliev Sergii (2020). vystupil v zashchitu skhiigumena Sergiya (Romanova). Pervyi mezhdunarodnyi pozitivnyi portal. May 1st. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oprvaOPall>

chy contaminated by heresies. Fundamentalist leaders are commonly lay; clerics openly confessing fundamentalist ideas mostly come to odds with the hierarchy and eventually become suspended, dismissed, or excommunicated. Schemahegumen Daniil (in that time – Fr. Veniamin Filippov) was defrocked as early as in 2008; Schemahegumen Sergii Romanov – in July 2020 as a direct consequence of his video appeals in the period of the lockdown. Nevertheless, fundamentalist media also compared closing churches for public worship with the Soviet policy of state-imposed atheism. In their opinion, the ecclesiastical lockdown was not just distressing the believers, but proved that contemporary Russia, like the Soviet Union, was a godless state.⁶⁴

The Website “Moscow the Third Rome” commented on the news that the church space on the territory of a hospital in Kiev was utilized as an improvised workshop to sew protective overalls:

“We all remember how in the Soviet time the militant godless were closing churches to turn them into granaries, workshops, plants, theatres and the like. Well, those godless, god-fighting times are returning, the only difference is that desecrating the holy takes place not because of the orders of mundane authorities, but with direct blessing from the hierarchy”⁶⁵.

Colonel Kvachkov symbolically returned to anti-Church invectives of the Soviet period about the “poison” of mundane authorities by saying that “until we get rid of inner parasites who are ruling us, we will not cope with the other parasites”⁶⁶. According to Aleksei Dobychin, suspending public worship and other lockdown measures proved that mundane authorities “are satanic... and the Church is led by the servants of the antichrist, which are both involved in a symphony with god-fighting authorities in order to deprive people of the sacraments”⁶⁷.

Fundamentalist speakers present what they see as satanic measures as a free decision of the ecclesiastical leaders; the latter, thus, become much less victims than perpetrators of the lockdown. They parallel the non-commemorating of today with the non-commemorating believers of the 1920s-1940s, who did not accept

64 Cf. Skhiigumen Sergii Romanov (2020/2). Gde vera v chistote – tam net raskola / Sredneural'skii zhenskii monastyr. *Vsevolod Moguchev*. June 19. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9NabgOOnNo>

65 Cf. Moskva – Tretii Rim (2020). Tsekh v pomeshchenii krama... Kak v starye «dobrye» bezbozhnye vremena. *Moskva – Tretii Rim*. April 11. See: <https://3rm.info/main/79675-ceh-v-po-meshchenii-hrama-kak-v-starye-dobrye-bezbozhnye-vremena.html>

66 Vladimir Kvachkov (2020/1). Koronavirus operatsiya mirovoi zakulisy Chipirovanie. *Andreyiz1946*. March 25. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK8-R_JrUU

67 Cf. Aleksei Dobychin (2020). Kreml rasprostranyaet koronavirus... Khramy pusty – v metro anshlag. *3rm*. April 17. See: <https://3rm.info/main/79754-kreml-nachal-rasprostranenie-koronavirusa-hramy-pusty-v-metro-anshlag-aleksej-dobychin-video.html>

Metropolitan Sergii's decision of the year 1927 about loyalty to the Soviet government.⁶⁸ Some speakers draw public attention to the aforementioned issue of insufficient solidarity of Orthodox parishes. Andrei Kormoukhin reminded that in most churches worshippers do not live like one big family, and that the suspending of public divine services would inevitably mean further "atomization" of the believer.⁶⁹ Andrei Saveliev also suggested that the purpose of a lockdown might be to sow seeds of division and the further destruction of a society.⁷⁰

Fundamentalists do neither interpret the Patriarch's instructions about the wiping of liturgical spoons with ethanol and burning used liturgical cloths in terms of the attempt to suppress the folk forms of religiosity, nor as an invitation to an open discussion about Christian ecclesiology. Unlike some Islamic radicals, fighting against culturally specific rituals, Orthodox fundamentalists do not object vernacular traditions and rites. The attempt to examine these reasons, would lead far be beyond the scope of this chapter; the author suggests that both fundamentalists and traditionalists envision vernacular rituals as representing the authentic Orthodox tradition.⁷¹ New types of the communion pose a proof of the hierarchy's apostasy for the fundamentalists and would therefore fulfil their deepest fears. "How can one be infected through the [liturgical] spoon from Christ; is not this assumption itself the *real* blasphemy against the Holy Ghost?" – Fr. Sergii (Romanov) asks rhetorically, referring to *Matthew*, 12.31.⁷² Actually, here fundamentalists are more consistent than official speakers, emphasizing that not only the Blood and Body of Christ, but also their mediators (spoons and chalices) cannot be contagious.

Unprecedented measures taken by authorities in Moscow and some other big cities, such as the introduction of digital passes containing QR-codes for all people intending to leave their homes by car or public transport, except for work, or instant blocking of city transportation passes for all people older than 65, confirmed the long expected fears of the fundamentalists. For many decades they struggled against all forms of control over individuals and families: from mandatory vaccina-

68 Cf. Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh (2020). V podderzhku skhiig. Sergiya. Ch. 2. Obrashchenie k russkomu narodu. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. July 28. See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pqj_-liL4A&list=PL8i7s8NjzFNNwoFmB4tvdHcI\]6U4RD4fG&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pqj_-liL4A&list=PL8i7s8NjzFNNwoFmB4tvdHcI]6U4RD4fG&index=1)

69 Cf. Pryamoi efr s Andreem Kormoukhiny. Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov. *DSS*. April 6. See: https://vk.com/videos-53664310?z=video-53664310_456240982%2Fpl_-53664310_-2

70 Cf. Saveliev (2020).

71 The author's field research shows that fundamentalists are mostly neophytes, born in average Soviet families; their first encounter with Orthodoxy in most cases happened via senior relatives living in villages.

72 Skhiigumen Sergii Romanov (2020/1). Pandemiya neveriya. Ne propoved Srednii Put. May 26. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KySJRYBFfe-8>

tion to the introduction of machine-readable identity cards.⁷³ Fundamentalists see these innovations in the light of the apocalypse. Schemahegumen Daniil (Filippov) declared that passes with QR-codes contained 666 (Number of the Beast) and were nothing but “a mark in their right hand or in their forehead” (*Rev.* 13.16); he also referred to some prophecies of the 18th century about “cards” without people would not be allowed to travel.⁷⁴ The same was the fundamentalist’s understanding of the government’s demands to prefer electronic money instead of cash for sanitary reasons (some web-stores discontinued all payment opportunities except plastic cards) and assessed this measurements as a sign for the apocalypse: «and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark» (*Rev.* 13.17). Fundamentalists suggested that public health concerns were just a pretext for a total digitalization of humanity to subjugate it then to the power of antichrist:

“there is no pandemic, but there are deliberately made up data everywhere in the world; under this cloak they try to organize the world’s electronic concentration camp that will have to be headed by the world ruler, the antichrist”⁷⁵; “the pandemic needs to digitalize all people in the world, it is not that digitalization helps to avoid the pandemic”⁷⁶.

It was important that lockdown in Russia became known as «self-isolation», because this approach implies a voluntary subjugation to the antichrist: Fr. Daniil (Filippov) compared those who obeyed the regulations with Judas, tacitly referring to “Satan entered into him” (*John*, 13.27).⁷⁷

Speakers more traditionalist or rather conservative than the fundamentalists, such as Andrei Kormoukhin, stressed that they were “not against technologies”, but opposed (mis)using them to control people’s behaviour.⁷⁸ Kormoukhin, never-

73 See: Kathy Rousselet (2015). *Religiya i sovremennye tekhnologii, ili protivorechivoe mirovo-zrenie pravoslavnykh khristian*. In J. Kormina, A. Panchenko and S. Shtyrkov (Eds.). *Izobrenenie religii: desekuliarizatsiia v postsovetском kontekste*. St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta, pp. 46–62.

74 Cf. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh* (2020). *Predatelstvo Khrista i tshifrovye propuska*. Chast 1. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. April 17. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT55Au3w6gs&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwoFmB4tvdHclJ6U4RD4fG&index=6>

75 Cf. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh* (2020). *Predatelstvo Khrista i tshifrovye propuska*. Chast 2. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. April 17. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf5ZQC-kRAw&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwoFmB4tvdHclJ6U4RD4fG&index=5>

76 Cf. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh* (2020). *Predatelstvo Khrista i tshifrovye propuska*. Chast 2. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. April 17. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf5ZQC-kRAw&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwoFmB4tvdHclJ6U4RD4fG&index=5>

77 *Ib.*

78 Cf. *Vkontakte* (2020). *Pryamoi efir s Andreem Kormoukhinym. Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov. VKontakte*. April 8. See: https://vk.com/videos-53664310?z=video-53664310_456240982%2Fpl_53664310_-2

Image 4: Colonel Ret. Vladimir Kvachkov with Schemahegumen Sergii (Romanov).



URL: <https://sun9-44.userapi.com/JEurilNfXohk7dekiDUXSg-CaE5sD1dSum8CvRw/ewwXDFzeUGg.jpg>.

theless, agreed that the digitalization and the subsequent “dehumanization” paved the way to the coming of the antichrist.⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the fundamentalists in Russia generally are keen in utilizing new technologies.⁸⁰ Even those who formally withdrew themselves from the world demonstrate a perfect knowledge of the latest mundane developments; they obviously watch TV and use the Internet, moreover, most of their propaganda is done on the web.

79 Pryamoi efir s Andreem Kormoukhinyim. Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov. DSS. April 8. See: https://vk.com/videos-53664310?z=video-53664310_4562409999%2Fpl_-53664310_-2

80 Mitrofanova, 2014, p. 97f.

Many fundamentalists speak about the pandemic using an overly “scientific” language; this can partly be explained by the fact that they were often educated in spheres like engineering and technologies.⁸¹ This is one example of that behaviour:

“The vaccine will contain nanocomponents-chips based on “smart dust” working principle, to be activated by external electromagnetic radiation. At any moment this radiation can be turned on with the help of mobile masts, and people will rave or die en masse”⁸².

As soon as the authorities announced that Covid-inflicted restrictions would be lifted only after inventing a vaccine, fundamentalists resided to picturing vaccination as another step to the universal antichristian dictatorship: they claimed that vaccine injections would be used to introduce microchips, or “liquid chips” into people’s bodies.⁸³ “Moscow the Third Rome” warned in an editorial article that

“as we used to say, the coronavirus is a worldwide act of sabotage conducted by the new world government of the antichrist [...] the vaccine will become that very lethal agent in the body of every vaccinated person, using every moment it can to control an individual physically and mentally, or even kill him/her”⁸⁴.

Some fundamentalist speakers, mostly those who withdrew into closed communities, envisioned the lockdown, vaccination and subsequent “chipping” as clear signs that the great tribulation is nigh (*Matthew*, 24.21-22) and expected to be universally hated and even killed.⁸⁵ Fr. Daniil (Filippov) said: “it is strange, of course, but we have probably reached the times described in the [book of] Revelation”⁸⁶.

81 Andrei Saveliev graduated in Physics; Aleksei Dobychin - in Computing; Andrei Kormukhin was initially a student of Physics and Math; See: Anastasia V. Mitrofanova (2008). *Natsionalizm i paranauka*. In Marlene Laruelle (Ed.). *Russkii natsionalizm. Sotsialnyi i kulturnyi kontekst*. Moscow: NLO, pp. 87-104.

82 Cf. Moskva – Tretii Rim (2020). Antikhrista gotovyat k prezentatsii miru... V Britanii predlozhili dlya borby s Covid-19 sozdat mirovoe pravitelstvo. *Moskva – Tretii Rim*. March 28. See: <https://3rm.info/main/79516-antikhrista-gotovjat-k-prezentatsii-miru-v-britanii-predlozhili-dlja-borby-covid-19-sozdat-mirovoe-pravitelstvo.html>

83 Cf. Saveliev (2020).; Cf. Kvachkov (2020/2).

84 Cf. Moskva – Tretii Rim (2020). Antikhrista gotovyat k prezentatsii miru... V Britanii predlozhili dlya borby s Covid-19 sozdat mirovoe pravitelstvo. *Moskva – Tretii Rim*. March 28. See: <https://3rm.info/main/79516-antikhrista-gotovjat-k-prezentatsii-miru-v-britanii-predlozhili-dlja-borby-covid-19-sozdat-mirovoe-pravitelstvo.html>

85 Cf. Moskva – Tretii Rim (2020). Tserkov ne dolzhna podchinyatsya gosudarstvu... O zaprete na bogoslužheniya v svyazi s koronavirusom. *Moskva – Tretii Rim*. March 15. See: <https://3rm.info/main/79374-cerkov-ne-dolzha-podchinyatsya-gosudarstvu-o-zaprete-na-bogoslužheniya-v-svjazi-s-koronavirusom.html>

86 Cf. Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh (2020). Predatelstvo Khrista i tshifrovye propuska. Chast 1. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. April 17. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT55Au3w6gs&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwoFmB4tvdHclJ6U4RD4fG&index=6>

Alternatively, people, involved into socio-political activism are less pessimistic; they described the worldwide lockdown more in geopolitical terms as a “special operation” against Russia, or “command and stuff exercises of those who rule the world behind the scenes to gain full control over humanity”⁸⁷. Analogies between World War II and the corona-crisis are common. Fr. Sergii (Romanov) stated that vaccination and chipping would in the perspective lead to the world “fascist regime”⁸⁸. More direct connection was offered by Fr. Daniil (Filippov), who suggested that the lockdown was imposed (presumably, by the clandestine world government) “first, to occupy the resources of the other side and to feed its own people [...] then to provide a sort of reason for living; this is how the Germans did during the second world war”⁸⁹. These dangers, although staged by satanic forces, were still located in the earthly domain and can be fought back.

Apart from Easter, the lockdown in Russia did not let the people celebrate properly the Victory Day (May 9th), that was usually celebrated in a unique place as a national holiday equally important for the state and for many families whose ancestors either fell on battlefields, or returned to their homes as decorated heroes. Suspending the public V-day celebrations and introducing virtual fests instead of it, could be easily understood in terms of no-victory, or “defeat” and has led fundamentalists to comparing the generation of war heroes with the contemporary generation of cowards ready to do everything for the sake of their individual health.⁹⁰

Sergii Aliev has sponsored the printing and placement of 250 posters throughout Yekaterinburg in the night before Victory Day, reading:

“June 22nd 1941! Our grandfathers left their homes to die without fear for the sake of grandchildren! May 9th, 2020 – Day of the Great Victory! Grandchildren are sitting at home, afraid of “cow virus” [wordplay in Russian: *korona – korova*, cow] and worried about their lives”.

Explaining his action, Aliev renounced virtual celebration as “betrayal” and emphasized that he wanted not just to congratulate veterans, but also to say excuses.⁹¹

87 Cf. Kvachkov (2020/1).

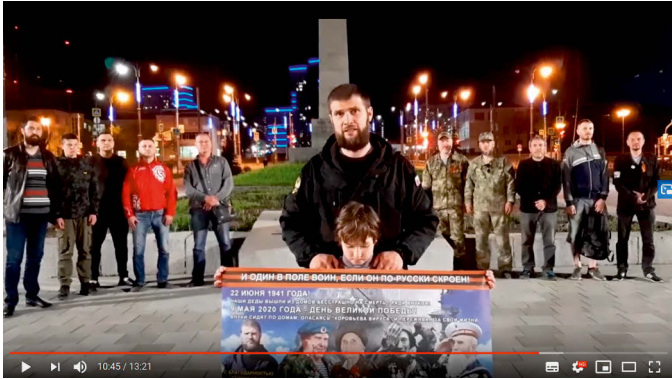
88 Cf. Sergii Romanov (2020).

89 Cf. Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh (2020). V podderzhku skhiig. Sergiya. Ch. 2. Obrashchenie k russkomu narodu. *Dvizhenie nepominaushchikh. Analitika sobytii*. July 28. See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pq\]__-liL4A&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwo_FmB4tv-dHcl\]6U4RD_4fG&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pq]__-liL4A&list=PL8i7s8Nj2FNNwo_FmB4tv-dHcl]6U4RD_4fG&index=1)

90 Cf. Saveliev (2020).

91 Cf. Pervyi mezhdunarodnyi pozitivnyi portal (2020). Dorogie veterany: Prostite nas! Ispravimsya! S Dnem Pobedy! 9 maya 2020 g. *Pervyi mezhdunarodnyi pozitivnyi portal*. May 8. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc3eJA6pD1c>

Image 5: Aliev, with his son, friends and supporters congratulates war veterans in the evening of May 8th and asks them for forgiveness.



URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc3eJA6pD1c>

Aliev and those who joined his well wishes also promised to do right, which shows how emotionally powerful events such as the V-Day are. They lead not just for to unpleasant comparisons to war heroes, but might also be misused as a source of strength in view of the pandemic. Some fundamentalists envision the world crisis as a breeding ground for some radical changes that would result in Russia's transformation into an Orthodox monarchy.⁹² «I am very happy that all this occurs... It has become clear that the present state is a structure fully alien to us [...] it is anti-Orthodox, it is anti-Muslim», Colonel Kvachkov said⁹³. “Let us prepare for the moment when we have to take Russia into our hands [...] let us pray, God will give another tsar to us”, Aleksei Dobychin concluded optimistically.⁹⁴

In order to avoid legal consequences, fundamentalists are evasive in specifying how exactly this change may happen. “We are not revolutionaries, we cannot seize power by force, we have no right to do so, it is the way of Satanists”, Kormoukhin

92 More about monarchy as a fundamentalist political project can be found in Tatiana Chumakova (2013). *Predstavlenie o tsarskoi vlasti v srede sovremennykh pravoslavnykh marginalov*. *Vestnik SPBGU*. Serii 6, No. 3, 61-65.; Maija Turunen (2007). *Orthodox monarchism in Russia: is religion important in the present-day construction of national identity?* *Religion, State and Society* 35, No. 4, 319-334.

93 Cf. Kvachkov (2020/2).

94 Cf. Dobychin (2020).

said.⁹⁵ Kvachkov recommended his followers to appeal to God, because “now such infernal, satanic forces [...] act against Russians and the other indigenous peoples of Russia that we will not cope without appealing to the light, the heavenly forces”⁹⁶. The most radical measures were offered by Andrei Saveliev in view of a sabotage of the self-isolation and the vaccination.⁹⁷ Fr. Sergii (Romanov) even called the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Patriarch Kirill to hand over their power to him and promised to restore the order in Russia in three days.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, he provided no plans how he expected to achieve it.

Conclusion

The pandemic of Covid-19 has brought both challenges and opportunities for the Russian Orthodox Church; the balance between the two remains so far unclear. The pandemic caused no specific challenges for the Orthodox communities in Russia, but exacerbated and visualized many longstanding and previously suppressed problems. These problems came to be of equal importance for all political platforms within the Church, including people who are usually absolutely loyal towards the ecclesiastical leaders, and in view of laity and clergy.

The author was able to identify several themes which were important for the Orthodox public in the period of the lockdown:

- a) Insufficient solidarity in parishes, “sacral individualism” of believers and the prevalence of non-parish forms of communication, including political groupings (e.g. fundamentalist networks).
- b) Deep distrust towards the hierarchy as a mutual element of all political platforms; even loyal members of the Church remain supportive of the Patriarch personally, but not with regard to the bishops. Liberals and fundamentalists are the last groups that trust both, the ecclesiastical and the mundane authorities.
- c) A fragmentary vision of faith practices, a lack of a common understanding in terms of changeable and unchangeable religious practices and the difference

95 Cf. VKontakte (2020). Pryamoi efr s Andreem Kormoukhinym. Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov. *VKontakte*. April 6. See: https://vk.com/videos-53664310?z=video-53664310_456240982%2Fpl_-53664310_-2

96 Cf. Kvachkov (2020/2).

97 Cf. Saveliev Andrei (2020). Vot vsyo i proyasnilo. Zamysel koronavirussei oboznachihsya v detalyakh. *YouTube*. May 21. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW3lPdsdjfk>

98 Cf. Skhiigumen Sergii Romanov (2020/3). Komu prinadlezhit vlast v Rossii? Predlozhenie dlya prezidenta Vladimira Putina. July 12. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eydP556eu4&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1Tb38j6PXJ25X_dG-Z76sW4AxF5URVpfKXypdRo_d4fOHSQkJVjy2Bt4U

between “vernacular” and “genuine” ecclesiastical tradition. In sum, disagreements about religious practices led to further decreases of solidarity and the emergence of antagonistic groups within the Church.

Fundamentalists, similar to the other inner-church ideological groups, did not raise new issues, but continued discussing sensitive longstanding problems in their own religious-political language, hastily adjusted to the new situation of the pandemic. What makes them specific is their combined critique on both the hierarchy and mundane authorities, represented by the Patriarch and the President of Russia respectively. At the same time, fundamentalist speakers carefully avoid direct political statements, at least in public, and it remains unclear how they intend to achieve a political and ecclesiastical “regime change”.

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