

CHAPTER 12

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion in Latvia

Anita Stasulane

Daugavpils University

Abstract

This chapter examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social and religious life in a country with a low level of religiosity. In Latvia, the pandemic caused a sharp division of society, not only into vaxxers and anti-vaxxers but also into believers and non-believers. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic showed clearly the rise of religious fundamentalists among Christians. The divergent positions of church leaders led to equally diverse positions of congregation members within one religious organisation. The chapter presents general restrictions and the main events related to religion during the pandemic in Latvia. It explains the public debate about the restrictions imposed on religious services. Although religious organisations encouraged their members to comply with the epidemiological security requirements introduced in the country, the restrictive rules were often violated. The media, upon receiving information from people about breaches of restrictions on the part of religious organisations, focused on these breaches, thus causing a strong resonance in the public. The chapter analyses how

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the COVID-19 pandemic affected life of religious people in Latvia. In conclusion, it explains the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on secularisation/desecularisation processes in Latvia.

Introduction

The Latvian Constitution (Article 99) declares that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, emphasising that the church shall be separate from the state. The Law on Religious Organizations allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs to protect the democratic structure of the state, national security, public safety or order, and the health and morals of other persons (Article 18). Thus, the legal system of Latvia is facing the dilemma of modern constitutional democracies: how to observe the principle of equality without infringing the entitlement to rights (for details see Balodis 2009). According to the Law on Religious Organisations (Article 8), religious organisations should be registered in the Register of Religious Organisations. However, currently ‘we must speak not only about their registration, but about special recognition of particular religious organisations by the State, which is not related to the registration institute’ (Balodis 2009, 13). Among the religious organisations registered in Latvia, a special legal status has been granted to the eight religious communities mentioned in the Civil Law (Article 51): the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Latvian Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Judaists. These religious communities listed in the Civil Law adopted in 1937 enjoy certain privileges; for example, they have the right to teach religious practices at school and privileges to perform marriages with civil validity (Statsulane 2023).

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, there were no COVID-19 cases in Latvia. The rapid spread of infection raised concerns, and Latvia followed the lead of other countries and also developed strict restrictive measures to protect public health. Initially, the spread of COVID-19 in Latvia was related to the intensive mobility between countries, which led to the first case of COVID-19 being confirmed on 2 March 2020. To contain the spread of the COVID-19 infection, the Latvian government declared a national emergency on 12 March 2020 and introduced restrictions concerning crossing the

state border and public assembly: classroom education was discontinued in all educational institutions and public events, including religious ones, were prohibited.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, states of emergency in Latvia were declared from 12 March to 9 June 2020, from 9 November 2020 to 7 February 2021, and from 21 October to 15 November 2021. The pandemic reached the critical threshold during its third wave: the health care system was overloaded, there were more than 3,000 new infections per day, and mortality increased notably (Mozgis 2023). The state of emergency declared owing to the spread of COVID-19 was lifted on 1 March 2022, and many epidemiological safety requirements were also eased on the same date, although new cases of the infection were still being detected (Mozgis 2023).

Setting the Context

When addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion in Latvia, the low level of religiosity of the population should be considered. In the population censuses (2000, 2011, 2021) conducted after Latvia regained independence in 1991, questions about religious belonging, religious identity, or religiousness were not included. According to the annual reports of the Ministry of Justice, among the 1.9 million population of Latvia, there are about 30 religious organisations/churches (Tieslietu ministrija 2022a). This religious landscape is characterised by the presence of a variety of Christian denominations and other religions (Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), as well as new religious movements (Stasulane 2017). In terms of the number of congregations, Latvia is dominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (292 congregations) and the Roman Catholic Church (268), followed by the Orthodox Church (133) and the Pomorian Old-Orthodox Church of Latvia (72). Among various branches of Protestantism, the largest number of congregations is registered for Seventh-day Adventists (51), Baptists (21), and Methodists (12). Other religious organisations have been registered in 294 communities (Tieslietu ministrija 2022b); however, many 'minority religions' are officially registered as cultural, educational, charity, and healing centres because of the complicated registration process requested by the Law on Religious Organizations. Among the religious organisations registered in Latvia, eight religious communities have been given special legal status

under the Civil Law (Article 51): the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Latvian Orthodox Church, the Old Believers, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and believers in Moses (Jews). These religious communities enjoy particular privileges, as determined by the Civil Law that was adopted in 1937: the right to provide religious instruction in schools and the right to perform marriages with civil validity.

Because the number of believers provided to the Ministry of Justice by the religious organisations themselves also includes nominal adherents, it was concluded that ‘belonging without believing’ exists in Latvia (Kiope, Runce, and Stasulane 2020, 149). Latvian society is moving down the path to secularisation. Data on religious affiliation of respondents in Latvia are collected in all major international comparative surveys: the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study (EVS), the World Values Survey (WVS), and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). The biggest drawback currently is the lack of fresh data, as the latest ESS and EVS data, as well as those from the ISSP special ‘Religion’ survey, are only available for 2008. These data show that only 5.85 per cent of the population attend religious services (apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings) at least once a week (EVALUE 2008), i.e. only a small proportion of people who consider themselves to be religious engage in religious practices.

Legal Aspects

The Responses by Religious Communities to the Restrictions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, neither religious leaders nor the mass media in Latvia mentioned the WHO’s practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19 (WHO 2020). Overall, neither Christian denominations nor ‘minority religions’ contested the state-imposed regulations restricting public events but instead showed understanding towards these regulations and assumed responsibility for complying with them. Websites of congregations or blogs by clergy called on people to be responsible during the pandemic and explained the restrictive measures concerning religious events in the church more clearly than government documents did. For example, the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church published the following call:

First, please remember that the COVID-19 threat is real. People fall ill and die. Congregation members and pastors fall ill. People become infected in the church during a service. Unfortunately, it was in our congregations that the most recent case of infection occurred. We cannot say anymore that infection does not spread in churches. Let this mobilise us for responsible attitude and serious action. (LELB 2022)

This call was followed by clear, itemised rules to be complied with in the church and during religious events.

Although religious organisations called on their members to comply with the epidemiological security requirements introduced in the country, the restrictive rules were often violated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, police initiated several investigations of administrative offences concerning failure to satisfy the epidemiological security requirements by religious organisations. The highest number of infringements was found in the 'New Generation' Church of Evangelical Christians, in which, in the period up to March 2021, 18 investigations of administrative offences were commenced in relation to identified infringements (TV3.lv 2021b).

The Public Debates on Religion in the Context of the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the public debate in Latvia focused on the restrictions to be complied with in cultural institutions, whereas the public did not pay particular attention to the restrictions targeted at religious organisations. The media, upon receiving information from people about infringements on the part of religious organisations, focused on these infringements, thus causing social resonance.

Following Easter 2020, discussions were raised in Liepāja (population approximately 67,000), where 19 cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed. The local newspaper *Kurzemes Vārds* came into possession of a video of around 45 people leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church under the cover of night. The newspaper publication fuelled discussions on non-compliance by believers with gathering restrictions imposed by the state since the emergency had been declared in Latvia, under which public services were prohibited and believers were asked to pray at home. However, attending church individually was allowed provided that the rules were followed: no more than 25 people

could be present in the church at any one time, and they had to keep a distance of two metres between each other. Although the pastor of the congregation was aware that the restrictions had to be respected, he explained that:

[T]he church is practically open, and nobody is asked to leave after entering it. But no services to which the congregation has been invited take place. Another thing is that we ask those who have come to prayer and have received the sacrament to leave. The flow of people is like this: you enter the church through one door and leave it through the side door. (Kupčs 2020)

Latvian Radio found that the mayor of Liepāja had also attended the church. He confessed that approximately 50 people had been present during the service. The mayor's explanation for his presence during the service was as follows: 'My prayer to God is private when I pray for people of Liepāja, Liepāja itself and the country at this time of the pandemic' (Kupčs 2020). Latvian Radio commented that, according to the mayor, praying together is the best weapon to fight the virus (Kupčs 2020). Following the publication of the information in *Kurzemes Vārds*, the pastor was indignant about it and pointed out that the journalist would not escape divine judgement. Legal entities were subject to a fine of up to €5,000 for the breach of restrictions.

In November 2021, when Latvia was hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'New Generation' Church of Evangelical Christians appeared in the view of the State Police. The 'New Generation', contrary to restrictions imposed by the state and police warnings, continued defying the epidemiological security requirements by organising religious face-to-face events and failing to take account of the maximum number of people. Since the spring, police had warned both the community leader, Aleksejs Ledjajevs, and other responsible persons several times, inviting them to comply with the epidemiological restrictions, but the 'New Generation' did not show any understanding and continued to violate the rules (TVNET/LETA 2021).

The breaches of restrictions during the funeral of a Catholic priest in November 2021 were found when a funeral video was placed on the social network FB by a participant at the event. The local television ReTV prepared a story about the breaches (ReTV 2021). According to the restrictions, funerals were allowed to be held outdoors only with the participation of a maximum of 20 mourners. Journalists urged

police to commence an investigation of the matter, since the priest's funeral had been organised in church with the participation of approximately 60 people, and some clergymen were not wearing face masks. When explaining the position of the Roman Catholic Church, Viktors Skulpins, president of the Bishops' Conference of Latvia, stated: 'Each congregation as a legal entity is responsible for complying with these restrictions. We believe that clergymen will try their best to apply these rules and will also encourage believers to do so. In the case of an infringement, the respective clergymen should be talked to' (ReTV 2021). The public debate on social media revealed that priests' attitude towards the nationally imposed restrictions varied. The comments made on FB show that some of them did not participate in the funeral because of the stringent restrictions introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19, but others praised those who found the courage to disregard the restrictions and attend the funeral.

Sometimes the issue of the permissive approach towards religious organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic taken by the Ministry of Justice of Latvia came to the fore during the public debate. When the mass media brought the issue of the breaches at the Catholic priest's funeral to public attention, a representative of the Ministry of Justice tried to indirectly justify the clergymen's actions. The issue that provoked public debate was the extension of the 'green' and 'red' regimes to religious organisations: the Minister of Justice invited the government to allow clergymen to perform their duties without having the vaccination or recovery certificate and to also allow believers to attend services during the 'red' regime (Puriņa 2021), although the government had taken a decision stating that, as of 15 December 2021, all those engaged in the provision of face-to-face services had to be vaccinated against COVID-19. That included all the staff of religious organisations who had direct contact with customers; that is, services had to take place in the 'green' regime only.

Towards Measuring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion

The Latvian Council of Science launched a call for proposals within the framework of the National Research Programme 'Reducing the COVID-19 Effects'. The programme was aimed at limiting the spread of the COVID-19 infection and protecting the population through the

implementation of innovative, properly designed projects to get economic activity back on track and restore socially active day-to-day life. Three thematic areas were defined in accordance with the aim of the programme: (a) health care and public health; (b) engineering solutions; and (c) the economy and public well-being. The projects that received funding as a result of the call for proposals were not aimed at investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion. Since the only way to get funding for research in Latvia is participation in calls for proposals, Latvian researchers have not succeeded in raising funds to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion.

Researchers at Riga Stradiņš University touched upon the aspect of religion indirectly in the project 'The Impact of COVID-19 on the Health Care System: Experience and Future Solutions' within the National Research Programme. The study concludes that the management of medical institutions appreciated and sought to enhance the psychosocial support provided by hospital chaplains to medical staff during the pandemic (Behmane et al. n.d.). Study data suggest that, out of all respondents (n = 2608), work (24 per cent), hobbies (19.3 per cent), and family (19.1 per cent) were reported as the best support during the pandemic, while the roles of belief in God (6.9 per cent), prayers (5.3 per cent), and meditation (3.1 per cent) were considerably smaller (Rancāns and Mārtinsone 2021, 36).

Laws Implemented in Response to the Pandemic

Latvia's population had not been affected by any outbreaks of infectious diseases for a long time, so the COVID-19 pandemic caught the population and legislators alike unprepared. Latvia has no legislation directly regulating activities of religious organisations during a pandemic or a natural disaster. Obviously, legislators hope that there will be no new pandemic in Latvia in the near future; hence, they are not working on drafting any legislation that could govern social life, including the religious life, in the event of any future spread of infectious diseases.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saeima (Parliament) of the Republic of Latvia adopted the Law on the Management of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection (Saeima 2020a), which stipulated that the Cabinet of Ministers, for epidemiological safety purposes, can determine the conditions for the operation of sites for the

performance of cultural and religious activities, entertainment, sports, and other recreational sites. The religious organisations were put on the same footing as cultural, sports, and entertainment institutions. The Consultative Council for Religious Affairs (a permanently functioning body representing religious organisations with special legal status under the Civil Law, Article 51) was convened by the Ministry of Justice to explain the restrictions affecting the activities of religious organisations and to clarify the rules for attending religious services (Tieslietu ministrija 2020).

The key legal documents laying down the epidemiological safety requirements were as follows: Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 720 'On Declaring the State of Emergency' of 9 October 2021 (Ministru 2021b) and Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 662/No. 360 'Epidemiological Safety Measures for the Containment of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection' (Ministru 2021a). The two regulations referred to the pandemic period only, and they did not endure because of regular amendments depending on incidence rates. The regulations applied to several aspects of religious practices: they restricted the number of people attending services, indirectly encouraged churches to change their rituals, and restricted access to religious services.

Regulations Concerning Specific Areas of Religious Life

Legislation relating to various aspects of religious life was changed on a regular basis during the pandemic, and it was difficult to keep track of it. Therefore, the explanatory information available in congregations had an important role to play. To provide an insight into the national epidemiological safety requirements to be satisfied by religious organisations and their members, a brief description of restrictions before and after vaccination follows.

Prior to the vaccination campaign in Latvia, the regulations concerning COVID-19 cancelled and prohibited all face-to-face public events. No more than 25 people could gather outdoors and everyone had to follow the principle of 2 + 2 (the distance of two metres between no more than two persons) in their day-to-day lives. The regulations banned private events and private gatherings, except events organised within one household. The use of a mouth and nose cover on public premises and public transport was mandatory. Funerals were allowed outdoors only and with the participation of no more than ten people

at one time (except persons directly involved in the funeral arrangements). Baptism rituals were allowed only in cases of absolute urgency, with the participation of no more than ten people at one time (except persons directly involved in the baptism arrangements). Weddings were allowed in the presence of the persons who wanted to marry and two adult witnesses. Churches could fulfil their mission from 6:00am to 8:00pm, except for Christmas Eve on 24 December and Orthodox Christmas Eve on 6 January, when they could be open for visitors until 11:00pm. A limited number of people were allowed at places of religious activity, and attendees had to arrive alone, except for members of the same household. Churches had to ensure a one-way flow of people and provide 10m² of available space per person. At any one time, a maximum of 20 per cent of the total possible number of people that the available premises and infrastructure could accommodate were allowed in a church (LV 2020).

When a certain number of people were vaccinated, the regulatory provisions concerning COVID-19 became more complex, since the requirements in relation to vaccinated persons, those who had had the virus, and unvaccinated persons varied, i.e. the 'green' and 'red' regimes were introduced. In its meeting of 9 November 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers laid down the common principles to be respected by all religious organisations. They stated that religious life could be practised in two ways: (a) by participating in publicly announced services and other religious events in the 'green', i.e. epidemiologically safe regime (only vaccinated persons and those who had had the virus and their children up to 12 years of age); or (b) by attending the church individually in the 'red' regime (e.g. upon prior agreement with a priest to confess sins and to receive communion), for up to 15 minutes at a time.

The most stringent restrictions were introduced during the third wave of the pandemic in Latvia. During the lockdown from 21 October to 14 November 2021, churches were open for individual prayers from 9:00am to 6:00pm every day, but they were closed during services and for half an hour before them. Services were held without the presence of believers. A priest was available for individual confessions and receiving communion in the church, but an appointment for performing the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick had to be made in advance by phone (Tolstovs 2021).

As of 15 November 2021, wedding ceremonies were allowed in the 'green' regime or epidemiologically safe environment if all wedding

guests were vaccinated or had had COVID-19. Wedding ceremonies could be organised indoors, where everyone had to wear a face mask and respect the distance of two metres, and a minimum of 15m² of the publicly available indoor space had to be ensured per person. The maximum number of people could be calculated based on the area of the church space. The number of people was not limited. To receive a religious service in the 'red' regime or epidemiologically unsafe environment, people had to abide by more severe restrictions (if any of the participants at the event were not vaccinated against COVID-19 or had not had COVID-19). Wedding ceremonies indoors could only be organised in the presence of the two persons to be married, two witnesses, and a clergyman, and, again, all of them had to wear a face mask and respect the distance of two metres, and a minimum of 15m² of the publicly available indoor space had to be ensured per person. Wedding ceremonies outdoors could only be organised in the presence of the two persons to be married, two witnesses, and a clergyman, and all of them had to wear a face mask and respect the distance of two metres. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice emphasised that a wedding ceremony is a public service, and therefore it has to be distinguished from a wedding event as a private event. A maximum of ten people were allowed to participate in a private event, i.e. wedding celebrations, funerals, and baptism ceremonies, held indoors; no more than 20 people were allowed at outdoor events. All of them had to wear a face mask (both indoors and outdoors) and respect the distance (Ministru 2021b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hospital chaplains were allowed to visit COVID-19 patients who wanted to receive a religious service or just meet the chaplain. Respecting the epidemiological safety measures, chaplains visited the sick who wished to pray together, asked to hold their hand if they had difficulties breathing and, therefore, were seized by fear, or asked them to call their relatives and pass on a message as they found it difficult to speak on the phone (Kinca 2021). According to observations by a female chaplain who had the experience of 16 years of service, 'In fact, those people who cultivate their spiritual lives, their relationship with God, they talk more about these eternity themes. But those people who haven't cultivated their spiritual lives, they address practical, temporal things. Inheritance matters, what has been done and what hasn't been done. That is also very good' (Kuške 2021). Importantly, chaplains also provided support to staff of medical

institutions during the pandemic, since they needed psychosocial support: during the state of emergency, medical personnel's stress, fear, agitation, alarm, and uncertainty followed an upward path. Previously, such support had not been available in all medical institutions. However, the heads of medical institutions tried to ensure assistance by a psychologist and chaplain during the pandemic (Behmane et al. n.d.).

Issues of Freedom of Religion

The prosecutor general, in response to public accusations by the state police against the 'New Generation', instructed the relevant staff in November 2021 to commence investigations concerning the 'New Generation's' compliance with the requirements of laws and regulations. Following the investigation, the prosecutor general applied to the court requesting it to terminate the 'New Generation's' activities, but the court dismissed the application (TV3.lv 2021a).

Religious organisations and their individual members did not apply to law enforcement authorities but applications addressed to the ombudsman were indirectly linked with the field of religion. These contained the concerns of Latvia's population about the decision taken by the Ethics Commission of the Latvian Medical Association, which stated that, in the event of a crisis arising during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was ethically acceptable not to treat people over 75 who had chronic diseases, or patients who were severely ill, using whatever available means may be necessary. This approach would allow a larger number of young people and those who were not seriously ill to access the therapy that might save their lives (Tiesībsargs.lv 2020).

Edgars Rinkēvičs (today president of Latvia), a representative of Latvia who participated in the ministerial session on religious freedom dedicated to the enhancement of freedom of religion and belief during the pandemic, called upon everyone not to use the COVID-19 crisis as a cover for the promotion of prejudices and discriminatory treatment based on religion or belief. He reminded Latvia that all restrictions on freedom of religion or belief had to be prescribed by law and had to be legitimate and proportionate. The minister explained that Latvia had supported several international initiatives aimed at strengthening religious freedom worldwide and at eradicating persecution related to religion or belief. To mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on religious organisations, the government of Latvia granted financial

assistance to clergymen and employees of religious orders (Rinkēvičs 2020).

Financial Support to Religious Communities

The Law on the Suppression of Consequences of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection (Saeima 2020a) did not provide for any special support to religious communities, although it granted certain minor reliefs. This law specified the deadline for submission of the annual report to the State Revenue Service (Section 23) by religious organisations and allowed ‘the transfer of the movable property (personal protective equipment, medical devices, and disinfectants) of a public person without compensation into the ownership of a religious association (church) for implementation of the epidemiological safety measures’ (Section 54). The law stipulated that ‘donations by phone of religious associations (churches) arranged during the emergency situation may be maintained also after revocation of the emergency situation, until 30 June 2021’ (Section 40).

In order to facilitate the post-pandemic recovery of the religious communities, the Cabinet of Ministers granted €236,000 to them in 2020, envisaging a €300 benefit pay-out to 394 religious ministers for a period of two months. As the benefit was only received by 135 persons who met the set criteria (social insurance contributions had to be paid for the personnel and the income of the religious organisation of the particular month had to be at least 30 per cent lower year-on-year), only €69,000 out of the funds granted were used and the remaining money was returned to the Treasury (ReBaltica.lv 2021). The following year, when the Ministry of Justice suggested the allocation of a quarter of a million euros for benefits to be granted to the personnel of religious organisations and utility payments of churches, a discussion arose on the separation between the state and the church, the political impact of the church, the fair distribution of funding across all the religious organisations, and the spending of taxes paid by the secular part of the population on the needs of religious organisations (Spundiņa 2021).

Sociological Aspects

Impact of the Pandemic on Religious Life

Before the pandemic, people who were not able to attend church had already been able to participate in services remotely: a channel of the public television broadcast a service held by a different Christian denomination each Sunday, and Latvian Christian Radio, Radio Maria, and Latgalian Radio broadcast services on a daily basis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, live broadcasts from churches on YouTube provided an extra option for remote participation in services. People's attitude towards participation in services in the online regime varied: some congregations broadcast services on a regular basis but others did not provide an opportunity for believers to take part in services remotely. A clergyman's skill in employing new technologies and his willingness or otherwise determined their use, e.g. a pastor of an evangelical Lutheran congregation compared online services with rubber women or non-alcoholic beer (Kupčs 2020). In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged the faithful to participate in services remotely and to release the following believers from the obligation to take part in the Mass (Code of Canon Law: Canon 87 §1, Canon 1245, and Canon 1248 §2): the elderly, those with symptoms of the infection, contact persons of the sick, and people who fear getting the infection (Romas 2020).

During the pandemic, the number of pilgrims who made their way to the principal sacred place of the Roman Catholic Church in Aglona to participate in the celebration of Our Lady of the Assumption feast day decreased significantly. In the year prior to the pandemic, around 50,000 pilgrims (TV3.lv 2019) had taken part in the services on 15 August, but epidemiological safety regulations severely limited the number of participants in 2020: up to 3,000 people (Jauns.lv 2020) were allowed to participate in the service held on the square next to the basilica (in the end, only around 1,700 people arrived) (Volka 2020), subject to the presentation of a COVID-19 certificate or a negative test result. Since pilgrims were not allowed to enter the basilica's premises, the customary procession past the Our Lady of Aglona icon did not take place. It was not only the number of pilgrims that fell but also the number of pilgrim groups organised by congregations. In 2019,

33 pilgrim groups arrived in Aglona (Komare 2019), but that number decreased to only 17 in 2021 (KABIA 2021).

Changes in Religious Behaviour

More extensive data-based studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on secularisation or desecularisation processes in Latvia should be carried out. Examining the reports on activities of religious organisations in 2019, 2020, and 2021 (at the time of writing this chapter, no data on 2022 are yet available) drawn up by the Ministry of Justice, it can be concluded that the number of marriages has mainly decreased in all largest denominations of Latvia: from 748 to 589 and 493 in congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, from 719 to 559 and 462 in congregations of the Roman Catholic Church, from 118 to 96 and 102 in the Union of Baptist Churches in Latvia and from 77 to 43 and 52 in congregations of the Latvian Orthodox Church (Tieslietu 2020, 2021, 2022c).

In Latvia, a funeral feast, organised by Latvians either at the home of the deceased or in catering establishments (cafés or restaurants), usually follows the funeral. By contrast, Russians sometimes honour the deceased by having a light meal at the cemetery or close to it. Until the outbreak of the pandemic, Latvians considered this tradition unacceptable and alien to their culture; during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone had to comply with the epidemiological restrictions, Latvians borrowed this tradition from the Russians. The pandemic introduced new elements into the Latvian cemetery environment: a wooden table, benches, and a shelter next to the cemetery gate so that mourners could stay for a while, commemorate the deceased, and have some snacks.

The pandemic also changed the course of religious rites, e.g. Catholics put aside the sharing of the peace by shaking hands, previously practised during services. However, despite the risk of contracting the virus, the Roman Catholic Church of Latvia introduced no changes in the ritual of Holy Communion, i.e. priests continued to put communion on the tongue of the faithful rather than in the palm of the hand.

The Attitudes of Society and Religious Leaders

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted society's mixed attitude towards various denominations and religious groups. Police closely monitored activities of the 'New Generation' congregations, since people informed police on their infringements on a regular basis. Therefore, a significant number of investigations of administrative offences were initiated against this church. Meanwhile, the breaches were not taken very seriously by congregations in eastern Latvia, which was dominated by Catholicism. As shown by the example of the Roman Catholic priest's funeral, police had to respond to the story broadcast by a local TV channel about the failure to satisfy the epidemiological security requirements. However, there was an underlying assumption concerning the attitude towards the infringement that the funeral of the priest, who had served for the congregation for many years and who was highly respected, was an exceptional case. At the time of writing this chapter, the case has not yet been examined, and, according to the comments provided by a representative of a local authority during individual correspondence, the 'police are on the side of the people'.

The attitude of Latvia's religious organisations towards the epidemiological safety requirements imposed by the state and towards vaccination did not differ much, and none of them delivered their official position. By contrast, individual clergymen demonstrated a diametrically opposite attitude. Different individual attitudes were present even within one religious organisation and congregation. Determinants of the different positions were individual motives and persuasions of congregation members, but the individual position by spiritual leaders played a major role. The divergent positions of spiritual leaders led to equally diverse positions of congregation members within one religious organisation, e.g. the Cardinal Emeritus (91 years old) of the Roman Catholic Church was against vaccination, since he had heard that cells of aborted embryos were used to make vaccines (DELFI 2021). By contrast, the Riga Archbishop of the Latvian Roman Catholic Church (66 years old) was vaccinated, and he publicly called on congregation members to get vaccinated, in response to the Vatican's recommendations. The Catholic anti-vaxxers, with strongly held beliefs, did not change their position even when two Catholic priests who were prominent public figures, respected by their congregations, active and quite young (53 and 42 years of age), died from COVID-19 (Barkāns 2021).

Conclusion

The attitude of Latvia's population to public institutions as well as to the medical science polarised during the COVID-19 pandemic. The contrasting responses to the pandemic caused a division of society not only into vaxxers and anti-vaxxers but also into believers and non-believers. Non-believers followed the activities of religious communities and reported any violations of the pandemic restrictions by parishes to the mass media. Under social pressure, the public authorities closely monitored the compliance with restrictions by religious communities. This dynamic suggests that irreligious people tried to strengthen their positions during the pandemic, thus contributing to secularisation.

The formal religious affiliation annually reported to the Ministry of Justice by religious organisations has not declined considerably. However, the current observations in parishes and the decreased numbers of marriages show that the number of practising parishioners in Latvia's largest Christian denominations declined. The long-lasting physical distancing restrictions imposed during the pandemic affected the gathering habits of people, including the collective practising of religion. It can be assumed that the individual practising of religion will increase, which will contribute to the flourishing of new religious forms or else the religious practices will be abandoned.

During the pandemic, the role of the church as a provider of a well-being service strengthened, as society highly appreciated the work of chaplains with the COVID-19 patients in hospitals, where even the closest family members could not access. The servicing of chaplains in hospitals as reflected by the mass media testified to a brutal reality, helping to disperse disbelief in the existence of the virus.

The restrictions imposed in Latvia during the COVID-19 pandemic have not caused wide discussions on the violation of the principle of the religious freedom, although some religious communities found it difficult to find balance between public regulation and autonomy in the management of church life. The religious organisations managed to find theological arguments to urge the believers to comply with the restrictions in the name of the value of life and common well-being. Nevertheless, some religious leaders supported conspiracy theories, thus encouraging their parish members also to take the position of radical resistance. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the problems

of the church and the indispensable role of solidarity in crisis circumstances. All religions recognise solidarity as a value, but, obviously, it is not always successfully practised in real circumstances.

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