

CHAPTER 14

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religious Communities in Finland

Kimmo Ketola

Church Institute for Research and Advanced Training, Helsinki

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Finland at the beginning of 2020. During the pandemic the Finnish government restricted citizens' basic constitutional rights in a manner that was entirely exceptional for the post-war years. This chapter focuses on how the various measures to curb the pandemic affected religious communities and religious life in Finland. The Finnish situation was made more complex by the special relationship between the state and the two national churches, which operate under public law but are nevertheless administratively independent of the state. The various legal exemptions for religious life from state regulation meant government restrictions on public gatherings and businesses did not apply to worship and other religious gatherings. Nevertheless, the majority churches and other religious communities adhered closely to the state regulations on their own initiative. The lack of government restrictions therefore did not mean the pandemic had no effect on religious life. The article describes how the religious communities adjusted their activities in some rather drastic ways during the shutdown periods.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Finland at the beginning of 2020. In March the situation was deemed so serious that the Emergency Powers Act (1552/2011) was enforced. Finland was declared to be in a state of emergency twice during the pandemic: during the first wave, from 16 March to 15 June 2020, and the third wave, from 1 March to 27 April 2021.¹ In addition, several measures decreed in the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016) were also deployed throughout the pandemic. This meant the Finnish government restricted the basic constitutional rights of citizens in a manner that was entirely exceptional during peacetime, and especially since the 1993 constitutional reform of those rights in Finland.

During the first shutdown, in spring 2020, all schools (except for early education) and most government-run public facilities were closed, at most ten people were allowed to participate in public meetings, and people over 70 were advised to avoid all human contact if possible. In addition, outsiders were forbidden to enter hospitals and health care facilities, and plans to restrict movement across national borders were initiated. On 27 March, the borders of the region of Uusimaa were even temporarily closed until 15 April to all but work-related and other necessary traffic to avoid the spread of the virus. Several hundred police officers and the Finnish Defence Forces were deployed to guard the borders of Uusimaa to avoid the spread of the virus elsewhere. Restaurants were closed until 1 June, after which eating at restaurants and arranging sporting events were allowed with special arrangements, and the maximum attendance at public meetings was raised to 50. On 13 August, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare issued a recommendation that face masks be used in situations where contact was unavoidable. The use of masks was not enforced, however, and there were no sanctions for those who did not comply.

During the second shutdown the measures were less stringent, and they varied more between regions. The regional state administrative agencies (AVI) were responsible for deliberating the measures according to the regional situation.

The Finnish government approved its vaccination strategy in December 2020. It prioritised various risk groups and health and social care personnel but aimed at universal vaccinations. The vaccinations were organised by municipalities and offered free of charge.

The high vaccine coverage in Finland efficiently curbed serious cases, enabled the opening of the society, and kept the death rate relatively low (Tiirinki et al. 2022).

This chapter focuses on how the pandemic affected religious communities and religious life in Finland. The question addressed is how church–state relations influenced how religious communities were treated by the government and how religious activities were regulated in religious communities. Several scholars have suggested that there is a special ‘Nordic pattern’ of church–state relations that has had a deep influence on how religion is treated in legislation (see e.g. Christoffersen 2022; Ferrari 2010; Kühle et al. 2018). The pandemic provided us with an interesting ‘naturalistic experiment’ to test this claim. Were there special features, perhaps stemming from the long history of close relations between church and state, that influenced how the government treated religious communities and how religious activities were regulated during the state of emergency? To start this enquiry, it is first necessary to review the state’s legal and administrative relations with religious communities and the country’s basic demographic profile in terms of religious affiliation. Having set the structural context, the legal and sociological aspects of the situation will be examined in more depth.

Setting the Context

The legal scholar and church–state relations specialist Silvio Ferrari (2010, 2012) has identified three different European patterns of relations between states and religions. The first is based on the idea that traditional religions can still play a central role in the creation of national cohesion, providing a set of values and ideals that accompany full citizenship. This pattern is evident in some Catholic- and Orthodox-majority countries. The second, typified by the French concept of *laïcité*, is based on the opposite idea that common citizenship is built around a set of secular principles and values. The third is based on the idea of a multicultural or multireligious society in which social cohesion is founded on the multiple cultural, ethnic, and religious communities that live within the state, which limits itself to providing the legal framework for their peaceful coexistence.

Ferrari (2010) recognises that the ‘Nordic pattern’ does not fit neatly into any of these ideal types. Until recently, all the Nordic countries

had Lutheran state churches. However, since the last decades of the 20th century this system has undergone a significant transformation, characterised by the growing administrative autonomy of the majority churches in all the Nordic countries except Denmark (Kühle et al. 2018, 87–90). Ferrari considers the restructuring of church–state relations to be quite advanced, even if the Lutheran majority churches are still mentioned in all the Nordic constitutions. It is important to recognise that the process has not been driven by conflict or an overtly secularist agenda but largely by mutual interests resulting in both increased autonomy for the churches and the preservation of their special legal status. As Ferrari writes, '[t]he core of the Nordic countries experiment is the attempt to give up the special relationship of the Church with the State without giving up its special relationship with the Nation' (2010, 34).

In Finland, the most important legal structures affecting the state's relationship with religion are the reformed constitution (HE731/1999), which came into force in 2000, and the new Act on the Freedom of Religion (453/2003), which came into force in 2003. Section 11 of the constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, and section 76 guarantees the status of the majority church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) under public law. At the end of 2023, 3.6 million people in Finland belonged to the ELCF, 63.6 per cent of the total population of 5.6 million.

However, Finland also has another church governed by public law, namely the Finnish Orthodox Church (FOC), although its status is not guaranteed in the constitution. Both the ELCF and the FOC are often called 'folk churches' because of their special legal status, numerical significance, and special roles in Finnish society and history. The presence of two religious communities with special official status in a single nation state is internationally unique. In 2023 the FOC accounted for only 1% of the population, or about 53,000 people.

The Church Act (1054/1993)² and the Act on the Orthodox Church (985/2006) were passed by the parliament and are both therefore part of the public law. Despite their legal status, the national churches still have considerable internal autonomy. For example, the constitution provides that the ELCF's own legislative organ, the synod, has the sole power to make initiatives on the content and enactment of the Church Act. Parliament can only accept or reject a proposal made by the synod.

This means the state's legislative authority as enshrined by the Church Act is very restricted in Finland.

The third legal category of religious organisations consists of registered religious communities, whose purpose and forms of action are specified in section 7 of the Act on the Freedom of Religion (453/2003):

The purpose of a registered religious community is to organize and support individual, communal and public activities relating to the profession and practice of religion that are based on a creed, religious texts regarded as sacred, or another specified and established basis for activities regarded as sacred.

Registered religious communities must also meet the formal requirements of the Associations Act (503/1989). The registration system is maintained by the National Patent and Registration Board under the Ministry of Education and Culture. A minimum of 20 persons over 18 years of age are required for the founding of a registered religious community, and the applications are screened by an Expert Board of the Ministry of Education and Culture. However, it is noteworthy that the law does not make registration mandatory for the organisation of religious activities. Associations with a religious purpose and aims can also be organised under the Associations Act (503/1989) or without acquiring the organisational status of a legal person at all.

The number of registered religious communities in Finland has grown steadily throughout the 21st century. Excluding members of the ELCF and the FOC, around 100,000 people, or 1.8 per cent of Finns, belonged to a registered religious community in 2023. The largest registered religious communities at the end of 2023 were the Jehovah's Witnesses (16,000, 0.3 per cent), the Catholic Church in Finland (16,000, 0.3 per cent), the Evangelical Free Church of Finland (14,000, 0.3 per cent), and the Pentecostal Church of Finland (13,000, 0.2 per cent) (Statistics Finland 2024).

There has been a small community of Tatar Muslims in Finland since the 19th century, but immigration since the 1990s has markedly increased both the numbers and the diversity of the Muslim population in Finland (Martikainen 2020). Muslims in Finland are organised in more than 50 different registered Islamic communities, which reflects their ethnic and linguistic plurality. The total membership of the Islamic communities was about 24,000 (0.4 per cent) in 2023. However, the majority of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries

do not formally belong to any Islamic community. According to some estimates there are therefore about 130,000 Muslims in Finland (2.3 per cent of the population) (Pauha and Martikainen 2022). Similarly, most Pentecostals do not formally belong to the Pentecostal Church, and it has been estimated that their total number is about 45,000 (0.8 per cent).

About 1.9 million Finns, or 34 per cent of the population, were not members of any religious community in 2023. The figure has been steadily rising in the 21st century. The increasing share of the non-affiliated population is mainly due to people leaving the ELCF, but also to some extent to immigration.

Growing religious diversity has also led to increased interreligious cooperation. While Christian ecumenical organisations have a long history in Finland, interreligious organisations have only emerged in the 2000s. The National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE Forum) was formally established in 2011. During the pandemic the CORE Forum brought together Christians of many denominations, Muslim organisations, Jews, Buddhists, and the Latter-day Saints.³ The CORE Forum's mission is to foster peace in society by promoting interfaith dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect. It also cooperates with the public authorities, acts as an expert in religious matters, organises various events, and participates in social dialogue. The CORE Forum has issued several public statements on social issues bearing on religious matters.

Legal Aspects

The most important law during the pandemic was the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016). This specifies the measures to be taken when a pandemic threatens the whole of society. However, the powers specified by the law were often deemed inadequate, and the Act was changed at least ten times during the pandemic (Junni 2021, 367). Many of the changes concerned temporary powers to restrict passenger transport and bar and restaurant customer services, but from the beginning there also arose discussion in the parliament about whether religious events were to be included in the proposed restrictions or not.

The original proposal by the government excluded religious events from the restrictions (HE 11.9.2020). In October 2020 the Regional

State Administrative Agency (AVI) also announced that the restrictions on public gatherings did not apply to religious services:

Restrictions on gatherings imposed by the Regional State Administrative Agency shall not apply to worship services and other similar services organized by religious communities which are part of the normal religious activities of the communities, and which are held for the purpose of public practice of religion on the community's own premises or equivalent. In addition to services, these include fairs, vespers, and religious processions. The Regional State Administrative Agency has no legal authority to restrict such opportunities. (quoted by Taira 2020)

This decision was based on the Assembly Act (530/1999), in which the scope of application (section 2) states: 'This Act does not apply to official events arranged by public corporations, nor to the characteristic events of religious communities where these are arranged for the purpose of public worship in the community's own premises or in a comparable place.'

The amendments to the Communicable Diseases Act that were finally accepted during the pandemic (HE 245/2020) ruled out the possibility of restricting the organisation of religious events, such as worship services. The municipalities or the AVI would not have the right to order the space used for religious practice to be closed. The amendments did, however, include obligations for religious communities to enable necessary distancing and hand sanitation facilities during the religious events.

There were a few isolated instances that provoked some discussion regarding the restrictions in relation to freedom of religion. For example, in one Pentecostal-charismatic community in Jyväskylä 50 people were infected, and about 700 were exposed to the virus and held in quarantine after a religious service in September 2020 (Yle 2020). On the other hand, there was also a case in which the police broke up an open-air Sunday service held by a Baptist community in April 2021, despite the fact that the restrictions did not apply to religious gatherings (Kotimaa 2021). Overall, the public discussion on the issues of religious freedom during the pandemic was rather limited and the issue was brought up mainly by religious organisations (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2020), Freethinkers (Vapaa-ajattelijain liitto n.d.), and some academics (Taira 2020). There are no prominent cases of

disputes relating to breaches of religious freedom due to restrictions under the pandemic that were brought to a court of law.

It was of crucial importance that the instructions given by the AVI required the religious communities to issue their own instructions and guidelines concerning religious services and other events during the pandemic. The National Church Council of the ELCF had already issued general instructions on 2 and 12 March 2020 for preparing for the pandemic in parish activities. According to the Church Act (1054/1993) of the ELCF it was the responsibility of each diocesan chapter, at the direction of the bishop, to instruct its parishes concerning religious events during the state of emergency. For example, the bishops' instructions concerning church services were issued on 16 March, arrangements for funerals on 18 March, and religious activities outside the state of emergency on 5 and 19 May and 1 June 2020 (Bishops' Council 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). The National Church Council of the ELCF issued numerous more specific instructions for various areas of church work (e.g. Hirsto et al. 2020).

Other churches also curbed the participation in church services in similar ways. The church administration of the FOC instructed its parishes to continue services but to limit them to ten participants. Other parish activities were completely closed during the shutdown. From 1 June, services held outside were allowed, while participation continued to be limited to ten inside church buildings (Ahonen et al. n.d., 1). The Catholic Church in Finland made the participation in Mass voluntary and also urged people to participate in online services (Yle 2021a). The Pentecostal Church in Finland urged its congregations to follow government restrictions to curb the pandemic, even if they did not formally apply to religious events (Suomen helluntaikirkko 2020).

The Finnish legislation on funerals is a good example of how church and state are intertwined in their operations due to the shared cultural heritage of Lutheranism. Finnish Funeral Services Act (457/2003) decrees that maintaining public cemeteries is a statutory task of the ELCF. Thus, everyone, regardless of their faith or church membership, may be buried in cemeteries maintained by the church. The Funeral Services Act further requires the ELCF parishes to designate special, non-confessional areas in cemeteries where non-members may be buried upon request. Cemeteries can also be maintained by the FOC, local authorities, and, when authorised, other organisations and foundations. For instance, the Freethinkers' local organisations maintain

cemeteries in about ten municipalities. Nevertheless, the vast majority of graveyards are maintained by the ELCF, and around 90 per cent of Finns are still buried by the church.

Thus, the excess number of deaths incurred by the pandemic fell largely upon the ELCF to handle. The bishops' instructions on burials on March 2020 decreed that participants in burials were limited to ten but that the limit could be exceeded for special pastoral reasons. It was also recommended that the blessings to the grave be conducted at the grave site rather than indoors. When the state of emergency was lifted, the number of participants was raised to 50, again in line with the government's rulings.

In summary, it is noteworthy that the ELCF, FOC and most minority religious communities followed rather closely the rulings and recommendations made by the government concerning restrictions on public events, and the like, despite their administrative autonomy vis-à-vis the state in handling the pandemic. Nevertheless, their independent status enabled them to adjust the norms based on their own special considerations, as in the case of funerals. As one could imagine, the ten-person rule in funerals could have been cruel on occasion if it had been followed to the letter. It is not without significance that religious communities were given so much responsibility to devise their own rules. If there were any misgivings among members, the primary target for criticism was their community's own leadership, and not the government.

Sociological Aspects

The emergency conditions increased the cooperation between the public authorities and the churches in numerous ways. For instance, the national broadcasting company Yle increased the frequency of televised church services soon after the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic began. Previously, church services were shown on television on public holidays and irregularly on Sundays, about 35 services per year. During 2020 and 2021, the worship services were shown on every Sunday in addition to public holidays. The popularity of TV services was exceptionally high during the pandemic: in 2020 they had an average of 192,100 viewers, the highest number in eight years (Yle 2021b).

The government's instructions in early 2020 for people over 70 to stay at home in quarantine-like conditions was a strain on public health care. The officials in Helsinki, for instance, soon announced that they did not have adequate resources to deal with the situation, and even the mayor of Helsinki urged people to invent something new in response to the exceptional circumstances. In response, the City of Helsinki and ELCF parishes organised together a service called Helsinki Aid (Helsinki-apu) for people over 70 years old. The service was put up quickly and it started about a week after the state of emergency was declared in March 2020. Other large organisations and companies joined the operation, as well as hundreds of ordinary citizens as volunteers. By the end of August 67,902 phone calls had been made, 3,662 food bags and 2,535 acute aid bags for the poverty-stricken had been delivered, and there had been 342 medicine transports. In addition, about 700 separate chat help calls were made, organised by the ELCF in collaboration with mental health workers and minority religions (Mäenpää and Grönlund 2021).

In August 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture gave a special grant of €4.5 million to the ELCF and FOC to support parishes in their diaconal work and their ability to help people to recover from the pandemic. The ELCF's share of the special grant was €4.43 million. This was distributed to parishes according to the population of the municipalities. A total of 264 parishes received grants and together these covered all regions of Finland (Gävert and Saarela 2021).

In December 2021, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, which was responsible for the national coronavirus strategy, made a request that diaconal workers and parish facilities could be available to help public health care because of the rapidly spreading omicron variant. The ELCF responded positively to this request. There are approximately 600 health care professionals working in the parish diaconal work. According to a subsequent survey, approximately 5 per cent of diaconal workers had been involved in helping health care in, for example, in coronavirus tracking, vaccination, or customer guidance during the pandemic (Kalanti 2022, 34).

The pandemic, especially during the shutdowns in the state of emergency, also affected religious life in religious communities. The severe restrictions on public gatherings, although administered by the religious organisations themselves (see above in Legal Aspects),

affected church services, life cycle rites, youth work, and diaconal work very significantly.

The general principle of the ELCF bishops' instructions concerning church services was that services were to be held but without the physical presence of the parishioners and with no more than ten people present (Bishops' Council 2020a). The situation during the first shutdown was especially acute for the Christian churches because it fell during Easter, when the Eucharist is especially important. The bishops of the ELCF had agreed that the holy communion could be celebrated during Easter. However, only a maximum of ten people could be present: one pastor, along with parish employees, and parishioners taking service duties. The instructions allowed each parish to exercise discretion. It was possible, but not mandatory, to celebrate the Eucharist during the state of emergency. In a survey of the vicars of the ELCF, three-fifths (60 per cent) of the respondents reported that there was no communion at all in their parishes, even during the Easter services in 2020 (Kallatsa and Mikkola 2020).

During the state of emergency, church services in the ELCF were thus conducted mostly without communion and behind closed doors, without the physical presence of parishioners. The situation gave a strong boost to the 'digital turn' in Finnish church life. Although about a third of parishes had provided streamed church and other internet services since 2016, the shutdown resulted in a veritable digital leap in ELCF parishes. During Easter 2020 almost all the parishes provided access to their services through the web by streaming (Kallatsa and Mikkola 2020, 11). The popularity of radio and televised services also increased markedly during the initial weeks of the shutdown (Yle 2021b). Digitally mediated church services generated discussion within the ELCF on the theological possibility of 'distant communion', that is, a communion service in which the participants' presence was mediated digitally, and in which they administered the sacramental elements themselves in their own locations (see Mikkola 2020). In their instructions to their dioceses, the bishops explicitly prohibited distant communions. However, only a few gave a detailed justification for the ban based on the Lutheran confession (Mikkola and Kallatsa 2021, 330–31). According to a study conducted among the vicars of the ELCF and a small sample of church members, about three-quarters of vicars viewed the possibility of distant communion negatively, and only one in ten positively. However, among church members almost a

third viewed the possibility positively. In both samples, women were more positive than men about distant communion (Mikkola and Kallatsa 2021, 334).

According to a representative survey among Finns during April–May 2020, 14 per cent reported following streamed church services. The same study indicated that about half of Finns considered it important that people could participate in church services in web-mediated ways during the pandemic (Salomäki 2020, 11–12). Statistics also indicate that far more people than normal participated in church services through the streamed services (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2021). However, the experiences of the parishioners of both the ELCF and the FOC were mixed. Some felt their spiritual connection with the church was enhanced by the new technologically mediated services. However, many also felt that distant web-mediated services were alienating and hollow (Metso et al. 2021).

Although some international studies have indicated that more people than usual were seeking solace from religion during the pandemic by turning to prayer (Bentzen 2021), this does not seem to have taken place in Finland. The Church Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church commissioned a representative survey of the Finnish population during the initial lockdown in April 2020. The survey included a question concerning the frequency of prayer, and, when comparing the results of this survey to a similar one only five months previously, one can detect no significant differences in prayer activity ([Figure 14.1](#)). In the survey conducted in November 2019 the share of those praying at least a few times a month was 35 per cent; in the beginning of April 2020, the share was 33 per cent. The only age group where frequency of prayer seems to have slightly increased was the 50–59-year-olds. In all the other age groups, the frequencies are slightly lower.

The ELCF parishes spend about €6.6 million annually in funding financial aid in diaconal work. During 2020 the total sum used for financial aid was increased to €8.4 million, a 27 per cent increase on 2019 (Gävert 2021, 114). Diaconal work was increasingly directed at individual encounters, which increased by 34 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019. The most important form of aid was food relief in the form of food bags distributed by diaconal workers. The figure for such aid doubled in 2020 compared to 2019. The largest single group seeking the church's aid was single people of working age. Food relief

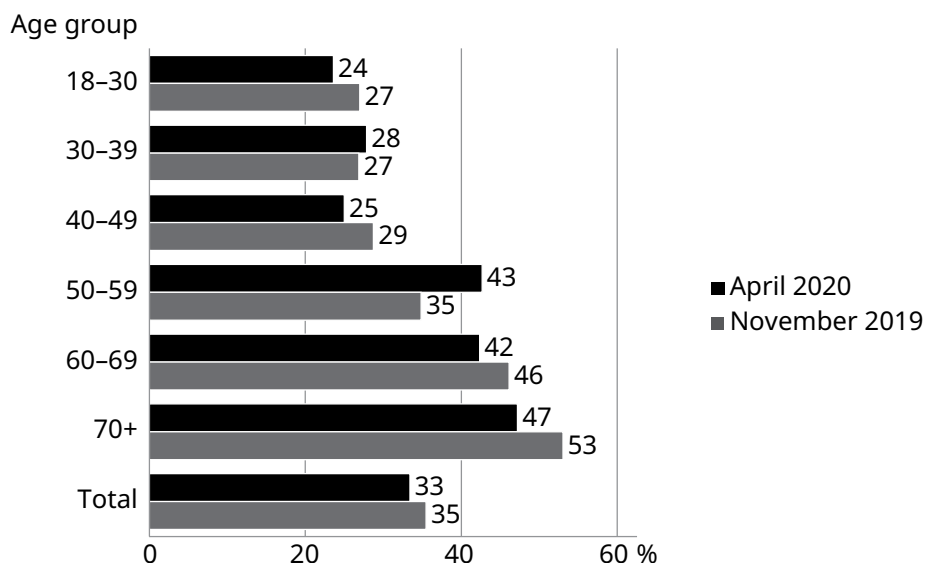


Figure 14.1: The shares of Finns by age group praying at least a few times a month in November 2019 and April 2020. Gallup Ecclesiastica 2019 (N = 4,182) and Church and Pandemic Survey 2020 (N = 1,236).

enabled a quick response in a situation in which the state reacted only slowly to the sudden falls in income many people experienced (Gävert 2021, 113–14).

During the initial shutdown, the bishops instructed that all weekly parish activities except church services were to be closed down during the state of emergency. Although the restrictions were subsequently relaxed during the summer, this required the reorganisation of confirmation preparation, which mainly takes place in Finland at summer camps, in which three-quarters (73 per cent) of the entire age cohort still participates (2023). The National Church Council of the ELCF issued its guidelines for confirmation preparation in April 2020. They instructed the parishes in organising web-mediated distant confirmation preparation. The basic principle was that distant learning should be thought of as an auxiliary learning method. The bishops stated that it was impossible to organise the entire confirmation preparation distantly. Some parts of the training had to involve the confirmation candidates' physical presence (Tervo-Niemelä, Porkka, and Pulkkinen 2021).

The parishes used three basic models to organise confirmation preparation during the pandemic: (a) intensive (unchanged) summer camps; (b) postponing intensive camps; and (c) switching to preparation in day sessions. During June 2020 there were therefore only 131 confirmation camps, whereas in 2019 there had been 458. However, whereas in 2019 there were 632 confirmation preparation courses during August–December, in 2020 there were 1,189 (Tervo-Niemelä, Porkka, and Pulkkinen 2021, 350).

According to a study of confirmation preparation during the pandemic (Tervo-Niemelä, Porkka, and Pulkkinen 2021, 351–52), about a fifth (18 per cent) did not involve a stay in a camp. About one in ten involved only a short one- to three-day period in a camp. A third involved four to six nights, and approximately a third involved a week-long camp. Almost half the respondents said there was no distant learning during confirmation preparation.

Church rites were a further area in which religious communities were forced to reorganise their services, sometimes drastically. During the shutdown periods, a maximum of ten people was allowed at these events. The rapidly changing rules and restrictions compounded the situation. There also appears to have been considerable local variation in the interpretation of the restrictions. For example, in some parishes the ten-person rule included the pastor and the church's director of music; in others the ten-person rule referred only to the participants. In their instructions of 18 March 2020, the bishops decreed that, for special pastoral reasons the ten-person limit could be exceeded for close relatives. When the state of emergency was over, the limit was increased to 50.

According to a study of the experiences of burials during the pandemic (Vähäkangas 2021), many experienced frustration and anxiety concerning the organisation of severely restricted funerals. Many also experienced conflicting emotions: safety was considered important; the ability to be physically present was sometimes equally important. Again, strong emotions were linked to the inability to express one's feelings through bodily contact like hugging and touching. In processing grief, bodily expressions are vital when verbal expressions seem inadequate, yet concerns about safety largely precluded them. The special conditions also highlighted the existential themes concerning the meaning of life and death exceptionally acutely for some participants.

Attitudes among the vast majority of Finns towards the vaccines and medical science were positive. A survey conducted in March–April 2021 by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum EVA showed that 87 per cent of Finns either had already been vaccinated or were certain to have it taken (Larros and Metelinen 2021). Only 3 per cent were certain to decline the vaccination and further 8 per cent were likely to decline. The study also showed that the majority of Finns trusted the medical science behind the vaccination: 80 per cent considered the benefits of the vaccination greater than potential harm, even if there were side effects.

Nevertheless, there was a small segment of people who opposed the vaccines and the use of the coronavirus pass. Some believed in conspiracy theories and various kinds of misinformation spread in the social media concerning the vaccines. There were also a few who opposed the vaccines for religious reasons. However, the major religious organisations actively encouraged people to take the vaccines. The Archbishop of the ELCF, Tapio Luoma, spoke in favour of the vaccines, and the Bishop of Helsinki, Teemu Laajasalo, wrote a strongly worded opinion piece in a major newspaper stating that the unvaccinated would bear responsibility for the suffering and death of their neighbours (Laajasalo 2021). The CORE Forum issued a release in October 2021 urging everyone to get vaccinated (CORE Forum 2021; Helsingin Sanomat 2021). The spokesperson of the CORE Forum also made clear that minority religions of a very broad spectrum supported the government programmes of vaccination, and the isolated exceptions concerned a tiny minority. Also, the imams of Muslim communities spoke in support of vaccination and helped to organise them in the mosques or their vicinity (Kirkko ja kaupunki 2022).

Conclusion

As the above documentation shows, the special relationship between the state and the two national churches strongly influenced Finnish religious life during the pandemic. These churches operate under public law and have a long history of close collaboration with the public authorities in many areas of life. Despite their status, the national churches are administratively independent of the state, and the restrictions on public gatherings and businesses placed by the government could not be legally applied to worship and other religious gatherings.

Despite their freedom, the national churches closely followed the state regulations on these matters on their own initiative, creating a model for other religious communities to follow. Despite isolated instances to the contrary, the minority religious communities seem largely to have followed the model provided by the official churches and to have voluntarily curbed their activities. Similarly, along with the national churches, most of the communities also gave their strong support to the vaccinations. The lack of direct government regulation therefore did not mean that religious life remained unaffected by the state regulation the pandemic prompted. On the contrary, religious communities adjusted their activities quite drastically on their own initiative during the shutdown periods. This situation resulted in scant public discussion concerning issues related to the freedom of religion, although some expressed doubts about whether such 'special treatment' of religion was warranted. The most heated debates revolved around the restrictions on freedom of enterprise, equally guaranteed by the constitution. For instance, the mandatory closing of restaurants was obviously a dire economic challenge for many business-owners. Similarly, the organisers of artistic and cultural events found the situation at times unfair and economically intolerable, which also created a lot of public discussion.

How things unfolded in Finland speaks volumes about the relationship between the public authorities and religious communities. The state's curbing of its own authority vis-à-vis religious organisations due to its extensive interpretation of the freedom of religion was mirrored by the religious organisations' swift and voluntary adoption of state-decreed measures to restrict the spread of the pandemic. The likeliest explanation for religious organisations' voluntary and large-scale adoption of state-decreed restrictions on public activities is related to the special Nordic pattern of a state religion system. This system is presently characterised by a long history of amicable collaboration and mutual trust on the one hand and more recently by the increased autonomy of national churches and strengthened freedom of religion on the other. The public authorities respected the autonomy of religious organisations in managing their own affairs, and the religious organisations respected the public authorities' ability to decide on the necessary measures to curb the public activities for the good of all.

The turn of events thus replicates with almost uncanny precision the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms or regiments. According

to this doctrine, God created two regimes to rule: the temporal and the spiritual. The close relationship between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities was justified by this doctrine of the duality of legitimate authority. The regiments were thought to be different and separate, but not isolated from each other. They were both understood to be employed by God to supervise the world. It is important to realise that according to traditional Lutheran doctrine civil or secular authority was *religiously justified* because its activities were intended to guarantee social order by upholding justice and peace (see e.g. Knuuttila 2019).

Although such arcane Lutheran doctrines are seldom invoked in today's public discussion, one can still detect their distant echoes in the Nordic political culture, in which state and religion are deemed to have their own separate duties and spheres of operation and yet are expected to work in mutual harmony towards the common good and for people's benefit. Although the political cultures in Nordic societies are increasingly secular, and the state church system has been gradually dismantled in most, 'cultural Lutheranism' can still be detected in their national cultures (see Sinnemäki et al. 2019).

Notes

- 1 In the state of emergency, the government may be authorised by presidential decree to use extended powers to secure the livelihood of the population and the national economy, to maintain legal order and constitutional and human rights, and to safeguard the territorial integrity and independence of Finland. For instance, the government may oblige a person to relinquish goods to the state and perform work, services, transportation, or other necessary tasks. It may also issue orders on communication, declare a curfew, and entitle the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Transport and Communications to temporarily requisition real estate, buildings, and premises.
- 2 The Church Act was reformed in 2023 (652/2023) but, since the reform took place only after the pandemic, the reference throughout the article is to the previous Church Act (1054/1993).
- 3 By 2024, Hinduism and the Bahá'í faith were also represented in the CORE Forum.

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