

## CHAPTER 18

# Religion, Politics, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Greek Society

## Legal Confrontations and Social Implications

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of people's professional, family, and social lives including religious and spiritual practices. In Greece, although the government took strict measures to protect the population from infection, it hesitated to impose similar immediate restrictions on the Orthodox Church of Greece. The church was reluctant to close all the temples and persisted in practising the Sunday Mass and major religious holidays, albeit with a limited number of participants. Owing to this lack of unconditional compliance with the governmental restrictions, the church was perceived as being against the state and medical regulations. The main questions that this chapter will try to answer are the following: what kinds of measure were taken by the government in relation to religious places and practices during the pandemic? How did religious groups and institutions, mostly the

### How to cite this book chapter:

Sakellariou, Alexandros. 2024. 'Religion, Politics, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Greek Society: Legal Confrontations and Social Implications'. In *Religion, Law, and COVID-19 in Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, edited by Brian Conway, Lene Kühle, Francesco Alicino, and Gabriel Birsan, 401–419. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-28-19>.

Orthodox Church, respond to them? Did society accept these measures? Which was the pandemic's impact on people's religious beliefs, practices, and trust towards the Orthodox Church? The purpose of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, to examine the implications on the societal level in the light of the Orthodox Church's social and political dominance under the prism of secularisation and, on the other hand, to systematically describe the political and legal developments during the pandemic pertaining to the 'politics–science–religion' triangle in order to showcase the pandemic's impact on religious practices.

## Introduction

Despite the evidence of the last decade showing a gradual distancing of the Greek people, especially younger generations, from religion (Sakellariou 2022a), the Orthodox Church of Greece still holds quite a strong and influential role in society and politics. Drawing on the historical and legal background, it could be argued that the Orthodox Church and the state have been collaborating closely on a variety of issues. In 1833, the Orthodox Church was declared independent of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and was incorporated into the state apparatus, thus becoming an ideological proponent of the national ideology. With very few exceptions from then on, the state has been protecting the Orthodox Church, considering it the nation's saviour during the Ottoman Empire (the 'mother of the nation'), and the church, on the other hand, has been supporting the state on ideological and political issues (e.g. anti-communism) (Sakellariou 2022b, 133–38).

When it comes to the legal framework, it could be argued that the Orthodox Church is much closer to what could be described as a *de facto* state church, although not *de jure* (Sakellariou 2013). The Greek Constitution starts with the phrase 'In the name of the Holy, one in essence and indivisible Trinity', and, according to Article 3, 'the prevailing religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ'. A number of scholars (Dimitropoulos 2001, 70–80; Paparizos 1998) have claimed that, as long as there are such statements in the constitution, Greece is far from being a secular state. Others (Manitakis 2000, 72–74; Venizelos 2000, 137–38) have contended that the above constitutional statements are not critical and have primarily a symbolic and cultural meaning, acknowledging the Orthodox Church's historical role and that the majority of Greek society self-identifies

with the Orthodox Christian religion. Furthermore, Article 2 of the first chapter of the law about the operation of the Orthodox Church and its relations with the state (Official Government Gazette A 146, 31 May 1977), mentions that the church of Greece should cooperate with the state on themes of common interest, for example the Christian education of the youth, religious service in the army, support for the institution of marriage and family, the protection of holy relics and ecclesiastical and Christian monuments, and the establishment of new religious holidays. The church can ask for the protection of the state whenever the Orthodox religion is insulted.

With the above in mind, this chapter will try to shed light on the following questions: what kinds of measure were taken by the government in relation to religious places and practices during the pandemic? How did religious groups and institutions, mostly the Orthodox Church, respond to them? Did society accept these measures? Which was the pandemic's impact on people's religious beliefs, practices, and trust towards the Orthodox Church? The purpose of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to describe the political and legal developments pertaining to the 'politics–science–religion' triangle in order to showcase the pandemic's impact on religious communities in Greek society, with a special focus on the Orthodox Church of Greece. On the other hand, the chapter examines the implications at the societal level in the light of the Orthodox Church's political and social dominance through the secularisation lens.

## Setting the Context

The pandemic of COVID-19 had a severe impact on every aspect of people's family, professional, and social lives, including every religious and spiritual manifestation (see the introduction to this volume). The eruption and expansion of the pandemic during February and March 2020 led the Greek government to take all the necessary measures in order to prevent the spread of infection. However, the government was hesitant to impose rigorous restrictions on the Orthodox Church and offered it the option to decide for itself on the necessary limitations. The church's reluctance to immediately close all Orthodox temples around the country and its persistence in practising Sunday Mass, albeit only with a few participants, caused huge debates in the public sphere during the first weeks of the pandemic.

Although the church acknowledged the dangers derived from COVID-19 and did not officially, through the Holy Synod, oppose scientific evidence and state decisions (Mitralaxis 2022), its initial reaction and lack of unconditional compliance with the governmental restrictions made the church appear to be against the state and medical regulations. The Holy Synod from the beginning expressed its trust in science as a gift from God, a position that was derived from the Holy Scripture, and asked people to follow doctors' advice. Moreover, the Holy Synod supported the hospitals with an amount of €150,000 as early as April 2020.<sup>1</sup> After the production of the vaccine, the church supported the effort to achieve high levels of vaccination, sending its spokesperson to vaccinate with the archbishop, and other members publicly doing the same. Furthermore, the Holy Synod decided to issue an encyclical letter to its adherents in support of the vaccine and in collaboration with the scientific community replied to a number of questions in order to clarify misunderstandings and confront conspiracy theories.<sup>2</sup>

As the pandemic escalated, the church realised that it had to adjust further, but a significant number of clergy members (higher and lower rank), monks and nuns, theologians, and laypeople started to stand against the restrictions (e.g. not wearing masks inside the churches, kissing religious icons, not keeping social distance) and vaccination. They participated in demonstrations and they reproduced conspiracy theories (Stamouli 2021), thus fuelling the anti-vaxxers' and COVID-19 deniers' milieu (Makrides and Sotiriou 2024, 67–72). Some of the opinions that were voiced by metropolitans, lower-rank priests, and theologians were arguing that God's laws are more powerful and that doctors are weak and only Christ is omnipotent. Especially during the periods of important religious holidays (e.g. Easter and Christmas), the church wished to keep temples open, and sometimes it actually did bypass the governmental restrictions (e.g. during the celebration of Epiphany on 6 January 2021). In some cases, the police had to arrest, fine, and prosecute clergy members for not following the imposed restrictions, e.g. because they opened the churches and practised Sunday Mass or because they organised prohibited litanies (Sakellariou 2020, 122–23).

Overall, it could be argued that the impact of COVID-19 on religious practices was a theme that attracted much attention during the pandemic from a variety of perspectives. It was mostly related to the

role of the Orthodox Church and its reactions against the restrictive measures, adding to the long-standing discussions already taking place in the public sphere on church–state relations and the infiltration of religion in politics. The result was a number of publications, studies, conferences, online seminars, and lectures<sup>3</sup> on the topic. First, a number of opinion polls (Sakellariou 2020, 163–70) included questions about the role of the Orthodox Church and trust in the church as an institution, resulting in very interesting findings that will be discussed in the following section. Furthermore, the publications included edited volumes examining the issue from theological and church perspectives (Asproulis and Wood 2020; Chrysostomos 2020; Dimitriadis 2020; Ierotheos 2021); sociological essays (Sakellariou 2020); chapters in edited volumes dedicated to the broader theme of the pandemic (Papanikolopoulos 2020); academic articles focused on how the pandemic affected people’s spiritual health (Papazoglou et al. 2021) and religious practices (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020); the attitudes of the Greek believers towards the state’s restrictive measures (Issaris, Kalo-gerakos, and Milas 2023; Kousi, Mitsi, and Simos 2021; Michailidis, Vlasidis, and Karekla 2021); and legal perspectives (Androutsopoulos 2021; Karavokyris 2021).

It is worth noting that, apart from Orthodox Christians, there are also smaller religious communities (Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.) and a growing number of people who self-identify as atheists, agnostics, or religiously indifferent, especially among younger generations. In Greece, there are no official data on religious affiliation since the national census does not collect such information. According to 2017 data from the World Values Survey (WVS), Orthodox Christians comprise 91 per cent of the population, Muslims 2.9 per cent, Roman Catholics 0.5 per cent, and Jews and Hindus 0.2 per cent each, with Protestants at 0.1 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2017) estimates the Muslim population in Greece at 5.7 per cent.<sup>5</sup> Various opinion polls conducted since 2017 have indicated a gradual increase in the number of non-religious individuals. To offer a brief overview, in one opinion poll (Public Issue 2008), 7 per cent stated that religion was not at all important in their lives, while 14 per cent said that religion was not very important. More recently (Kapa Research 2015), 81.4 per cent said they were Orthodox Christians, while 14.7 per cent said that they were atheists, a number much higher than the 1.8 per cent mentioned in the same company’s

opinion poll in 2006. In the most recent surveys conducted by Dianeosis (2024), it was mentioned that 18.9 per cent did not believe in God, while in 2016 (Dianeosis 2016), this number had been 15.8 per cent. It is important to mention that these numbers are much higher among the ages of 17–24 years. With regard to religiosity, there seems to have been a significant shift between 2006 and 2015, based on the aforementioned opinion poll (Kapa Research 2015). The proportions of those who attended church weekly went from 22.7 per cent in 2006 to 6.7 per cent in 2015, those who went one to three times per month from 24.6 per cent to 10 per cent, and those who never went from 6.9 per cent to 36.7 per cent.

### Legal Aspects

During the first weeks of the pandemic, the Greek government started to impose a series of measures in order to protect the population from COVID-19. The first infections were recorded at the end of February 2020, but the first serious restrictions were imposed in March through the ban on all carnival celebrations and school excursions in Greece and abroad. On 11 March 2020, the government decided to close all kindergartens and schools and, two days later, all bars, cultural events, malls, shops, restaurants, museums, and sports halls. Religious places were exempted from the measures, while the government was trying to persuade the Orthodox Church to take this decision on its own through official and unofficial contacts. In every public announcement from 3 to 16 March, the church, after the Holy Synod's assemblies, expressed its support for governmental measures by asking people to follow the instructions, but underlined the importance of praying and saw the pandemic as an opportunity 'to surrender to God's will' and 'to act in solidarity'. On 15 March, the prime minister asked the archbishop to keep churches open only for individual prayer. On the 16th, the Holy Synod decided to stop baptisms and weddings unless there was a need and a small number of people attended. Furthermore, the church decided to cancel all daily rituals, but did not do the same for Sunday Mass. The same night, the prime minister announced that, owing to the seriousness of the situation, every religious place would be closed down without exceptions (Sakellariou 2020, 106–17).

This was the first piece of legislation (Common Ministerial Decision) to regulate religious practices and was in force from 16 to 30

March 2020 (Official Gazette B 872, 16 March 2020). The measures continued until May through the renewal of the Common Ministerial Decision. The only exemption was that, in some churches, the priests were allowed to practise a ritual, especially the Sunday Mass, but only in order to transmit it via the internet, television, or radio. In May 2020, the situation was significantly improved and religious places reopened with limitations. At the beginning, all religious places opened only for individual prayer (Official Gazette B, 1643, 2 May 2020), and afterwards with regulations about the number of people who could attend inside and outside as well as protective measures (e.g. masks and social distance) (Official Gazette B, 1816, 12 May 2020). As expected, in the summer, the measures ceased for every activity, including religious practices and rituals, but gradually the legislation came back into force in the autumn and winter of 2020–2021 with the following waves of the pandemic (e.g. Official Gazette 5509, 15 December 2020). As shown above, all these measures were temporary; they were withdrawn in times when the pandemic was abated and put back into force in periods of outbreaks. As has been argued, the spring 2020 response of the Greek state to the pandemic involved strong limitations on fundamental rights, especially freedom of movement and assembly, economic freedom, and the exercise of freedom of religion. Their legal basis mostly referred to the ‘necessity law’ provision of Article 44, paragraph 1 of the Greek Constitution (Karavokyris 2021). It should be noted that this was the first time such legislation was implemented in order to confront a public health issue and currently this legal state of exception is not active.

The restrictions on religious places caused a variety of reactions from the Orthodox Church. Letters were sent out to the prime minister, the minister of education and religious affairs, and other officials to protest against the ban, especially during important religious holidays. A number of lawyers, theologians, and in some cases priests appealed to the courts to overturn the restrictions, arguing that their religious freedom had been violated. In March 2020, a group of priests and believers appealed to the Administrative Court of First Instance of Athens against the first legislation that included the provision to close religious places (Act of Legislative Content, 25 February 2020). During the same period, Orthodox believers appealed to the Council of State, asking to open the churches in order for the people to attend religious rituals. Finally, a group of people appealed to the Supreme Civil and

Criminal Court of Greece (28 May 2020), arguing that the restrictions ‘violated the Constitution, insulted the name of God, and infringed the Holy Canons of the Church in order to alienate and extinguish the religious consciousness of the Greek people and to inflict atheism on the individual and state levels’ (Sakellariou 2020, 142–43). All the above appeals against the restrictions imposed on religious places were turned down by the Greek courts. It is also interesting that the Orthodox Church, through the Holy Synod, did not participate in these legal initiatives.

During the Christmas period of 2020–2021, the government took more strict measures due to the new wave of the pandemic, including religious places, especially for the day of Epiphany, on 6 January. The Orthodox Church reacted and argued that it would not implement the new decision but would follow the previous one, which allowed the participation of people during the celebrations on the days of Christmas and the New Year with limitations in their number and wearing protective masks. In addition, on 5 January the church appealed to the Council of State against the government’s decision (Loudaros 2021). As a consequence, all churches were open for celebrations during Epiphany. A few days later, the Council of State turned down the appeal. What is worth underlining, though, is that in the past it had mostly been religious minorities or non-religious groups and people that were legally active in order to protect their religious freedom.<sup>6</sup> During this period, it was the Orthodox Church and its members who reacted against the restrictive measures and appealed to the courts.

The main restrictions that affected religious life were, first, the closure of all religious places, mainly during the peak of the pandemic, and, second, the limitations on the number of people who could attend religious rituals inside and outside of the religious places. As a consequence, when it came to the appeals, the main claims were that there had been a violation of the Greek Constitution, more particularly Article 3, according to which the dominant religion in Greece is the religion of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ, meaning that the Orthodox Church should be treated exceptionally compared to other religious groups, and Article 13, regarding religious freedom. In addition, it was claimed that the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 9) had been violated.

The courts examined whether the administrative decisions overcome the legal settlement usually produced by an Act of Legislative



Content in terms of Article 43, paragraph 2 of the constitution. The judicial reasoning in the above cases implied crucial assumptions. First, the rise of the public health interest covered practically any restriction of rights. Second, the application of the proportionality principle equalled a smooth necessity test, in which the unusual conditions of the pandemic justified the large discretionary power of the state. Finally, the legality of the debated measures was essentially dependent on their temporary and exceptional character (Karavokyris 2021). Therefore, according to the case law of the Greek courts, the principle of proportionality was not infringed by the restrictive measures regarding the freedom of worship, mostly because of the duration of the measures and particularly their temporary nature. Thus, it became obvious that, as far as their content is concerned, the prohibitive or restrictive measures related to the freedom of worship could not remain unchanged but had to be redesigned ‘from time to time’ based on the renewed data regarding the pandemic, in order for the least restrictive and most adequate of them to be chosen (Androutsopoulos 2021, 8).

Therefore, the critical question is what should be done in this particular case when two obligations of the state – on the one hand, the assurance of religious worship and, on the other, the protection of public health – should simultaneously be served despite fighting each other (Androutsopoulos 2021, 4). Based on the constitutional law, it is accepted that an abstract hierarchy between constitutional rights does not exist and, in the event that one conflicts with another, they must be weighed in accordance with the specific actual circumstances existing at the time. However, when not only health but even citizens’ lives are put in danger, it is obvious that the protection of human life has increased weight in the procedure because, ultimately, the existence of life becomes the prerequisite for the realisation of all other human rights (Vlachopoulos 2020).

### Sociological Aspects

It is still early to reach a conclusion about the impact of the pandemic on people’s religious lives and religiosity. Despite the fact that restrictive measures were temporary, it is clear that the pandemic affected people’s participation in religious practices (religious holidays, everyday church attendance, Sunday Mass, and religious pilgrimages). For a long time, people had no access to religious places or they had access only under

very strict limitations. Even when religious places gradually reopened, many people hesitated to attend because they were afraid of the level of implementation of the measures, such as wearing a protective mask or keeping social distance. Baptisms and weddings were postponed for long periods of time, while funerals continued with limitations. There are no data yet to demonstrate a sustained rise in civil weddings, civil partnerships, and civil funerals due to the pandemic. Here it is important to mention that a shift in weddings had already started to take place since the economic crisis. Civil marriage was introduced in 1982. According to the data available for 1991, out of the total of 65,568 weddings, only 5,858 were civil. In 2001, of a total of 58,491, 10,404 were civil, and 2012 was the first year that civil weddings surpassed religious marriages. From then on, civil weddings and civil partnerships, the latest being introduced in 2008, have steadily increased compared to religious ones. In 2021, there were 18,487 religious ceremonies, 22,272 civil ceremonies, and 11,550 civil partnerships; in 2022, those numbers were 21,381, 21,974, and 13,157, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Apart from baptisms, weddings, and funerals, Holy Communion, kissing holy icons, and litanies were among the practices that were considered infectious practices. Pilgrimages were also affected since people could no longer travel and visit places of religious significance in Greece (e.g. the island of Tinos or Mount Athos) and abroad (e.g. Jerusalem) (Papazoglou et al. 2021). The use of the internet and the media (radio and television) was an innovative solution for people who wanted to attend religious services but could not, either because of the restrictions or because of fear for their health. Many local parishes organised religious services offering the option of online, television, and radio transmissions (Makrides and Sotiriou 2024, 74–76).

A very interesting impact of the pandemic was the materialisation of individual religion, as shown by qualitative research on homemade *epitaphioi* (epitaphs) during the Good Friday of 2020 (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020). At that time, owing to the restrictions imposed on practising this communal Easter feast publicly in churches, people reacted inventively by constructing homemade epitaphs, displaying them in privately owned spaces and posting photographs and comments on social media. This new form of domestic ritual relates to formal ecclesiastical support, since a number of Church officials encouraged the faithful, through interviews in the newspapers before and during lockdown, to revitalise the practice of the house church, as has

been known since early Christianity, while intensifying their prayers at home (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020, 100).

A last point related to religious practices comes from unsystematic observations during the Easter holidays from 2020 to 2024. Usually, on Holy Saturday night people gather and have dinner after the church service at midnight in order to celebrate Christ's resurrection, ending the Easter fast. However, owing to the restrictions in 2020 and 2021, the religious services were organised earlier, at nine or ten o'clock, and as a consequence people assembled for the celebration dinner earlier, before midnight. In the following years (2022–2024), some people decided to have the celebration dinner before going to church at midnight, although the church service returned to the original time. It seems that these people realised that celebrating Christ's resurrection at midnight and then having dinner is a human-made tradition, and changing this practice is not such an important violation of religious teachings.<sup>8</sup>

When it came to the regulation of religious places, a number of opinion polls conducted during the pandemic showed that the vast majority of the population (e.g. 78.6 per cent and 85 per cent in two polls) agreed with the government's decision to close the churches in March 2020. In another poll, 84.7 per cent argued that, during Easter 2020, all churches should remain closed. When asked which three activities should open first after the lockdown, only 9 per cent answered 'the churches' and, when asked which should open last, 34 per cent replied 'the churches'. Moreover, when people were asked what they missed most during the lockdown, only 30 per cent replied 'attending a religious service in the church', compared with 62 per cent who replied 'a walk for coffee or lunch' and 31 per cent who replied 'go out for a drink at night' (Sakellariou 2020, 167–68). Bearing in mind that in most surveys and opinion polls Greek people self-identify with Orthodox religion, to the level of 85 to 90 per cent, this is a striking finding.

Regarding faith and trust, the data showed a significant growth in trusting science, medicine, and the state and only a small rise in faith in God. In one opinion poll, people were asked how much they trusted a number of values, institutions, and principles during the lockdown of 2020. While belief in God increased by 12 per cent, trust in science rose by 28 per cent. Similar to studies in other countries (Kanol and Michalowski 2023), which showed no significant rise in religiosity due to the pandemic, a number of surveys among university students and

school teachers have equally shown that people's faith and relationship with God did not change significantly during the pandemic, with most of them (more than 50 per cent) characterising it as 'the same' and 'stable' (Karamouzis and Sakellariou 2023; Karamouzis, Tsirevelos, and Sakellariou 2024).

On the other hand, trust in the church faced a profound decrease. In one of the first opinion polls, 44.2 per cent replied 'no' and 'not so much' when people were asked about their trust in the Orthodox Church, while 54.6 per cent replied 'enough' and 'very much'. Scientists were much higher on the relative list of trust, in third place, while the church was in seventh. In another opinion poll, people were asked to evaluate a number of institutions and their role during the pandemic on a scale from 0 to 10; the church scored 3.2 and appeared in last place, even below the usually untrusted media. In a later study during the pandemic, 67 per cent replied that they did not trust the church at all. In total, all the surveys have shown that, in cases of conflicts between science and religion, people favour science as being right, a reply scoring very high (from 60 to 75 per cent), especially among young people 17–39 years old (Karamouzis and Sakellariou 2023; Koliastasis 2022, 21).

It is very interesting that, in an opinion poll of May 2019, before the pandemic, 64.85 per cent argued that they trusted the church, meaning that during the pandemic the church lost at least 10 per cent, or even more depending on the time each poll was conducted. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, in past surveys conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s, the church scored even higher, being among the first two or three most trusted institutions, even among young people, which is certainly not the case anymore.<sup>9</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that, contrary to the church's public discourse during the pandemic and its teachings, only 22 per cent argued that COVID-19 could not be transmitted through the Holy Communion, while 70 per cent argued that it could (Sakellariou 2020, 168–69). Even when surveys were focused only on the followers of the Orthodox religion, the vast majority agreed with the restrictions. An interesting finding, however, was regarding the attitude of a number of young Orthodox believers and churchgoers (15–24 years old), who appeared more conservative than others of their age. This particular (minority) group of young people believed that the state had taken the restrictive measures in order 'to attack' the church and that the attitude of the church was a little to not at all

satisfactory; they also appeared a little happy with the way in which the churches were reopened after the lockdowns, i.e. with restrictions (Michailidis, Vlasidis, and Karekla 2021, 13).

One last critical point is the relationship between religious groups and the state. During the two years of the pandemic, reactions from other religious or non-religious communities were not recorded. No other religious group reacted against the restrictions imposed without exception on all religious places by the government or appealed to the courts, arguing that their religious freedom and human rights were violated. On 29 February, the Catholic Church of Greece issued an encyclical letter introducing preliminary measures to avoid infection. These measures included distributing Holy Communion in people's hands, removing holy water from temples' entrances, and discouraging the kissing of holy icons.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the Orthodox Church had issued an encyclical letter the day before, on 28 February, which did not introduce any restrictions in relation to religious practices. Instead, it suggested just keeping temple windows open for fresh air and advised vulnerable individuals (those with serious medical issues) to stay at home, while recommending that others simply wash their hands.<sup>11</sup>

It further needs to be underlined that, while the government decided to close every religious place on 16 March 2020, because of the Orthodox Church's unwillingness to take such a decision, other religious communities proceeded in this direction a few days earlier without waiting for the state to regulate this issue. For example, a well-known Muslim website asked all Muslims on 11 March 2020 to pray from their homes on the forthcoming Friday, 13 March, and avoid visiting official and non-official mosques. Similarly, the Synod of the Evangelical Church of Greece decided on 14 March 2020 to suspend every physical, face-to-face, religious ritual, to broadcast the Sunday Mass through the Internet, to suspend Holy Communion, and to ask people to pray from home (Sakellariou 2020, 116). Based on the above it is no surprise that during the pandemic there was no formal inter-religious body to discuss and decide on issues of common interest. This absence can likely be attributed to the dominant position of the Orthodox Church in Greek society and politics, and the influential role the church sought to play in the decision-making process regarding restrictive measures.

As mentioned above, the Orthodox Church (metropolitans, priests, monks) and theologians or groups of Orthodox believers were the

only ones who reacted in a number of ways (e.g. legal initiatives, official public letters to the authorities, not respecting the restrictions). Many Orthodox monks, nuns, priests, theologians, and laypeople participated in COVID-19, anti-mask, anti-vaccination, and anti-measure demonstrations in Athens and other parts of Greece and they reproduced conspiracy theories arguing that 'Orthodox religion is persecuted' (Sakellariou 2020, 137–44, 153–63). Related to the above, a political party founded in 2019, Niki (Victory), participated in the national elections of May 2023, failing only by a few thousand votes to surpass the 3 per cent threshold to enter Parliament. In the following elections of June 2023 it managed to garner 3.7 per cent of the votes and had 10 MPs elected. The party comprises and is followed by very religious people and is supported by Orthodox monasteries and local parishes. This is the only political party that includes a special section on COVID-19 in its published political theses, expressing its criticism of all the measures implemented during the pandemic (masks, social distance, and closure of churches), even against vaccination.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth mentioning, though, that, after the first weeks of the pandemic, the Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod made a noteworthy turn and explicitly supported and followed the restrictive measures, collaborating with the state. However, there were individual and local cases of disobedience (e.g. the metropolitans of Corfu and Kythera), while there were also a few instances when the church, officially, through the Holy Synod, did not follow the government's regulations, e.g. during the 2020 summer litanies and the Epiphany of 2021, when it introduced its own guidelines and instructions.

Overall, it could be argued that, from confrontation at the beginning, relationships between church and state moved to a status of collaboration. The crucial problems were first that the Orthodox Church failed to control the extreme and/or disobedient voices coming from some of its members (higher- and lower-rank priests), who continued to have significant influence on large parts of the population, and, second, that the church wanted to be considered the state's partner and that the government should ask for its views and advice respecting its power and authority, as was implicitly or explicitly argued (Sakellariou 2020, 128–30). On the same issue, it seems that the pandemic and the church's stance strengthened the already-dominant view among the population that religion has nothing to do with politics and that the

church should be separated from the state, an opinion even stronger among young people (Sakellariou 2022c; Sakellariou 2022d).

## Conclusion

Two main conclusions can be drawn about the impact of the pandemic on religion in Greek society. The first relates to politics and religion and is divided into two main issues. On the one hand, the pandemic showed that the political power in Greece was hesitant to impose any measures on the church owing to the perceived political cost and the church's influence over the political sphere. As mentioned already at the beginning, the Orthodox Church holds very close relations with the state and this was what the church tried to preserve during the pandemic. Therefore, on the other hand, the pandemic made clear the church's goal of protecting its status and privileges, as well as having access to political power and participating in political decisions. Despite the fact that ultimately the government followed the strict path to close down the churches, it seems that there is still a long way before it could be argued that the Greek state is secular and that the church's power in the political realm is low and insignificant. In a few words it could be argued that the church did not become stronger and more influential during the pandemic but continued to keep its privileged relationship with the state.

The second conclusion refers to the social level. Following a slow but visible trend that started almost a decade ago, it seems that Greek society has made a few steps towards secularisation and the pandemic might have played a role in this development, especially among young people. Science has strengthened its position against the church, scoring very high in terms of trust, while at the same time trust in the church has faced a significant decrease. Furthermore, people seem to be clear that, on matters of science and medical issues, religion has a very small, if any, role to play. Finally, as in other countries (Pew 2021; Witt-Swanson, Benz, and Cox 2023), belief in God did not face any significant rise, meaning that, despite the critical times experienced by the people, there was no observed turn to religion and God. In sum, it could be argued that a secularisation process in Greek society started before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Sakellariou 2022a), but the pandemic can be considered a catalyst that could accelerate this process in various ways in the future, without nevertheless meaning that religion

and the Orthodox Church have lost their importance, especially in terms of cultural identity.

In sum, the pandemic can lead us to the following hypothesis. While the secularisation of the state is slow and it seems very difficult for politics to dislodge the church's influence, society is actually ahead of politicians and is moving, though not very fast, towards secularisation, proving that the two forms of secularisation do not have to develop in parallel.

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.ecclesiagreece.gr/ecclesiajoomla/index.php/el/iera-synodos/enkyklioi/peri-ton-apophaseon-tes-diarkous-hieras-synodou-tes-1-4-2020-hos-pros-to-zetema-tou-neou-koronoiou-COVID-19>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 2 <https://www.ecclesiagreece.gr/prostolao/53.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 3 For example, a session dedicated to the topic was included in a conference organised in 2021 by the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki <https://cutt.ly/wwlYQ4Wn>, as well as an online seminar of interreligious dialogue between Orthodoxy and Islam with the theme 'Religion and Health' <https://cutt.ly/jKgc-MyJ>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 4 <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 5 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 6 That is why, among EU countries, Greece has the most cases against it at the European Court for Human Rights accused of violating religious freedom. [https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/Overview\\_19592021\\_ENG](https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/Overview_19592021_ENG), accessed 29 May 2024.
- 7 See the data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority on this: <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/0431ead9-e21a-81ba-17af-9584f61c9196> and <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/3a2748aa-9f4c-a4fa-76b1-2c14348eaa19>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 8 This is a quite interesting impact of the pandemic that needs to be further and more systematically studied in the future under the approach of lived religion (McGuire 2008).
- 9 See, for example, Eurobarometer 48 (1997), where 77 per cent said that they trusted the Church and 21 per cent that they did not, and, for young people, see a survey from 2005 (Stratoudaki 2005). According to a recent opinion poll (Kapa Research 2024), this image is completely reversed: 38 per cent trusted the Church 'very much' and 'enough' and 61 per cent 'not at all' and 'not so much'. [https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/entry/ereena-kapa-research-7-stoes-10-eper-toe-diachorismoe-kratoes-ekklecias\\_gr\\_662d1c38e4b0c2fde1a5c6d6](https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/entry/ereena-kapa-research-7-stoes-10-eper-toe-diachorismoe-kratoes-ekklecias_gr_662d1c38e4b0c2fde1a5c6d6), accessed 29 May 2024.



- 10 <https://shorturl.at/jwbfv>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 11 <https://www.ecclesiagreece.gr/ecclesiajoomla/index.php/el/iera-synodos/enkyklioi/metra-prolepseos-tou-neou-koronaizou-2019-ncov>, accessed 29 May 2024.
- 12 See <https://nikh.gr/theseis/yegeia/4-COVID-19-o-ios-tis-dixonoiis>, accessed 29 May 2024.

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