

# Comparative Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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Sudden external shocks affecting virtually everyone at the same time often help societies to view themselves in a new light (Klinenberg 2024).<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the significance of health care to society's well-being, in some cases exposing existing deficits in national health systems as societies struggled to cope with COVID-19 cases, especially in the early stages of the pandemic (Falkenbach and Caiani 2021). As such, the pandemic brought out the different priorities of different societies and how these, in turn, reflected their basic value systems (Klinenberg 2024). Large-scale societal disruptions such as pandemics have a way of peeling back the curtain, so to speak.

Likewise, one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic also helped us to see other aspects of the social world, in this case the internal workings of religions and religious freedom in society, afresh. Never before in living memory were regular religious services prohibited, major life cycle rituals severely constrained, and religious groups challenged to make sense of a sudden event whose contours were only beginning to be understood. Suddenly not being able to do familiar, taken-for-granted religious things, such as attending religious services, rendered religiosity more visible (and strange) than before.

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More broadly, it helped us to see religion's role as a comfort blanket during hard times. In most countries in Europe, devotees turned to less familiar religious practices such as online services to express their faith. Also, religion frequently functioned as a source of legitimation during the pandemic, bolstering state authorities as they attempted to respond to the pandemic. In still other contexts, religious groups helped foster acceptance of scientific authority as a way out of the pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic revealed religion's role as a propagator in some contexts, either directly or indirectly, of conspiracy theories (Baker et al. 2020; [Chapter 12](#), this volume; Whitehead and Perry 2020), stoking up the idea of the pandemic as basically bogus and linked to the influence of hidden social forces (Baker et al. 2020). Instead of a comfort blanket, religion operated as a kind of pitchfork.<sup>3</sup> Whether as an enabling or a constraining force, then, religion mattered during a time of societal crisis.

Yet sociologists of religion have paid considerably less attention to sudden, short-term critical events as drivers of religious change than to long-term processes such as secularisation (Conway forthcoming; Molteni and Biolcati 2023; see also Bruce and Voas 2016), especially in cross-national terms. This is surprising as some, though relatively few, past studies have considered the potential of societal crises to produce changes in established patterns of religiosity (e.g. Bruce and Voas 2016; see also Stolz and Voas 2023). Here a crisis can be understood as a sudden shock to a society that upends taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting (Stolz and Voas 2023).

Against this background, this edited volume has paid attention to how period effects (in this case, a global pandemic) influenced religiosity in the European context. Period effects have to do with specific events in society that impact most (or usually all) ordinary people at the same time (Molteni and Biolcati 2023). As such, we follow in the tradition of a line of research that focuses on how big events may prompt religious change (Molteni and Biolcati 2023).

Past research shows that the pandemic impacted religion at a range of levels (individual, organisational, and societal), prompting sociologists to assess its consequences for future religious dynamics (Baker et al. 2020). At the same time, in previous work, attentiveness to the international comparative aspects of the pandemic's impact on religion has been rare.

Thus, this concluding chapter attempts to provide a comparative societal-level analysis of the country case studies included in this volume, based on the points of comparison identified in the volume's introduction (Type I–III factors). This goes beyond the introductions to the country groups by considering all the country groupings together. In other words, it focuses less on differences *within* the country groupings than on differences *between* them.

To recap, Proposition 1a suggests that societies with a majority religion should exhibit less conflict regarding the management of the pandemic compared to societies without a majority religion. On this issue, how do the case studies compare?

An important distinction can be made here between the Catholic grouping and the other contexts. In the Catholic cases, religious leaders (e.g. Belgium) tended to appeal to the idea of solidarity in their messaging to adherents, drawing on this religious group's tradition of social teaching (Palacios 2007). This, in turn, helped to operate as a cue for motivating consensus among adherents.

This national-level discourse articulated well with global-level dynamics. For example, Pope Francis attempted to harness the COVID-19 pandemic experience as an opportunity to create a better world. Institutionally, this was reflected in the establishment of a Vatican COVID-19 Commission to help steer societies after the pandemic towards a social order rooted in concern for the well-being of all humanity (Santos and Chai 2022). But it was expressed in other ways too, such as the Pope's use of social media, especially in the pandemic's early stages (Pérez-Martínez 2022), and his well-received *Urbi et Orbi* (To the City and to the World) message (27 March 2020) to an empty St Peter's Square (Pérez-Martínez 2022; Scardigno et al. 2021), to help foster a sense of hope amid the pandemic.

Regarding other religious groups, we find less evidence of this kind of socially motivated discourse. Although an appeal to solidarity was not absent in Protestant-majority countries, this tended (as in the Norwegian case) to be mainly promoted by secular rather than religious actors. For example, the Norwegian prime minister invoked the idea of *dugnad* to foster a cooperative response among the general populace to the pandemic, a reference to this society's deeply rooted mutual aid system (see [Chapter 15](#), this volume). Likewise, in Denmark there was a strong appeal to the communitarian idea of *samfundssind* to inspire solidarity during hard times.

It is also clear that there is not a simple or straightforward relationship between majority status and societal consensus. To take just one example, the Greek case reveals that, despite the historic dominance of the Orthodox religion in this society, consensus appeared to be lacking in the very early stages of the pandemic, when the church pushed back against its perceived lack of involvement in state pandemic decision-making. At the same time, the Orthodox Church began to support state restrictions a few weeks into the pandemic.

In other Orthodox-majority contexts, such as Bulgaria, it is worth noting the Orthodox Church's stance of keeping church buildings open even as other religious groups voluntarily closed theirs. The state tacitly approved this approach by not mandating their closure, likely owing to its reluctance to stoke opposition at a time when anti-government feeling was already running high.

On the other hand, in Protestant-majority societies such as Sweden, there was a broad consensus about the management of religion, even if some religious leaders did speak out against the perceived harshness of restrictions applying to funeral services or perceived differences in rules applied to secular versus religious settings.

Another aspect worth mentioning in this context concerns the presence or absence of interfaith interactions. In a number of countries under study here (e.g. Ireland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden) – interfaith bodies or interfaith exchanges, at either a national or a regional level, helped to foster a shared approach among different religious groups during the pandemic. In Ireland, the Dublin City Interfaith Forum played an important dialoguing and awareness-raising role and regular meetings between religious and state elites also took place at the national level, even if these did not preclude controversies arising between them. In Romania, an interfaith forum existed between religious groups (the Consultative Council of Religions) and political and medical authorities. Similarly, in the Swedish case, an interfaith body (of religious minorities) also existed and met with state representatives to find common ground around a pandemic response. At the same time, it seems that these various fora were more revealing of established religion–state interactions than drivers of changes in them.

In the secular-majority grouping, religious groups were supportive of the state's public health efforts. In France, for example, Catholic leaders as well as leaders of other religious groups lent their support to restrictions. In Estonia, too, religious leaders supported restrictions

and, as with religious-majority contexts, called into question, when restrictions began to be relaxed, the apparent dissimilarity in treatment by the state of similar secular and religious settings. Although Germany experienced well-publicised protests against restrictions and vaccines, the interactions between the state and religious groups in responding to the pandemic were cooperative. And the Latvian case revealed that religious groups also supported state actions.

Thus, religious-majority contexts did not look very different from secular-majority ones in terms of their degree of conflict around pandemic management. Overall, then, we did not find strong support for Proposition 1a across the country groupings.

Proposition 1b concerns whether societies with historic legal cooperative relations between church and state should exhibit more harmonious relations during a pandemic compared to societies that lacked a tradition of legal cordial interactions. Regarding the case studies, we find some support for this proposition. For example, the Catholic-majority Croatian case, where formal concordats exist between the Catholic Church and the state, revealed cordial church–state interactions, even if the bishops did not necessarily agree with all state actions during the pandemic. Indeed, in this context state actions frequently privileged the dominant religious group, as in the state’s looking-away in the case of some priests who breached pandemic-related restrictions.

Similarly, in the Finnish case, also characterised by close legal church–state ties, the country’s two dominant religious groups – the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Orthodox Church – both supported the state’s restrictions, although religious groups were not specifically curtailed by them. Indeed, this Protestant-majority case provides strong support for political scientist Alfred Stepan’s idea of ‘twin tolerations’ (Buckley 2016, 13), whereby church and state mutually respect each other’s autonomy. As the chapter on Finland put it, ‘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 measures necessary to curb the public activities for the good of all’ ([Chapter 14](#), this volume). In the Danish case, the state imposed strong restrictions on its own state Lutheran church, even though reflection on their implications for religious freedom was absent.

Although in some Orthodox-majority countries – such as Greece, where there is also legal cooperation – there was some disagreement between the Orthodox Church and the state during the pandemic, on the whole church–state interactions were harmonious. The disunity arose particularly with regard to perceived deficits by the Orthodox Church in the state’s decision-making processes, in which it sought a greater role.

Within the Catholic grouping (with preferred religion), unsurprisingly there was also cooperation with the state. For example, in Lithuania the church complied with state restrictions and when it held Masses that breached restrictions it changed course in response to the state’s request. Similarly, in Spain there was little or no conflict, although the absence of religious groups in the state’s decision-making around restrictions may have contributed to anomalies, whereby a secular activity such as purchasing tobacco was considered ‘essential’ while attending Mass was not. In Italy, the bishops’ conference cooperated with the state but also argued for its right to exercise autonomy, an observation that prompted a clarification from Pope Francis.

Compared to societies without an historic tradition of legal cooperation in church–state interactions, the pattern is not very different. Consider, for example, the French case, which was characterised by relative unity in managing the pandemic.

Overall, then, we did not find strong support for Proposition 1b. Perhaps this reflects a ‘rally around the state’ effect in a time of crisis like a pandemic, regardless of the presence or absence of historic legal cooperation between religious and state authorities.

Proposition 1c is based on the idea that societies with a secular majority should be more accepting of scientific authority than societies with a religious majority.

Based on our analysis of the religious-majority and secular-majority countries, we find limited support for this perspective. Within the secular majority grouping, views of scientific authority wavered between acceptance and disagreement. In France and Germany, for example, religious groups, for the most part, supported vaccination efforts and efforts to dampen the virus’s social reproduction. In another secular-majority case, Estonia, different religious groups were supportive of vaccination efforts even if ethical concerns about the use of abortion cells in vaccines were brought out by the Central Estonian Märijamaa congregation. By comparison, in the Latvian case there was some

disagreement about vaccines, especially within the Catholic leadership. For example, the country's cardinal and archbishop took diverging anti- and pro-vaccine positions, respectively. Here, too, there was some Catholic involvement in anti-vaccine mobilisation.

Regarding the religious-majority countries, in the Catholic and Protestant groupings there was stronger support for vaccination efforts than in the Orthodox-majority grouping, where disagreement about vaccines and public health strategies tended to be more salient, perhaps even more so than in the secular-majority countries. In this context, it is worth mentioning that past research suggests that across different world regions Christianity was negatively associated with vaccination (Trepanowski and Drązkowski 2022).

Overall, then, we did not find strong support for the idea that scientific authority should be greater in secular-majority countries than in religious-majority ones. Perhaps this reflects increasingly secular trends even within religious-majority countries nowadays (e.g. Dobbelaere and Pérez-Agote 2015).

Whereas Proposition 1c has to do with religious-secular contrasts regarding scientific authority, Proposition 1d concerns views of scientific authority within the same religious tradition.

In the Catholic subgroup (with and without a preferred religion), bishops in general supported vaccination efforts. For example, the church in Lithuania supported scientific messaging around vaccines notwithstanding some ethical concerns around the use of abortion cells. Additionally, the church offered churches for use as vaccination centres.

Similarly, in the Protestant-majority grouping, scientific authority was supported in the four case studies, especially in the Swedish case. Indeed, Sweden stood out globally in the symbolic weight accorded to its scientific community by political actors (Greer et al. 2021). [The chapter on Sweden](#) reveals that this was grounded in the historical intimacy between church and state in this context, expressed via the Lutheran church's strong social welfare involvements.

Within the all-Orthodox grouping, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was not supportive of vaccination efforts, revealing its sceptical approach to scientific authority. For example, the church declined to participate in a public forum established to support vaccination efforts. This may have reflected similar scepticism in the society more widely, with social surveys showing less than half of the general

population viewing vaccines as safe. This contrasted with the situation in Greece, where high levels of support for vaccination efforts within the Orthodox church were reflected in the publication of statements about its own leaders availing of vaccines, as a spur to adherents to do likewise. At the same time, individual clergy diverged from the official church stance by supporting anti-vaccine sentiment.

Similarly, in Romania, the patriarch's decision to publicly disclose having received his vaccine likely had a similar intended purpose of motivating wider acceptance among the general populace. Thus, even within the same religious tradition, the pandemic revealed variation regarding acceptance of scientific authority. This suggests that, within a single religious group, different and sometimes opposing messaging can operate regarding its doctrines. It also suggests that, in contexts of uncertainty, such as a global pandemic, religious leaders may struggle to articulate where their church stands on a given issue (in this case, the religion–science nexus).<sup>4</sup> Public signalling of their vaccine status by prominent leaders within other religious traditions was also present, as in the example of Pope Francis in the Catholic case (Vatican 2021).

Thus, regarding Proposition 1d we find that within the Catholic- and Protestant-majority groupings there was little or no difference across countries in the degree of support for scientific authority. However, we find more variation across countries within the Orthodox-majority category. Thus, the case studies suggest partial support for the proposition about within-group homogeneity.

Two propositions were developed in this study regarding the impact of communism. Proposition 2a is based on the idea that societies with a prior history of communism should be more likely to exhibit conflict with regard to religious restrictions compared to societies lacking this history.

The empirical data presented in the case studies suggested that this proposition is only partially supported. On the one hand, in some contexts (e.g. Latvia), religious groups supported the state's restrictions, even though sometimes there was an issue with compliance. On the other hand, in other cases (e.g. Bulgaria) restrictions activated collective memories of the communist era, a finding in line with past research (e.g. Rudenko and Turenko 2021; Tytarenko and Bogachevska 2021). In other words, the past was drawn upon to speak to present-day debates about state power. To take two brief examples, the mobilisation of memories of communism in Bulgaria helped to legitimise the 'special



pleading' of religious groups during the pandemic, as imposing restrictions on them would have been viewed as an unwelcome reminder of past communist repression. Similarly, in Estonia, memories of communism were harnessed to oppose state restrictions. At the same time, in some other former communist countries (e.g. Lithuania), there was little or no weaponising of collective memories of communism to delegitimise state restrictions.

Partial evidence in support of conflict-related Proposition 2a comes from studies of protest activity in different parts of Europe during the pandemic. For example, past research revealed interesting divergences within Europe in levels of mostly street-based protest activity during the pandemic, with higher levels in North-Western Europe than in Southern Europe. Also, protest levels increased more in Eastern Europe as the pandemic went on than in Southern Europe, even if pandemic-related protests were less salient in Eastern Europe (where restrictions tended to be weaker) than in Southern Europe (and in North-Western Europe) (Kriesi and Oana 2022).

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that some former communist societies exhibited fewer street protests against pandemic-related restrictions (e.g. Bulgaria) than some countries that lacked a communist past (e.g. France), while some societies with a communist experience (e.g. Germany) exhibited more street protests than societies that lacked a communist past (e.g. France)<sup>5</sup> (Kriesi and Oana 2022).

Proposition 2b concerns whether societies with a prior history of communism should be more likely to exhibit less support for the cues of religious leaders during a pandemic compared to societies lacking this history. Here, the evidence suggests partial support for this proposition. Although restrictions related to COVID-19 gave rise to contestation in Germany as a whole, it is also the case that dissatisfaction with these tended to be heightened in the eastern part (Pronkina et al. 2023), which may reflect its more secular context and the legacy of East Germany's communist past. At the same time, in other former communist societies, there is mixed evidence of an historical legacy effect on religious leadership. For example, in Bulgaria, Orthodox adherents sided with the church leadership's stance on restrictions. By contrast, although in Croatia devotees were broadly supportive of the Catholic Church's approach to pandemic restrictions, there was less evidence of support for its pro-vaccine stance. In Slovakia, the Orthodox Church's position on the closure of church buildings prompted public protest.

Also, here there is evidence of a long-term erosion of trust in religious institutions, which may be related to the historical legacy of communism. By comparison, the pandemic-related cues of religious leaders in the countries that lacked a communist history in the other country groupings (e.g. Catholic-majority and Protestant-majority countries) tended to be broadly supported by the general populace.

The third set of propositions had to do with legal culture. Here we were interested in looking at whether societies with a tradition of openness with regard to defending the rights of religious groups should be more likely to exhibit more religious freedom cases during the pandemic than societies that lack this tradition (Proposition 3a). We find some support for this proposition.

Clearly, the countries under study reflect variation in the severity of restrictions on religion, ranging from ‘strict’ contexts (e.g. Ireland) to ‘lax’ ones (e.g. Bulgaria), resulting in variation in the pandemic’s ‘piety’ (Madera 2022b). However, most European countries implemented some form of restriction on religion. According to the *Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights*, it is also the case that the different countries reflect variation in their degree of openness to religious minority issues (Ferrari et al. 2024), which may be viewed as a proxy measure of their openness to religious claims more generally. Here, the secular-majority case of Germany is instructive (see [Chapter 11](#), this volume), a country with a tradition of imposing some restrictions on religious minorities (Fox 2008). This case was characterised by a number of religious freedom cases brought by religious groups during the pandemic, with the Federal Constitutional Court ruling in favour of an Islamic group’s claim against restrictions on religious services, on the grounds that they treated similar secular and religious settings differently. Here – as in other contexts – the idea of proportionality seems to have been one of the key legal issues at stake (du Plessis and Portaru 2022; Madera 2022b; Martínez-Torrón 2021). In other words, restrictions on basic rights ought to reflect the degree of risk at a given point in time and not overstep it (Martínez-Torrón 2021). Yet, in other societies (e.g. Estonia) and country groupings (e.g. Protestant-majority countries) with generally a strong tradition of openness to supporting religious group rights, there were few or no legal cases about religious freedom.

Proposition 3b concerns whether societies with a weak tradition of openness with regard to defending the rights of religious groups

should be more likely to rely on the international regional courts during the pandemic than societies that lack this tradition. The country cases show that religious freedom cases were taken to national court systems during the pandemic in Catholic-majority (e.g. Belgium), secular-majority (e.g. France), and Orthodox-majority settings (e.g. Greece) (Christian Network Europe 2023; du Plessis and Portaru 2022) but, interestingly, not in the Protestant-majority ones. A recent review of such court decisions concluded that in the European context (compared to the North American context) ‘courts adopted analogous deference toward public decision-making’ (Madera 2022a, 722), whether on a substantive or a procedural basis, even if some cases did find in favour of religious groups<sup>6</sup> (Madera 2022a).

Against this background, and in line with expectations, we find evidence of religious groups in some of the case study countries resorting to the European court system during the pandemic to advance religious freedom claims. For example, cases were taken by individuals or groups from Croatia, Greece, and Romania (du Plessis and Portaru 2022). Perhaps the Greek and Romanian cases reflect the relative lack of openness of their national legal systems to religious (minority) group claims.<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that there also is one pending post-pandemic case regarding religious freedom in Slovakia (Christian Network Europe 2023; Puppink 2023). By contrast, the relative lack of cases in the Protestant-majority countries likely reflects their greater openness to religious group claims, thus providing support for Proposition 3b.

Perhaps the most salient legal issue that arose across the country case studies had to do with the issue of religious freedom, either in relation to public worship (*libertas ecclesiae*) or private belief (*libertas fidei*) (Colaïanni 2020). Thus, the pandemic brought to the fore a relatively new context for the exercise (or not) of some religious freedoms in modern European societies, one that collided with other competing interests such as the duty of the state to protect public health. Of course, legal rights are not absolute (Trstenjak 2023) and in the early stages of the pandemic some religious freedoms were curtailed to protect public health, the latter being the basis of other rights in society. This revealed that the adjudication of rights involves a kind of weighing up of colliding rights or interests (Trstenjak 2023), where one may trump the other in specific contexts. Proportionality was an important principle guiding state decision-making in this context (du Plessis

and Portaru 2022; Madera 2022b; Martínez-Torrón 2021). However, as restrictions eased, some religious freedoms became more contested as an issue, especially in light of perceived differences in the treatment of similar secular and religious settings.

Finally, Proposition 4 had to do with our expectations about the impact of the pandemic on religious commitment at the individual-level in societies with varying levels of (in)security. We expected individuals in societies characterised by high levels of insecurity to exhibit greater religiosity in the wake of the pandemic than individuals in societies with low levels of insecurity. Here, the evidence is not clear cut.<sup>8</sup> In terms of secure societies, empirical studies in some settings (e.g. Spain) reported both upticks and declines in religiosity. In others (e.g. Sweden), studies revealed that life cycle rituals are basically on the same level as before the pandemic and religious service attendance may well have even declined. In still others, such as Estonia, surveys revealed a 17 per cent uptick in interest in spirituality among young people. In secular-majority France, the evidence is mixed as well, with some studies pointing to an increase and others to a decrease in religiosity. On the insecure societies side, there were only a handful of cases (i.e. Bulgaria, Greece, Romania) included in this volume. Comparing the countries in the Orthodox-majority category to the ones in the Protestant-majority one, research suggests a higher uptick in religiosity in the Orthodox case of Greece than in the Nordic countries (Bentzen 2021), providing partial support for Proposition 4. At the same time, in most societies included in this volume the pandemic had some effect on individual-level religiosity, but there was no clear pattern and it remains to be seen if the effects are lasting.

Overall, although we find support for some of the propositions, others received less support. This invites the question of the extent to which other factors beyond the ones considered here might be important in accounting for the patterns observed in this volume. One potential factor not directly incorporated into our framing relates to the relevance of religious traditions themselves. We deliberately categorised the countries in this volume into groupings reflecting particular religious groups, traditions, and backgrounds on the basis that the cases within these groupings might be expected to exhibit a high degree of commonality owing to this shared heritage. It may be that this factor may help explain why within each country grouping – though perhaps less so for the Orthodox-majority category – we find a broad similar-

ity in the approach adopted by religious groups to the pandemic. For example, within the Catholic category bishops in Europe supported vaccines, prompted by the pro-vaccine messaging of the centralised authority of the Vatican and Pope Francis especially (*Vatican News* 2021). Here, the shared teachings of Catholicism ensured that national churches did not waver from Vatican directives. Likewise, in the Protestant-majority countries a similar approach was taken regarding scientific authority, each national context rooted in a shared Lutheran tradition, albeit one less centralised than the Catholic case. By contrast, within the Orthodox grouping – where authority is horizontally organised – religious leaders tended to exhibit more latitude regarding their approach to vaccines. Thus, it may be that by taking the national society as the unit of analysis our framing overlooked to some extent the role of international contexts and religious traditions in shaping how the pandemic influenced the internal workings of religions and religious freedom across Europe.

Another factor worth considering here is the secularisation experience within the specifically European context. What distinguishes Europe as a world region is that it is generally regarded as a kind of exemplar of secularisation theory, where countries are moving towards greater secularity as modernity takes hold more and more (Davie 2002). Within this background, it is worth noting that, while the countries included in this volume may be at different steps in the secularisation process, some further along than others or some beginning earlier than others, all the countries, despite national specificities in the contextual factors considered here, are in one way or another basically on the same ‘secular transition’ pathway (Voas 2008, 25; see also Davie 2002). This may help explain why, say, religious-majority and secular-majority contexts did not look very different in terms of acceptance of scientific authority. Put otherwise, had we compared countries within a different world regional context (e.g. Africa), reflecting different ‘staging points’ in the secularisation process, one might observe different consequences of the pandemic for the internal workings of religions and religious freedom.

## Conclusion

Based on the country case studies and comparative analysis presented in this volume, what are the broader empirical and theoretical

takeaways for students of religion and law or, more generally, for how religion responds to crises in the modern world?

Empirically, an important contribution of this volume is that it presents a profile of religion in diverse countries in Europe during a time of crisis, ranging in their confessional traditions and religion/secular dynamics. As such, it will likely serve as an important database or reference work for social scientists – and, indeed, non-researchers – in seeking to better understand how religious forces were influenced by the societal crisis brought on by the pandemic (and vice versa) and, more broadly, of how the pandemic influenced the social world. This historical archive, so to speak, could also be profitably utilised by teachers of religious education across Europe, as a chronicle of how the pandemic experience impacted religion as a social institution. More broadly, this volume will help future generations who want to know more about the afterlife of this aspect of their collective past.

Regarding this impact, perhaps one of the most significant issues concerns the durability (or not) of changes in religion arising from the pandemic. Unlike previous studies, which have focused on the pandemic's impact during a particular phase of the pandemic (e.g. Greer et al. 2021), this volume has focused on its impact as a whole, in this case on religion. Even so, our answer to the long-term question can only be somewhat tentative, as we have yet to see how religion will play out five or ten years from now. To what extent are observed changes in religion across the country case studies (e.g. rise in online forms of religion) likely to endure into the future? Although our answer to this question is somewhat speculative, it is likely that the provision of a mix of online and in-person religious rituals will be one of the pandemic's enduring impacts. For example, the Swedish case suggests that online rituals are likely here to stay, with 21 per cent of Church of Sweden congregations offering online services at the end of 2022 compared to a pre-pandemic level of 12 per cent (see [Chapter 16](#), this volume). Even in other cases, where empirical research on this aspect is less available (e.g. Norway), the embrace of digital technologies will likely continue. The Estonian case – long seen as a global leader in technological change (Kattel and Mergel 2019) – also suggests that online religious activity will become a more important part of future evangelisation, as evidenced by the establishment here of a dedicated Christian support website.

Another important issue brought out by the country case studies is that they reveal religion to be both a constraining and an enabling

force during pandemic times. For example, a predominant finding in nearly all of the case study chapters was how religious groups helped to legitimise the efforts of state actors to minimise the social and medical harms brought about by the pandemic by encouraging adherents to follow restrictions or avail themselves of vaccinations (or both). Even where the state did not mandate the closing of places of worship (e.g. Bulgaria), religious groups willingly brought in restrictions of their own out of concern for the whole society.<sup>9</sup> Some religious groups were also involved in providing direct humanitarian aid to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic. Moreover, religious groups (e.g. the Orthodox Church in Greece) actively supported state actors in providing social welfare support to the general populace during the pandemic, even furnishing financial support of its own to the state. In France, religious groups mobilised social and spiritual support for victims of the pandemic via telephone. Additionally, the humanitarian role of chaplains in hospitals in supporting the victims of the pandemic (e.g. Croatia, Estonia) brought a spotlight on a frequently overlooked occupational category. More broadly, religious groups saw the pandemic as an opportunity to imagine a better world, especially for the most disadvantaged (Phillips 2020).

At the same time, some of the country case studies revealed how some religious groups were supporters of the notion of the pandemic as some kind of conspiracy, which was sometimes weaponised to fuel anti-vaccine sentiment. For example, in the Norwegian case, evangelical-related media (i.e. *Visjon Norge*) sought to empower conspiracy ideas about the pandemic, even though this was admittedly a minority view among religious groups in society. Likewise, in Catholic-majority Austria religious groups were active in anti-vaccination efforts. It is also the case that religious groups were sometimes indifferent to restrictions by carrying on with religious practices (Rudenko and Turenko 2021). For example, in the Greek case, the Eastern Orthodox Church decided to celebrate the Eucharist, going against state elites (Rudenko and Turenko 2021).<sup>10</sup>

Theoretically, this study has attempted to put forward an analytical framing to account for cross-national variation in the impact of the pandemic on religion, focusing on the role of three conditioning contextual factors (religious landscape, political history, legal culture). This framing motivated a set of propositions and we find support for some of these in the empirical analysis of the country cases.

More generally, perhaps the most significant theoretical takeaway of this study is the importance of centring the role of critical events in understanding religious dynamics in society. This focus goes against the more common attentiveness to large-scale social processes (e.g. secularisation) (e.g. Casanova 1994) but aligns with the relatively small number of studies that focus on sudden, short-run events – e.g. wars and economic upheavals (Stolz and Voas 2023) and internal church events (Conway 2016) – as potential influences on religious change.

Looking to where research on this topic might go in the future, it is our hope that this edited volume will spur other researchers to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on religion in other world regional contexts and to engage in comparative work across regional settings. Additionally, we hope that it might inspire research on the impact of the pandemic on other religious groups apart from the ones examined here, especially non-Christian religious groups, and comparing its impacts across different religious traditions.

To take just one example, comparing Christian-majority and Muslim-majority countries regarding religion–science interactions could shed light on how the teachings of different religious traditions regarding the place of scientific knowledge in relation to religious worldviews could potentially shape this interaction. Another fruitful line for future inquiry would be to engage in comparative historical analysis of the impact of different pandemics on different religious groups across different world regional settings. For instance, a comparison of the influence of the Spanish flu and the COVID-19 pandemics on religion could shed light on how religion–science interactions have changed across time and space.

Although this study has relied mainly on textual materials and survey-based work, future research could utilise other qualitative approaches such as ethnography to better understand the local influences of the pandemic on different religious groups varying in their numerical size, cultural position, legal status, etc. across different countries. Additionally, mixed-method studies combining social surveys and ethnographies would be useful for better understanding both population-wide dynamics as well as local contextual experiences within individual countries. A number of ongoing large-scale research studies<sup>11</sup> offer the potential to bring this methodological diversity to this interesting topic, as well as yielding important empirical and theoretical insights.



Finally, by providing international comparative evidence about the different yet similar influences of a short-term event (in this case, a global pandemic) on the internal workings of religions and religious freedom in diverse countries within Europe varying in their religious/secular landscapes, this study has attempted to advance our understanding of the societal role of religion nowadays, especially during times of sudden, large-scale uncertainty and disruption.

## Notes

- 1 I thank Lene Kühle and Francesco Alicino for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
- 2 Similarly, anthropologist Didier Fassin argues that epidemics can be seen as ‘unveiling’ exercises (Fassin 2007, 32).
- 3 Likewise, sociologist Linnea Lundgren usefully distinguishes between religion as a resource or a risk in her study of state dynamics concerning religious minority groups in Sweden (Lundgren 2023). I owe this reference to Grace Davie (EUREL correspondents’ meeting, 22 September 2022).
- 4 For a similar example in a different context, see Johnston, Holleman, and Krull (2023).
- 5 For a visual representation of trends in street protests across six select European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, see Figure 7 in Kriesi and Oana (2022).
- 6 For example, courts found in favour of religious groups in Belgium, France, and Germany, especially after the early period of the pandemic (Madera 2022a).
- 7 According to the *Atlas of Religious or Belief Minority Rights*, Greece and Romania have P-index scores of 0.25 and 0.27, respectively, compared to a European average of 0.28 (Ferrari et al. 2024). In the Greek example, the case was taken by the Association of Orthodox Ecclesiastical Obedience, independent of the Greek Orthodox Church, whereas in the Romanian one it was by a Seventh-day Adventist adherent (du Plessis and Portaru 2022).
- 8 This volume’s categorisation of European societies as either secure or insecure is based on sociologist Francesco Molteni’s global mapping of levels of insecurity using Human Development Index data (Molteni 2021, 50).
- 9 See also Martínez-Torrón (2021).
- 10 Past studies suggest that religious groups were associated with ‘end time’ thinking in relation to the pandemic (e.g. Dein 2021), though we found little evidence of this in the country case studies.
- 11 These include: *Churches Online in Times of Corona* (<https://contoc.org/contoc-en>); *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations* (<https://www.COVIDreligionresearch.org/>); *The Changing Role of Religion in Societies Emerging from COVID-19* (<https://www.transatlanticplatform.com/the-changing-role-of-religion-in-societies-emerging-from-COVID-19/>); *Religious Communities in the Virtual Age* (<https://recovira.org/>); and *British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19* (<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/projects/bric-19>).

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