

CHAPTER 7

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion in Lithuania

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Abstract

To stop the pandemic, the government of Lithuania announced two quarantines, in periods that encompassed the major holidays of the year. The country imposed highly restrictive measures by banning public religious gatherings but allowing accommodations for private prayer in public places of worship.

The chapter discusses the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on religion in Lithuania, focusing on the legal and sociological aspects of the issue. It analyses such questions as the relationship of religion and state in Lithuania during the COVID-19 pandemic when the government imposed different restrictions on religious groups (religious communities complying with the public health directives from the government and/or adopting voluntary restrictions on their activities following public health recommendations), the main legal texts that have affected religious life, regulations concerning specific areas of religious life, how collective religious life was affected during the pandemic including the importance of digital use, and how the pandemic

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has influenced people's religiosity, including modifications of religious practices.

Introduction

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Lithuania on 28 February 2020 (The Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020a). Nationwide, from 3 January 2020 to 4:01pm CEST, 5 July 2023, there were 1,321,478 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 9,692 deaths, reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). As of 10 June 2023, a total of 4,532,385 vaccine doses had been administered (WHO n.d.). A coronavirus-related extreme situation was raised by the government of Lithuania on 24 February 2020, which ended with an adoption of the Resolution 'On Declaration of State-Level Emergency' on 26 February 2020.¹ During the pandemic, the country had two lockdowns: the first lasted from 14 March 2020² to 17 June 2020 and the second lasted from 4 November 2020³ to 31 May 2021. Lithuania ended the national emergency on 1 May 2022 (The Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2022).

Owing to these lockdowns, some rights were restricted in Lithuania. The quarantine measures impacted free movement, access to health services, social services, and education. For example, during the first wave of the pandemic, the right to movement was restricted by the prohibition on going abroad. During the second wave of COVID-19, the adopted measures were stricter as the government approved a prohibition on moving from one municipality to another and from one household to another (Voveriūnaitė 2021). During the first lockdown, medical diagnostic services, elective hospitalisations, and surgeries were postponed (cases of emergency were exceptions), visiting of patients in hospitals was prohibited (children under 14 years old and patients with terminal illnesses were exceptions), and the provision of medical rehabilitation services was restricted. The quarantine measures impacted socially vulnerable groups, putting them in institutional isolation (FRA 2020, 3–4). As for religious communities, the recommendations were to cancel all religious ceremonies and public gatherings during the first quarantine period (FRA 2020, 4) and to organise religious rites and recollections remotely during the second quarantine period (The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020b).

According to OSCE/ODIHR (2020), the health crisis posed a challenge for individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief and affected their ability to access places of worship, observe religious holidays, and participate in rituals associated with certain stages of life, such as religious funeral services. It also impacted the ability of people to gather in homes for worship, to conduct community activities and religious processions, and to teach religion or belief. Moreover, physical distancing hampered the efforts of religious or belief communities to undertake charitable and humanitarian work and to reach out to and assist the most vulnerable people (OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 117).

Setting the Context

Lithuania is a country with a majority Catholic population. According to the 2021 census data, 74.2 per cent of the population attributed themselves to the Roman Catholic community. Other large religious denominations were Orthodox (3.8 per cent), Old Believers (0.7 per cent), Evangelical Lutherans (0.6 per cent), and Evangelical Reformed (0.2 per cent) (Oficialios statistikos portalas 2021a). The number of Orthodox Christians has increased since 2020, due to the arrival of citizens of the Republic of Belarus seeking to escape the undemocratic regime there (who have come in two waves: 2020 autumn to the first half of 2021 and since the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 24 February 2022) and refugees fleeing Ukraine from 24 February 2022. At the start of 2024, 86,352 citizens of Ukraine and 62,165 citizens of Belarus lived in Lithuania (Migracijos departamentas... 2023, 11).

Membership of other religious communities did not exceed 1 per cent of the population (Pentecostals 0.11 per cent, Old Baltic faith communities (contemporary pagan groups in Lithuania) 0.14 per cent, Jews 0.03 per cent, Muslims 0.08 per cent, Greek Catholics 0.03 per cent, Karaites 0.01 per cent, Jehovah's Witnesses 0.08 per cent, Baptists 0.04 per cent, Seventh-day Adventists 0.03 per cent, Methodists 0.01 per cent, Buddhists 0.01 per cent, members of Churches of Christ 0.06 per cent, communities of Charismatic Evangelical Christians 0.02 per cent, the New Apostolic Church 0.01 per cent, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) 0.01 per cent, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 0.004 per cent) (Oficialios statistikos portalas 2021a). In total, 6.1 per cent of the population did not identify with any religious group and 13.7 per cent of Lithuanian residents

did not indicate their religion. There were new religious communities recorded in the census: Deists, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Witches, Rastafarians, and Theosophists (Oficialios statistikos portalas 2021).

The Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos religinių bendruomenių ir bendrijų įstatymas 1995⁴) embedded a differentiation of religious communities, as well as the model of cooperation between state and religious organisations. It divides religions into three groups: ‘traditional’ religious groups supported by the state, ‘recognised’ religious groups, and other religious groups, which must register with the government to gain legal status.

The first group is made up of nine traditional religious communities and associations that comprise a part of Lithuania’s historical, spiritual, and social heritage and receive special benefits from the state. These groups are: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Judaist, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite (Article 5). Relations between the state and the Catholic Church, which has the most members, are governed by the constitution and the Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania, but also by several other agreements. In 1990, the Act for the Restitution of the Status of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was adopted, declaring cooperation between the state and the church on the basis of parity. In 2000, three agreements (the Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See Concerning the Juridical Aspects of the Relations between the Catholic Church and the State,⁵ the Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See Concerning the Pastoral Care of Catholics Serving in the Army,⁶ and the Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See on Cooperation in Education and Culture⁷) were concluded between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See. Subsequently, special laws were developed on the basis of these agreements.

Members of the second group receive recognition by the state under the constitution, provided they do not contradict the constitution or the law. The requirements for religious associations seeking state recognition are provided in the Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania (Article 6). Currently, four ‘recognised’ religious communities and associations groups receive more limited benefits from the state: the Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Pentecostal

Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and the New Apostolic Church of Lithuania.

The third group – other religious communities and associations – must follow the requirements provided in the Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania (Article 11) in order to register with the government to gain legal status.

Legal Aspects

In Lithuania, there was already legislation to regulate religious life in the event of a disaster. The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992) allows limits on the freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs when necessary to protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Under the constitution, the government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief during a period of martial law or a state of emergency.

In response to the virus, the state imposed highly restrictive measures by banning public gatherings but allowing for private prayer to be accommodated in public places of worship (OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 117). These legislative changes related to religious life were temporary. During the first wave of the pandemic, the government recommended that religious communities not organise religious rites (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė 2020). The resolution on the first quarantine (No. 207, 14 March 2020), Article 5, recommended that all religious ceremonies and public gatherings be cancelled during the quarantine period. Religious organisations agreed with the recommendations. During the second national lockdown, it was recommended that religious communities either organise the religious rites and recollections remotely (online), avoid gatherings (an area of 10m² per person had to be ensured and a distance of at least two metres had to be observed between persons or groups of persons (up to five persons or members of one family and/or one household), or refrain from performing religious rites (The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020b).

Restrictions on public religious gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of religious services, including during Easter and Christmas (ACN International 2021; Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020b), Passover (ACN International 2021; Weber 2020), and Ramadan (ACN International 2021; LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020b). The severity of Lithuania's approach was described

as ‘high’ (rather than ‘very high’, ‘moderate’, or ‘low’) because it imposed highly restrictive measures by banning public religious gatherings while allowing for private prayer to be accommodated in public places of worship (Artaud de La Ferrière 2020; OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 117).

Religious communities had to adapt to the governmental recommendations and decrees. Some of them, such as the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Lietuvos evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia 2020), the Evangelical Reformed Church, and the Council of the Lithuanian Muslim Religious Community – Muftiate (LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020a), issued their regulations and reminders to believers to consider the government’s decision on quarantine. For example, on 27 March 2020, the Consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church issued regulations stating that services would be broadcast online; churches, if possible, would be opened for individual visits for at least some hours during a couple of days per week; all events would be cancelled; baptisms would be provided only in the presence of the person being baptised and his/her parents; preparations for confirmation would be organised online, with dates for confirmation to be decided after 1 June; and funeral services would be provided outside the church building with the participation of only the people closest to the deceased (Lietuvos evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia 2020). On 17 May 2020, the Evangelical Lutheran Church announced that regulations of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania regarding protective measures and safe distances should be maintained, and they would be applied to religious services (Lietuvos evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia 2020a).

Religious communities generally complied with the public health directives from the government or adopted voluntary restrictions on their activities following public health recommendations. Religious minorities (traditional, state-recognised, and registered religious communities) acted in basically the same way as the largest religious communities: they adhered to the government’s public health directives or limited their activities voluntarily in accordance with public health recommendations. Religious leaders shared and reinforced the advice of public health authorities and helped to counteract misinformation about the pandemic. Also, religious communities supported health services and sought to help the most vulnerable members of society (OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 118).

However, there were cases where religious communities adopted voluntary restrictions on their activities following public health recommendations, which were viewed as challenging the existing guidelines on social distancing. An example relates to the Catholic Church during the second lockdown, when there were recommendations for religious communities in place but no prohibitions. The Catholic Church supported the decision of the government and announced a temporary suspension of public Masses from 16 December 2020 (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020b). However, after the Christmas feasts, the Episcopal Conference announced the return of Masses in churches with restrictions (Naureckaitė 2021). This decision resulted in considerable public criticism (Naureckaitė 2021) and, following pressure from the government, prompted a change in the bishops' decision (ELTA 2021). On 28 January 2021, Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė requested that the Catholic Church not celebrate public Mass (ELTA 2021), a request that the Episcopal Conference agreed to, thus postponing the return to public Masses. The Lithuanian Episcopal Conference announced its decision to start public Masses from 17 February 2021 (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2021), but under strict conditions (Narbutas 2021, 12–13).

The government issued regulations concerning specific areas of religious life, including hospitals and funerals. During the second lockdown, visits to social care homes and residential social service establishments were banned, except when visiting residents in terminal condition or when a visit was related to the performance of duties. Hospital visits were banned too, except when visiting terminally ill patients, children under 14 years of age, and patients in maternity wards with the permission of the hospital's manager (The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020b). Terminally ill patients could attend masses while staying in nursing hospitals (mostly based on a Christian worldview). Patients received psychosocial support through spiritual assistants working at the institutions, during religious rituals, or at other events attended by clergy (Bučius 2020).

In the beginning of 2021, Catholic Church representatives organised an online conference for practitioners of clinical pastorate, 'Clinical Pastorate: Pandemic Challenges and Possibilities in Lithuania', which was dedicated to health care staff (doctors and nursing staff, spiritual assistants, social workers, midwives, hospital chaplains, and psychologists). The conference aimed to reflect the situation of health

care staff (e.g. doctors, volunteers) during the pandemic and discussed practical issues of spiritual help (mainly from a Catholic perspective) in hospitals as well as in nursing hospitals (LSMUL Kauno klinikos 2021).

The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania prepared recommendations for the handling of bodies of deceased persons and the arrangement of funerals (SAM 2020), based on the recommendations from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (ECDC 2020). Religious communities followed the recommendations of the Ministry of Health. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church decided not to organise viewings of bodies for mourners in churches (in those that had such a tradition). Funeral services had to be held outdoors, only with the people closest to the deceased attending (Lietuvos evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia 2020).

Recommendations were renewed during the extreme period (COVID-19 2022). The same recommendations prepared earlier by the Ministry of Health were applied. In November 2020, the second nationwide lockdown was brought in, when some businesses had to halt or reduce their operations, tighter infection control measures were enforced, and work and education were arranged with a minimum of contact. During lockdown, specific rules regarding funerals were released. Funerals could be attended by a maximum of ten persons, except family members (spouses or persons with whom a registered partnership agreement had been concluded; children and adopted children, including minor children, of the deceased, of their spouses, or of persons with whom a registered partnership agreement had been concluded; and parents, adoptive parents, and guardians; and the persons providing the funeral services) (The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020b).

As far as is known, no legal cases were taken regarding state-imposed religion-related restrictions in Lithuania. There were some discussions regarding church–state relations, as well as the impact of restrictions on freedom of practice during the pandemic. Most attention was given to the Catholic Church (Narbutas 2021; Ruškytė 2021). Narbutas (2021) attempts to evaluate how the lockdown influenced the situation of religious liberty in Lithuania. He also gives an overview of relations between the Roman Catholic Church (represented by the Lithuanian Episcopal Conference) and the government of Lithuania, emphasising its mode of bilateral partnership. Ruškytė (2021)

discusses the relationship of the state and the Catholic Church during the quarantine. She also discusses the right of the Catholic Church to adopt and revoke decisions in Lithuania regarding restrictions on religious rites associated with quarantine by referring to constitutional regulation, the principle of cooperation, and the Code of Canon Law. The conclusion is that the church could not ignore the dangerous situation in the state for health and life, and the state could not dictate to the church, especially considering that the celebration of the Mass is the core of Catholic faith (Canon 904).

Sociological Aspects

Religious organisations are often based on communal values and mobilisation of community members. Within this context, the COVID-19 pandemic became a significant challenge for them. Therefore, religious organisations had to choose between, on the one hand, contributing to the spread of COVID-19 by continuing to organise religious ceremonies and promoting contact activities and, on the other, involving members of society in the fight against the pandemic by focusing on limiting social contact networks, by gathering help and remote volunteering, informing adherents about vaccination, etc.

Owing to the quarantine restrictions, many places of worship and churches in Lithuania were closed and community gatherings were cancelled. Religious communities were advised to refrain from performing religious services or conduct activities in a way that would help avoid large gatherings. Various communities faced restrictions and recommendations. This highlighted the ability of religion to adapt to changed conditions. After the suspension of live services, religious communities invited believers to participate in services, recollections, and other community meetings virtually (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020b; VU 2020). Other religious communities, such as ISKCON, invited believers to watch meditations and lectures online instead of meeting in the temple (Tamošiūnaitė 2021). Others, e.g. the Old Baltic Faith community 'Romuva', had no gatherings during the quarantine and renewed them only during the break between two lockdowns.⁸ Some religious communities, such as Muslims, refrained from public meetings for prayer and had prayers in home settings instead. They also, referring to governmental recommendations (from 18 May 2020), considered the possibility of having small-group (up to 30 persons)

prayers outside (Friday prayers – *Jumu'ah* – and festive prayers – Eid al-Fitr), (LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020a). The activities of the Opus Dei community generally moved online and priests gave spiritual advice by telephone. Larger gatherings were cancelled or postponed. However, there were small gatherings held live and people could visit priests for spiritual advice. A couple of priests joined the group of priests in the Church of St Francis and St Bernard in Vilnius, who were ready to support people if they needed to talk to a priest. Generally, the Opus Dei community followed the recommendations of the Lithuanian Conference of Bishops.⁹ The Jewish community in Lithuania also turned to the use of private or virtual spaces during the lockdown, holding individual prayers at home as group prayers (which need at least ten persons) were suspended. Online communication and reading Torah studies were implemented virtually (VU 2020). During the two long periods of lockdown in Lithuania, the two working synagogues (in Kaunas and Vilnius) were closed, and prayers and gatherings for festivals were held sometimes only in private spheres with close friends and family members. The interruption of lockdown after the first period provided the possibility to celebrate the most significant festivals of the autumn in-person. This period was the most profitable time for a group opposed to the official rabbi of Vilnius synagogue from Chabad Lubavitch Chassidim, and even before the lockdown they did not pray with that community. This group (which was joined also by people from Klaipėda, Šiauliai, and later Riga), held weekly Zoom meetings with their unofficial rabbi, Kalev Krelin, for Torah studies and other questions.¹⁰

To prevent the spread of the virus, religious institutions and groups had to respond quickly to government demands, so newly adapted forms of interactive religious services and rituals were inevitable. As mentioned, as a result of the pandemic many individuals and communities moved their activities online. Religious groups and institutions used a number of technological innovations to fill the void created by the coronavirus outbreak. Live gatherings were replaced by means of telecommunications, radio, and various online platforms. In this way, believers could feel part of a community even though they were participating virtually. Such a method contributed to the continuation of communal religious practices, even though it did not replace physical presence in the community. By meeting in online spaces, believers could confirm their professed values and religious goals.

Live-streamed religious rituals connected people in time but also in different locations, thus turning their homes into a ‘temporary sacred space’ (Bryson, Andres, and Davies 2020) by trying to replicate what normally happened in the church. Home also turned into ‘intersacred space’ (Bryson, Andres, and Davies 2020), a space where believers in different places could gather together for a common goal. One example was an initiative at the shrine of Šiluva entitled the ‘Map of Light’, where every spot marked a place where people prayed to end the pandemic. This initiative began as an invitation to multiply prayers, and later became a charity initiative. Organisers emphasised that this project aimed to help people worldwide to participate as much as possible in the prayer of intercession for those who were affected by the coronavirus pandemic and to support them with a donation. The goal of the initiative was ‘to spread the message of hope that together we can counterbalance the statistics of infections and deaths with the statistics of prayer, support, unity, and light’ (Gagliarducci 2020).

Although it may seem that the use of digital technologies by religious communities is a new thing that only came into play during the COVID-19 pandemic, this is not the full story. Back in 2012, digital religion was described by Campbell as ‘the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated’ (Campbell 2012, 4–5). Although the boundary between the ‘offline sphere’ and the ‘online sphere’ is increasingly disappearing (O’Brien 2020), there is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic led to more frequent use of digital religion. For example, the popular church and pilgrimage centre Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Vilnius has been broadcasting and continues to broadcast religious activities online 24 hours per day.¹¹

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced changes in some established habits and rules and encouraged believers to look for ways to maintain and practise their faith. The development of digital religion during the COVID-19 pandemic has been active both at the level of the individual (choosing to comment on religious topics in social space) and at the level of the larger social group (a public broadcaster providing direct virtual access to ritual rites). Such virtual access to religions and religious communities is viewed positively and has continued to be developed when the restrictions regarding social interaction were ended.

As restrictions were eased during the pandemic, the Lithuanian government took measures, following the recommendations of the WHO (WHO 2020) and coordinating multilaterally through the European Council (EC 2020). The government urged people to wash their hands more often, wear face masks, maintain physical distance, and avoid large gatherings. Also, considering these instructions, the order of activity of religious communities was changed. The physical distance between believers was increased in places of worship, for example, by marking the seats at an appropriate distance.

The WHO recommended that religious communities avoid touching other members of their community and kissing objects of worship, and that they should promote hygiene and maintain cleanliness in places of worship and meetings. In Lithuania, these instructions were followed by wearing masks in places of worship, providing the opportunity to disinfect hands, and changing the order of rituals. For example, religious rites were stopped during the pandemic period in the mosques of Vilnius and Kaunas (LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020a). During the first lockdown, prayers were made at a distance among individuals, who had to wear masks (VU 2020). In the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, Eucharist was placed in the palm of a person (instead of the usual reception of communion in the mouth) (Lietuvos evangelikų liuteronų bažnyčia 2020a; Tamošiūnaitė 2021). In the Catholic and Orthodox churches, there was no more holy water, people were asked not to kiss crosses and other relics, and, during services, handshakes and hugs were replaced by head nods when making a sign of peace. In the Old Baltic Faith community 'Romuva', some elements in the sequence of previously performed rites were eliminated. The element of *palabinimas* (welcoming), when the leader of the ritual drinks one gulp from the dipper he/she is holding and later the dipper with the drink is passed around all participants in the circle, vanished and was not restored after the pandemic period.¹² As the number of infections increased, states tended to tighten conditions. This happened in Lithuania as well, where it was decided to stop live services during the main holidays of the year (Tamošiūnaitė 2021). Also, there were changes in religious behaviour regarding funerals, commemoration, marriage, baptism, etc. For example, people chose to cremate their dead relatives more often, and priests visited deceased persons in places of mourning for a shorter time or did not visit them at all, and only performed funeral service rituals in a cemetery (Vaitelė 2020).

In Lithuania, there has been little systematic research on how the pandemic influenced people's religiosity. However, it is possible to make some observations about communal-level religiosity during the pandemic. For example, Catholic Church representatives noticed that there was little or no increase in visits to church in the period between the two quarantines, when it was possible to visit church physically (VU 2020). It is also worth noting that nowadays, when Lithuania (together with other countries) is still experiencing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (as well as the consequences of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war) in the economic and social life of the country, it is difficult to adjudicate the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religions.

Also, the pandemic led to increases in some aspects of individual-level religiosity. Based on an analysis of Google searches for prayer in 107 countries during the pandemic, Bentzen (2021) reports an increased interest in prayer in Lithuania. This increase in prayer intensity may be considered as a form of religious coping with the emotional distress experienced in the world during 2020, confirming that religion remains important for people in modern times (Bentzen 2021).

The relation between religious groups (traditional, state-recognised, and registered religious communities) and the state during COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania could be described as one of collaboration. The majority of religious groups facilitated the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus. For example, it was considered that collaboration of religious communities and state was possible because of common respect for human life (VU 2020). Religious communities, leaders, and individuals played an important role in responding to the pandemic in Lithuania, often working in collaboration with public authorities and civil society organisations to make a direct contribution to societal resilience, cohesion, and security. During the first wave of the coronavirus, the government of Lithuania recommended that religious communities not organise religious rites (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė 2020). Religious organisations agreed with the recommendations. For example, the Episcopal Conference of Lithuania immediately informed Catholics that public Masses would be halted for as long as the quarantine announced by the government was in effect. Bishops urged people not to go to churches but to watch Mass offered by priests on television or the internet, or listen on radio broadcasts. It was emphasised that churches continued to

‘remain open for private prayer’ and for the most necessary personal services of believers – funerals, baptisms, or other sacraments continued to be provided, but only with the participation of the closest family members (Budreikienė and Navakas 2020).

Religious leaders mobilised both religious and secular logics in motivating solidarity among the general population, reaching out to people to encourage them to engage in certain activities or to refrain from certain behaviours (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020a; LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020a; Weber 2020). Religious communities also viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to promote volunteering as a meaningful activity. For example, Catholic bishops mentioned in their Christmas letter to believers that during a global pandemic the world ‘takes an exam of mutual aid’. Also, the bishops invited devotees to try to overcome difficulties, to care and listen to each other, and to turn to the church, which was open to the needs of believers and offered its help (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020a). Thus, religion during pandemics and crises could act as a source of meaning. Religious communities and their leaders encouraged seeing not only the challenges of the situation but also the benefits, seeing its significance in a wider context, and trying to help those most affected by the crisis (Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija 2020a; LMRBT-Muftiatas 2020a; Weber 2020). By referring to people’s needs and suggesting support to them, religious leaders enjoyed popular support in this context during the pandemic.

Mostly, the leaders of various religions collaborated directly with the representatives of state regarding the management of the pandemic. There were also attempts to develop consensus among religious leaders and communities in working together to cope with the pandemic. For example, representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam held interreligious dialogue regarding issues related to COVID-19 (health and economic challenges and human rights, including religious freedom, social responsibility, and ethical issues) (VU 2020). However, no formal interreligious body (at local, regional, or national level) existed during the pandemic.

During the first wave of COVID-19, both the Republic of Lithuania and religious organisations acted in cooperation, which was successful. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) considered Lithuania to have successfully managed the pandemic outbreak. Insights were shared into how Lithuania had managed to control the first wave of the pandemic: its prompt

response to the threat of the pandemic, the rapid reorganisation of the national and regional health care institutions, a successful testing strategy, even with limited human resources, and responsible public behaviour under the quarantine conditions (The Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020).

During the second national lockdown, it was recommended that religious communities organise religious rites and recollections remotely (online) (The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2020b). However, some religious organisations made their own decisions. For example, the Episcopal Conference decided to continue organising public Masses in churches, but with serious restrictions on the number of participants (Bernardinai 2020).

Religious groups broadly supported scientific authority (e.g. public health bodies) during the pandemic. In many cases, religious leaders shared and reinforced the advice of credible health authorities and helped to counteract misinformation about the virus (OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 118–19). Religious or belief communities responded to the need by supporting health services and reaching out to and assisting the most vulnerable members of society. Many leaders also promoted a sense of solidarity and hope, especially against the backdrop of great stress and anxiety, as well as rising nationalist tendencies, xenophobia, and division (OSCE/ODIHR 2020, 118–119).

Generally, religious communities supported state vaccination efforts. For example, the Catholic Church emphasised that vaccination against COVID-19 did not contradict the teaching of the church, that it was one of the ways to control the pandemic (LRT 2021). There were cases when religious communities provided their premises for a vaccination. In Klaipėda, representatives of the municipality approached the Catholic Church, offering to cooperate to make it possible for everyone who wanted to get vaccinated on a particular Sunday. The priest from the Church of Mary Queen of Peace suggested the premises of the parish library and catechetics to be used by the mobile vaccination team (Rumšienė and Platūkytė 2021). The Catholic Church, by supporting science and public health, also tried to embrace everyone by stating that the church welcomed both vaccinated and non-vaccinated believers (Bernardinai 2020).

The factors that most influenced how religious freedom was managed during the pandemic were partly based on cultural specificities (historic and legal relations between church and state), the degree

of trust of the population in the state, and so on. The collaboration between state and religious organisations during the pandemic was the most visible in the public sphere in the case of the Catholic Church, as well as other traditional religions. This gave an impression of religious communities as highly supportive of state actions towards the fight of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The factors that most influenced religions and religious freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania were partly based on cultural specificities (historic and legal relations between church and state), the degree of trust of the population in the state, etc. Religious groups and the state developed a collaborative relationship during the pandemic. Religious groups broadly supported scientific authority (e.g. public health bodies), with the majority of them facilitating the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus, sharing and reinforcing the advice of credible health authorities, and helping to counteract misinformation about the virus. Generally, religious communities supported state vaccination efforts.

The health crisis posed a challenge for individuals and communities to express their religion or belief and significantly affected their ability to access places of worship, observe religious holidays, and participate in rituals associated with certain stages of life. It also resulted in changes in some established habits and rules among believers. Some practices faded away and were not renewed after the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of digital religion during this period was active at both individual and communal levels. Such virtual access to religions and religious communities in some cases was viewed positively and continued to be developed when the restrictions regarding social interaction were ended.

The pandemic led to increases in some aspects of individual-level religiosity, with increased interest in prayer. However, Lithuania (together with other countries) is still experiencing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (as well as the Russian-Ukrainian war) in the economic and social life of the country, and for this reason it is more difficult to assess the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious communities.

Notes

- 1 Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės 2020 m. vasario 26 d. nutarimas Nr. 152 ‘Dėl valstybės lygio ekstremalios situacijos paskelbimo’ [Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 152, 2020 February 26, ‘On Declaration of State-Level Emergency’]. <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/8feb1a7658a111eaac56f6e40072e018?positionInSearchResults=31&searchModelUID=e5efa5d2-b709-413d-b7ad-feece99aa238>.
- 2 Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės 2020 m. kovo 14 d. nutarimas Nr. 207 ‘Dėl karantino Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijoje paskelbimo’ [Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 207, 2020 March 14, ‘On Declaration of Quarantine in the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania’]. <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/deaf8694663011eaa02cacf2a861120c?jfwid=-wb5huuiol>.
- 3 Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės 2020 m. lapkričio 4 d. nutarimas Nr. 1226 ‘Dėl karantino Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijoje paskelbimo’ [Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 1226, 2020 November 4, ‘On Declaration of Quarantine in the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania’] <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a2b5da801f4a11eb9604df942ee8e443>.
- 4 Lietuvos Respublikos religinių bendruomenių ir bendrijų įstatymas [The Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania]. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalActEditions/TAR.B4DBBD7C388A?faces-redirect=true>.
- 5 Lietuvos Respublikos ir Šventojo Sosto sutartis dėl santykių tarp Katalikų bažnyčios ir valstybės teisinių aspektų. [Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See Concerning the Juridical Aspects of the Relations between the Catholic Church and the State] Nr. 100T001SUTARG001740. 2000-05-05 <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.106811>.
- 6 Lietuvos Respublikos ir Šventojo Sosto sutartis dėl kariuomenėje tarnaujančių katalikų sielovados. [Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See Concerning the Pastoral Care of Catholics Serving in the Army] Nr. 100T001SUTARG001741. 2000-05-05 <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.106812>.
- 7 Lietuvos Respublikos ir Šventojo Sosto sutartis dėl bendradarbiavimo švietimo ir kultūros srityje [Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See on Cooperation in Education and Culture] Nr. 100T001SUTARG001742. 2000-05-05 <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.106813>.
- 8 Information presented by Inija Trinkūnienė, the leader of the Old Baltic faith community ‘Romuva’ (communication with the author by phone, 13 June 2024).
- 9 Information presented by the representative of the Informational Bureau of the Opus Dei community in Lithuania (communication with the author by phone, 20 September 2023).
- 10 Information presented by Assoc. Prof. Aušra Pažėraitė, Vilnius University.
- 11 Direct online broadcasting from Sanctuary of Divine Mercy: <https://gailestingumas.lt/tiesiogine-transliacija/>.
- 12 Information presented by Inija Trinkūnienė, the leader of the Old Baltic faith community ‘Romuva’ (communication with the author by phone, 13 June 2024).

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