

SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS CHURCH IN GREECE IN THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: WHO IS THE WINNER?

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Abstract: *This text examines the role played by social media in Greece in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, pressuring the Greek government to take measures to suspend the operation of worship places. Although the Orthodox Church is a very important institution in Greece and the Greeks trusted the Church until 2019, its inability in the first wave of the pandemic to accept the need to close the temples and the termination of the Holy Communion caused the dissatisfaction of public opinion that was expressed against the Church on social media. Mass media held the same position and this had as a result the spreading of dissatisfaction against the Church throughout the society. The case of coronavirus showed that even an institution such as the Church cannot ignore public opinion as expressed through the media and the government's mandates to protect public health.*

Keywords: *Orthodox Church, Holy Communion, social media, COVID-19*

Introduction

Traditionally, the Orthodox Church in Greece has played a significant role in the society, the country and the public sphere. Greeks are one of the most religious people in Europe as 92% state they believe in God and Greece is an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian nation.¹ Therefore, the Church in Greece has an institutional role in society and the right to intervene in political developments and social issues. It publicly expresses its positions and arguments and even intervenes in a number of issues that do not relate to its responsibilities. The Greek State, for its part, maintains close and inseparable ties with the Church. In all the constitutional texts of Greece it is recognized that the predominant religion in the Greek territory is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ². The Preamble of the Constitution invokes the Holy Trinity as well as the oath of the President of the Republic of Greece and the members of the Parliament. Therefore, the ties between the State and the Church

¹ Lipka, M. "Greek attitudes toward religion, minorities align more with Central and Eastern Europe than West". – Pew Research Center, 31.10.2018, <<https://pewrsr.ch/2Jheo3k>>.

² Paparizos 2000, p. 90.

of Greece are strong and institutionally defined, while the Church influences not only the decisions of the faithful followers, but also the State with its public speech.

The first cases of coronavirus in Greece and the attitude of the government towards the Church on COVID-19 pandemic

The first confirmed case of coronavirus in Greece was recorded on February 26, 2020, while the first death was reported on March 12, 2020.

In contrast to what often happens in Greece, in the case of the coronavirus, the government took restrictive measures very early, which proved to be very effective, as by 10th of May, 2020 (end of the first lockdown) Greece had only 165 deaths and less than 2,850 cases. The biggest problem for the government was the restriction of religious events. The ruling party, New Democracy, is an amalgam of conservative liberal politicians and traditionally has very good relations with the Church.

The Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, contacted for the first time on February 28 with the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, Ieronymos, asking for the help of the Church of Greece, in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. On March 9, the government announced new emergency protection measures against COVID-19, but did not mention church gatherings or communion³. Two days later, the Prime Minister showed more determination. In his proclamation, he said he was drawing strength from his faith, but as prime minister he had to listen to experts and he was going to take action on church gatherings. "Today it is not our 'beliefs' that are being tested, but our belief in human health. The love for the "neighbor" to which Orthodoxy itself refers"⁴. The pressure had been redirected to the Church side. The government publicly pressured the Church to close the temples, otherwise it would have intervened⁵. But it was impossible for the Church to interrupt the commission of the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Communion on its own. The next day, the government issued a decision imposing "the measure of a temporary ban on the performance of any kind of services and rituals in religious places of worship."⁶

³ "Coronavirus: 73 cases, the measures increase: Schools are closed on occasion, Open Care Center for the Elderly, the stadiums are emptied". - Iefimerida.gr, 9.3.2020, <<https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/koronoios-ayxanontai-ta-metra-gia-ton-periorismo-toy>>.

⁴ "Message of the Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to the citizens about the Coronavirus". – Amna.gr, 11.3.2020, <<https://www.amna.gr/pr-view/208195>>.

⁵ "Government Spokesperson: We expect self-regulation by the Church of Greece". – OrthodoxTimes.com, 16.3.2020, <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/government-spokesperson-we-expect-self-regulation-by-the-church-of-greece/?fbclid%20=%20IwAR1sz19PUwOtkkYr-MzEZfgO-nf-P4Y-xw5IlzMiPDU7egLYeHwgi6kCeM>>.

⁶ Government Gazette, no. 872, vol.2, 16.3.2020, 9587–9588.

The government did not take repressive measures only against the Church and Orthodox Christian worship. The places of worship of all religions, such as synagogues,⁷ Protestant churches⁸ and mosques⁹ had been closed.

The reaction of the Church

The Church at first erroneously estimated that the State intervenes in matters of faith. That is why it refused to accept the State's urgings to close the churches and stop the Divine Liturgy, but it realized that the pressure was gradually increasing.¹⁰ On March 9 the Holy Synod demanded "respect for their faith and this choice, to love without fear and insecurity," but again stated that Holy Communion cannot be a cause of disease transmission. It did, however, urge vulnerable groups to stay home.¹¹

At the same time, the Holy Synod and the Archbishop of Athens understood the seriousness of the situation and began to differentiate their position. As the number of cases in the country increased and the State took appropriate measures, the Church changed its approach. The Permanent Holy Synod of the Church of Greece met on March 16 but did not decide to close the temples.¹² The same night, via Twitter, the Prime Minister announced that the services in all places of worship of every dogma and religion are suspended, in order to prevent the coronavirus' spread.¹³ In essence, the Prime Minister got the Church

⁷ Letter of KISE to fellow believers, 17.3.2020, <https://kis.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2624%3A2020-03-17-11-34-11&catid=49%3A2009-05-11-09-28-23&fbclid=IwAR1X1hFUZNeSwXn9qaWzXN5HmlOD2k8AA4zedLKwW-fZGIPsrfz7Ot0xbGRM>.

⁸ "Sunday service online by the Evangelical Church". – Amna.gr, 16.3.2020 <<https://www.amna.gr/macedonia/article/439873/Kuriakatiki-leitourgia-online-apo-tin-Euaggeliki-Ekklesia>>.

⁹ The official page of Moufteia of Xanthi on Facebook <<https://www.Facebook.com/MoufteiaXanthi/posts/535212050707707>>. The official page of Moufteia of Komotini on Facebook <<https://www.Facebook.com/Gumulcinemuftuluguu/posts/771235663404302>>.

¹⁰ "Coronavirus: Today is the meeting of the Holy Synod- The two plans about the operation of the churches". – In.gr, 16.3.2020, <<https://www.in.gr/2020/03/16/greece/koronaio-synedriazei-iera-synodos-ta-dyo-senaria-gia-ti-leitourgia-ton-ekklision/>>.

¹¹ Press release of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece about the coronavirus, 9.3.2020, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=2603&what_sub=d_ty-pou>.

¹² Press release of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece about its urgent meeting, 16.3.2020, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=2607&what_sub=d_ty-pou>.

¹³ Prime Minister GR [@PrimeministerGR]. By decision of the government, the services in all areas of religious worship of any dogma and religion are suspended.

out of the predicament in which it had found itself. In the following days, Archbishop Ieronymos publicly supported the government's measures to close the temples in relation to health aspects. The Church may not have decided to close the temples itself, but it immediately disciplined by issuing relevant circulars.¹⁴

Archbishop Ieronymos, keeping low profile as usual, after the Prime Minister's proclamations emphasizing staying and praying at home, addressed similar messages to the Church's flock. With calm, logical and substantial speech, he addressed to the faithful both on television¹⁵ and from the pulpit,¹⁶ trying to convince them of the necessity of state's measures and to prevent disobedience that could have particularly negative consequences for people's health and for Church's image.

On March 26, 2020, the Archbishop and the Holy Synod requested in a letter to the Minister of Education and Religions, Niki Kerameos, that the clergy of the country be allowed to perform the Divine Liturgy and the services normally, but behind closed doors, which was accepted.¹⁷ The temples operated during Holy Week and Easter behind closed doors, without believers. People celebrated Resurrection and Easter at home.¹⁸ Worship was allowed again on May 17, 2020 with the presence in the temples of one person per 10 sqm.

Churches remain open [Tweet], 16.3.2020, <https://twitter.com/PrimeministerGR/status/1239653497118875648?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1239653497118875648&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.star.gr%2Ffeediseis%2Fellada%2F493462%2Fkorwnoios-kleistes-oles-oi-ekklhsies>.

¹⁴ Note from the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece to all metropolises of Greece, 17.3.2020, <http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/egyklloi/619_17032020.pdf>.

¹⁵ Karekla, S. "Archbishop: Protect the sanctity and continuity of your life and that of your fellow human beings". – Orthodoxia.info, 27.3.2020, <<https://orthodoxia.info/news/%ce%b1%cf%81%cf%87%ce%b9%ce%b5%cf%80%ce%af%cf%83%ce%ba%ce%bf%cf%80%ce%bf%cf%82-%cf%80%cf%81%ce%bf%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b1%cf%84%ce%b5%cf%8d%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b5-%cf%84%ce%b7%ce%bd%ce%b9%ce%b5%cf%81%cf%8c/>>.

¹⁶ Karekla, S. "Archbishop: It hurts to experience the unprecedented atmosphere of empty churches". – Orthodoxia.info, 3.4.2020, <<https://orthodoxia.info/news/%ce%b1%cf%81%cf%87%ce%b9%ce%b5%cf%80%ce%af%cf%83%ce%ba%ce%bf%cf%80%ce%bf%cf%82-%cf%80%ce%bf%ce%bd%ce%ac%ce%bc%ce%b5-%ce%b2%ce%b9%cf%8e%ce%bd%ce%bf%ce%bd%cf%84%ce%b1%cf%82-%cf%84%ce%b7%ce%bd-%cf%80/>>.

¹⁷ "The Church requests the operation of the temples in camera". – Amna.gr, 26.3.2020, <<https://www.amna.gr/home/article/443883/I-Ekklesia-zita-na-leitourgoun-oi-naoi-kekleismenon-ton-thuron>>.

¹⁸ Lakasas, A. "Easter "behind closed doors" in the churches". – Kathimerini, 6.4.2020, <<https://www.kathimerini.gr/1072433/article/epikairothta/ellada/pasxa-kekleismenwn-twn-8yrwn-stis-ekklhsies>>.

The role of social media in the battle to close the temples

The issue of the cessation of the liturgies was raised for the first time at the end of February 2020, at the same time in the traditional media and on social media. On February 28, the public television 'NET' hosted a priest in the show "Connections", in which the issue of the transmission of the virus through the Holy Communion was raised by the journalists. The priest warmly defended that never in the twenty centuries of life of the Orthodox Church has anyone contracted a disease from Holy Communion. The first negative comments were sent during the show.¹⁹

The most militant hashtag on Twitter with the most hostile attitude towards the Church was #close_the_churches (in Greek language). It started on February 26, at the same time with the recording of the first case of COVID-19 with the tweet: "Mr. Nobody wrote: The great Nobel laureate and so-called Rambo #kritikopoulos says that we are not in danger from wine... Sorry the Holy Communion #Christian Taliban #close_the_churches #COVID-19 #coronavirus".

On March 4, a Greek youtuber called the National Organization of Public Health (EODY), asking if the coronavirus could be transmitted through Holy Communion. The answer was that he could receive the Holy Communion normally.²⁰ The video went viral, with tens of thousands of furious users reposting it asking for explanations from EODY. Sotiris Tsiodras, representative of the Health Ministry and infectious disease specialist, was forced to make statements, claimed that "the Ministry of Health and the National Organization of Public Health are in consultation with the Archdiocese in order to take measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus."²¹

Social media proved to be the place where the great battle was fought for the closing of the temples, the interruption of the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Communion. A public sphere was formed, where those opposed to the Church seemed more and more militant than the defenders of the other point of view. They were liberal supporters of the State-Church separation, real old-time leftists and people from the field of citizens' movements and non-governmental organizations, but also apolitical people. The most militant of them were opposed to the Church on other issues (cremation, gay marriage) or atheists, so for them it was another episode in the fight against it, but there were also many neutrals that turned against the Church especially on the issue of confrontation

¹⁹ Video from TV station 'ET1', 28.2.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJDabaiTvHk>>.

²⁰ Non sectarian Brats, 4.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dv-l0EShEQI>>.

²¹ "NOPH: Do not go to churches". - Athens Voice, 5.3.2020, <https://www.athensvoice.gr/greece/627290_eody-min-pigainete-stis-ekklisies>.

of COVID-19.

The controversy over whether or not to close the churches was reported on Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. TV content was posted on Youtube, which was used by Facebook and Twitter users to support their views. All the memes, sketches, jokes, etc. were created on Facebook that were addressed to the general public, mainly Facebook and secondarily to other social media. All of the above were used as accompanying material by the militant Twitter users in their dispute for or against the closure of the temples. On the contrary, there was no significant activity on Instagram. Whatsapp and Viber were used by some to stream content to their contacts. In this way the diffusion of the original message reached a steady growing audience.

We have to keep in mind that the concern about COVID-19, the search for information about it and the writing of texts about it on social media began to grow very strongly worldwide after January 20th 2020. The same goes for registering new users. Users requested information from any source, reliable or not. A first survey showed that the most neutral source was Twitter. Youtube canceled unreliable information (about 10% of content), while other social media, such as Reddit and Gab, not only did not take action against unreliable sources and fake news about COVID-19, but strengthened internally their circulation.²²

There was a lot of activity on Twitter on March 11 and 15, when the businesses closed and the convening of the Holy Synod was pending in order to decide on the closure of the temples in Greece. Many people wrote in it, with passion for the Church. From the tweets, it seems that the dislike for the Church pre-existed the period of restrictive measures.

However, there was the opposite side. As early as February 21, the hashtag #holy_communion (in Greek language) was created, which gathered those who were opposed to the interruption of the worship. The user Evgenios Tzavaras reports on the following tweet: "You do Not get coronavirus or the flu from the Holy Communion. It is a mystery of our church when we commune, completely harmless. It is the body and the blood of Christ. You become one with Him. Do not spread atheistic bullshit".

The majority of users were religious people, while those who opposed or simply ridiculed the former were a minority. Others were hard-line and advocated the uninterrupted continuation of the divine liturgy and others were in favor of its temporary cessation for reasons of prevention. Most people wrote without a hashtag, because they did not use Twitter often or started writing on it just to defend their point of view on the subject. Many uploaded additional data (links to photos, videos, interviews, and articles) and presented the views

²² Quattrociochi et al. 2020, pp. 6–7.

of various hierarchs of the Church of Greece and of the Church of Cyprus. Fewer expressed their personal views. Their presence had all the characteristics of those who want to defend their views, but have no experience in producing original and personal speech with arguments and therefore use references in texts, videos or interviews of others. The activity also peaked on March 9, 11 and 15.²³

Essentially the following scheme was created: The initial controversy took place on Twitter where the posts were either in the form of a conflict with the other side on the issue of the operation or not of the temples, but mainly it was the total opposition to the Christian religion, its hierarchy, its tradition. It is a form of atheism and anti-liberalism. This form soon becomes autonomous and instead of being opposed, it turns into a slander of the Christian religion as a whole, its leadership and its believers. The supporters are not interested in public health or Holy Communion, since they do not participate in worship, so they do not commune. They just want a victory against the Church. The struggle, instead of being conducted with arguments and logic, focuses on emotion, with constant memes, cartoons, opinions and sketches that mimic anything related to Christian worship.

YouTube had a special role in the whole war on social media. In the period from February 28th to March 18th of 2020 it functioned mainly as the place where the television networks posted the news programs in which bishops and clergy took part defending the right to Holy Communion and the uninterrupted operation of the temples²⁴ as well as reports of people going to temples, indifferent to the recommendations of doctors and the government.²⁵ Finally, there were interviews with priests who explained the sacrament of Holy Communion and whether the believers are in danger of catching coronavirus from the Holy Communion.²⁶

Many YouTube users passionately expressed their views in the comments. Most were negative about the attitude of the Church. Some more active YouTubers isolated the parts they were interested in and either uploaded them to

²³ The data was largely based on research conducted by Yanna Younari.

²⁴ "Coronavirus: Divine Church and scientists are divided". - Ant1 Channel, 10.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEZJaYAl-Fo>>.

²⁵ "Coronavirus: Believers defied the virus and filled the church". - Central Bulletin, Open Tv, 6.3.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-nN_nB2vOU>. "Coronavirus: The churches are full despite all the measures to avoid crowds", 15.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pS2JATb-N3c>>. Church of Saint Nicholas- Larisa, 15.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aea5XmdjIRw>>.

²⁶ "Is the coronavirus transmitted by Holy Communion? | Ask the Elder", 27.2.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exfTg1BuJ4>>.

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their own YouTube channels or directly to their Facebook profile and to groups that were members or administrators. This was done by users of both sides of the conflict, but the anti-clerical side was more numerous than the defenders of the Church. Therefore, YouTube, at least in Greece and on the Church issue, did not function as a field of controversy, but as a feeder of television material for users, mainly of other social networks that wanted to support their point of view. However, when footage was uploaded to Facebook or elsewhere with the comments of each user, then it was shared on the pages of many other people, resulting in its multiple spread. There were few times in the period from February 28th to March 18th of 2020 that a youtuber shot a footage of their own in order to take a position or denounce the Church for its practices.²⁷ It was broadcast many times on other social media and infuriated those who were critical of the Church.

After the closing of the temples, the posting of footages on YouTube by the television networks continued normally, even with the presence of clergy. But they did not have the same rebroadcasts in the other media as the goal, the ban on worship, was achieved and the anti-clergy were satisfied.

At the same time, the uploads by the defenders of the Church began to increase. Many video posts have been made, mainly with monks from Mount Athos talking about coronavirus, worship and Holy Communion²⁸ and considering the coming of the mark and the global dictatorship,²⁹ even the connection to 5G,³⁰ and metropolitans complaining that the State exhausted its strictness in the Church.³¹ Priests and monks who consider the coronavirus to be a pre-

²⁷ "NAPH: COVID-19 is not transmitted via Holy Communion". - Nonsectarian Brats, 4.3.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dv-l0EShEQI&feature=emb_+title>. "Greek woman is calling "Go rally because all are lies", 11.3.2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVvWTM8zbUg>>.

²⁸ "Fr. Ananias Koustenis on coronavirus and developments in Evros", 20.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG9SnCY29M8>>. "Mount Athos Abbot for coronavirus: The whole truth and the sealing that is coming", 21.4.2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8IawHaXbXA>>. "The Mount Athos c. Gabriel on the coronavirus and the Churches", 1.5.2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3ye77TvgHY>>.

²⁹ "Elder Efthymios: Koronovios, Vaccines, Stamping, Global Dictatorship", 15.4.2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sjb8GWDa0yE>>. "P. Savvas Lavriotis: Koronoios, closed churches, electronic identity", 6.4.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-GVoXykZ_Sc>. "Coronavirus and Ecumenism", 4.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t91QdWvAqLw>>.

³⁰ "The real epidemic, the 5G syndrome", 25.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUavtOFdxxQ>>.

³¹ "Metropolitan Theologos: The strictness of the controls was exhausted in the church", 18.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3v1EfcoSpxw>>. "The glass overflowed for the Church due to Protopsalti - Chrysostomos of Messinia in N. Evangelatos".

text for the State to close the temples and ban Christian worship,³² confessions of hierarchs that they gave the Holy Communion to believers despite the ban during lockdown,³³ prophecies of priests who believe that we are in danger of epidemics³⁴, youtubers who express their views on the issue with sobriety³⁵ and passion.³⁶ Political activists belonging to those who oppose the New Order of Things,³⁷ and singers with new songs for the Church.³⁸ Especially the videos with the prophecies and the speeches of Mount Athos' monks have become very popular, which shows that the specific audience that was defeated during the period from February 28th to March 18th of 2020 could not accept that the decision of the government was logical and was looking for redemption either in the words of the Church, or to justify with irrational arguments the attack against the Church.

Facebook functioned as the place where memes, jokes, etc. were created and the humorous images and sketches with which ordinary users expressed their views on the Church's choices on the subject of the coronavirus, on the behavior of the faithful followers and even on their aversion to the rites of Christian worship. They posted them on their personal pages and their friends shared them on their own pages and in many groups. Quarantine and a sense of insecurity have led Facebook users to spend many more hours on it, so these posts were clearly more popular than in a normal era.

The posts showed anger and anti-clericalism: "Criminal Hierarchs... Dastard politicians... Irresponsible journalists... Medievalists, Obscurantists and naive of the whole suffering country unite... Cannibalize by eating the body and drinking blood... Take oily water from the baptisteries and spray... And do put a braid of garlic on you because, if I die for the sake of your "goodness" I

27.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdW298aYbpg>>.

³² "Under the pretext of our viruses, they closed the temples", 17.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Px9AuCBs4c>>.

³³ "Coronavirus: Archimandrite communed with the faithful in their homes!", 2.5.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIPELXhTPSY>>.

³⁴ "Shocking! Prophecy from 1990 for epidemia of the blessed Augustine Kantiotis", 14.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etH1WhgVSJ8>>.

³⁵ "Easter without Churches My point of view", 10.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0vUaQP4Js8>>. "Is the coronavirus transmitted to churches?", 8.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkwA96x4rLk>>.

³⁶ "Antonis Cooken: They closed the churches and the super market opened on Sunday!", 22.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAuX0wcG-qA>>.

³⁷ "The biggest scam in history is the coronavirus But they didn't tell you anything", 25.3.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ve-GV50KuU8>>.

³⁸ "Open my church- Mattheos Giannoulis- Michalis Tambouras", 15.4.2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsMWg3AKNDQ>>.

will become a vampire and “partake” with your own blood and body...” and disrespect and insults for the elderly who believe in religion and go to the temples: “The motto we stay home to save the old women and they go to church”.

However, the searches of YouTube users for content related to the Church theme and the appearance of Facebook posts related to the same theme create a new stream of content supply. This is because the proposals for new content are not made randomly, but based on complex algorithms, which select the content that will appear before us with specific criteria. The media suggestions are Content-based, Knowledge-based, Collaborative, Context-aware.³⁹ Therefore, not all users see the same content. The suggestions on the screen of the PC or mobile phone are made after a search or after watching a random program. Both YouTube and Facebook learn from our searches and our behavior and make us relevant or similar suggestions. When the main concern of the public was whether there was a problem of transmission of the coronavirus through Holy Communion and the gathering inside the temples, it was logical to present any suggestions to the interested public by chance. But when a user asked for additional information by clicking on the suggestions of Youtube or Facebook, then the information was depended mainly on the algorithms of each social media and not on random searches. Thus, the acceptance of one or the other point of view was strengthened through the proposals of social media. So, the public speech used by the original Facebook posts and those who appeared on the Facebook footages was very important to create any initial consensus and acceptance, which was then reinforced by the algorithms of each medium.

At the same time, these posts became the property of Twitter users in order to support their opinions against the position of the Church to keep the temples open, against Holy Communion and against Christian worship in general. So, Facebook was the medium that, when the arguments of controversy dried up, began to produce all the disparaging stories against the Church and fed Twitter with the sharpest ones to accompany the small texts of the users in the struggle against the Church. After March 16, 2020, when the government closed the temples, the anger began to decrease and the insults and mockery of the Church increased. They focused on two issues: the infectious disease specialist Sotiris Tsiodras went to chant in church⁴⁰ and many individuals, organizations and companies made donations to the health system but not the Church⁴¹. The in-

³⁹ Hunt & McKelvey 2019, pp. 311–312.

⁴⁰ “Sotiris Tsiodras chanted at church with behind closed doors and replied to Twitter”. – Lifo.gr, 22.3.2020, < <https://www.lifo.gr/now/greece/274964/o-sotiris-tsiodras-epsale-se-ekklisia-kekkleimenon-ton-thyron-kai-apantise-sto-twitter>>.

⁴¹ “Covid 19. Corporations and institutions are fighting together”. – Euronews, 4.4.2020, <<https://gr.euronews.com/2020/04/04/covid-19-systrateusi-epixeiriseon-kai-koinofelon-idrymaton>>.

sults took the form of an original text, a republication of a playful commentary, photographs, memes and cartoons. However, even in this case, the creation was based on Facebook, while the fierce controversy and insults appeared on Twitter.

The defenders of the Church on Facebook as well as on Twitter had no hope of confronting and overpowering their opponents. The most militant were the most fanatical Christians, zealots, followers of metaphysics and revelation. Their speech was in complete contradiction with both the positions of the scientific community and common sense. An important defense group, called Supporters of the Genuine Monastery of Esphigmenos, that of the zealots around the Monastery of Esphigmenos⁴².

On March 8, 2020, they published a post entitled “Enough is enough! Keep your hands off of Holy Communion and church attendance inside the house of God”, which in a short time received 3.3 thousand likes and 1046 notifications. The same group, a day later, had posted on its Facebook page that the virus is manufactured and not by nature and that it is not transmitted from human to human. This post had many thousands of likes and many notifications⁴³. It was obvious that these posts were confessions of faith for this group and not arguments in order to convince the skeptics, the scientific community and the government of the need to keep the temples open and for the Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion to be celebrated. In addition, we must not forget that users tend to receive information from sources that identify with their own worldview or ignore information contrary to their views and organize themselves into groups with clear and similar views⁴⁴. Therefore, the defenders of the original position of the Church to keep the temples open, for the services to be performed normally and for Holy Communion could not seriously address the general public for whom the protection of public health was the main issue.

After all, the flock of the Church was not and is not united. At the same time that some people were fighting to remove the pressure of the State on the Church, the community “We Live in the Church” was created on the network by “a group of ordinary Greek citizens who love the Homeland and the Ortho-

⁴² The official page of the Supporters of the Genuine Monastery of Esphigmenos on Facebook <https://www.Facebook.com/pg/ipostiriktes.gnisias.ieras.monis.esfigmenou/posts/?ref=page_internal>

⁴³ “EKPA Survey: Half of Greeks believe that the coronavirus is not worse than the flu”. – Huffingtonpost.gr, 1.5.2020, <[⁴⁴ Quattrocio et al., 2020.](https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/entry/ereena-ekpai-misoi-ellenes-pisteeoen-oti-o-koronoios-den-einai-cheiroteros-apo-te-yripe_gr_5eaae6b8c5b634687cb47e0b?+ncid+=+other_trending_qeesnbnu018+&utm_campaign+=+trending>”.></p></div><div data-bbox=)

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dox Christian Faith.”⁴⁵ Its purpose is the electronic collection of signatures to reopen the churches and to perform the divine liturgy and the Holy Communion, either inside or outside the temples.⁴⁶

At the same time, Facebook users who maintain accounts on messenger, Whatsapp and Viber shared these stories in their contacts. Their contacts did the same and so there was a great dispersion. It is not possible to estimate the spread of the point of views of the one side or the other through encrypted social media such as Whatsapp and Viber. In Greece, Whatsapp may not have the impact it has in other countries, such as the UK or India, but researchers have shown how popular it can be and how much it is used by those who consider themselves excluded from the main sources of information.⁴⁷

Virtually everyone who was locked up at home saw dozens of anti-clerical stories pass in front of their screen or come to their accounts. It is obvious that on social media the majority had turned against the Church, so it had consented to any move of the government against the Church.

The public has the feeling that social media connect human beings, who want to communicate. Indeed, in many cases this happens, especially in older forms of communication, such as fora. But when we talk about modern communication platforms, the concept of intermediation and automation enters. Everyone denounces automation, but when the time comes, everyone uses it to promote their own political campaigns and to react to the actions of their opponents. Bots are often used by politicians to defeat their opponents. Philip Howard states that social media is used to reinforce the message (amplifying the messages rather than argumentative engagement).⁴⁸ In fact, strange as it may seem, recent studies show that a very significant part of Internet traffic, perhaps 40%, is done by Bots and not by regular users.⁴⁹ Greece does not seem to play a leading role in this type of movement, but two countries in our region, Turkey and Romania, are among the top 5 of the most botnet countries.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Official web page of “Menoume Ekklesia” (in Greek language) <<https://www.menoume-ekklisia.gr/>>.

⁴⁶ Vasvani, L. “They collect signatures so that they can communicate in the Church”. – Thessaloniki Press, 3.5.2020, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Faroog 2018; Sharma & Shukla 2016.

⁴⁸ Howard & Kollanyi 2016.

⁴⁹ Reed, M. “How Much of the Internet Is Fake? Turns Out, a Lot of It, Actually”. - *Intelligencer*, 26.12.2018, <<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/how-much-of-the-internet-is-fake.html>>. Roberts, E. “Bad Bot Report 2020: Bad Bots Strike Back”. – *Imperva*, 21.4.2020, <<https://www.imperva.com/blog/bad-bot-report-2020-bad-bots-strike-back/>>.

⁵⁰ Roberts, E. “Bad Bot Report 2020: Bad Bots Strike Back”. – *Imperva*, 21.4.2020, <<https://www.imperva.com/blog/bad-bot-report-2020-bad-bots-strike-back/>>.

In fact, all the publicity on social media did not stay in the social media but extended to the traditional media. The editors in a newspaper or TV station follow social media and when they see an interesting post, they make it an article or reportage in the media they work for. Then, more and more social media users will bring it back into social media as a notification of the new post by traditional media. In this way a circular course of the same news or point of view, commentary or cartoon, is made, which increases greatly the impact of the original publication.⁵¹

The victory of the anti-clericalists

Who were those who turned against the Church on social media and why? Typically, it was the liberals, the leftists and the younger ones who were indifferent to religion. That is, those who are traditionally in favor of the separation of the Church from the State.

In practice, however, the most militant were those from the civil society movement, refugee support, non-governmental organizations, supporters of open borders and the lack of repression and enforcement of state power, and the defense of human rights. Only in this case these individuals were in favor of the mandatory imposition of the views of the State and the scientific community against the Church and against those who demanded respect for their religious expression and the performance of their religious duties. The reason for this attitude was that the faithful followers could believe what they want and perform their duties, but in this case, they could not endanger public health.

The most active defenders of closing churches for public health protection are those who conflict with the Church over time because they have a different value system. On the one hand, the Church is an institution that believes in a society united with its beliefs and dogmas, and on the other hand, it is those who oppose this view, which they consider oppressive and in favor of an “other” society. But those who fight for the rights of all minorities and marginalized individuals have spoken out in favor of State repression in the operation of temples and have focused on the sacrament of Holy Communion as the main danger for the transmission of the coronavirus, because it is the core of Christian worship. So, they attacked the Holy Communion with ferocity and hypocrisy, since this was their main ideological enemy.⁵² In fact, as it turned out along the

⁵¹ Roese 2018.

⁵² Vardis, G. “Coronavirus and the safety community”. – Antifono.gr, 11.3.2020, <<https://antifono.gr/%ce%bf-%ce%ba%ce%bf%cf%81%ce%bf%ce%bd%ce%bf%cf%8a%cf%8c%cf%82-%ce%ba%ce%b1%ce%b9-%ce%b7-%ce%ba%ce%bf%ce%b9%ce%bd%cf%89%ce%bd%ce%af%ce%b1-%cf%84%ce%b7%cf%82-%ce%b1%cf%83%cf%86%ce%ac%ce%b-%ce%b5%ce%b9-2/?fbclid=IwAR2Jqnk3gekHn9GFDIa-8uoL7scyHObLh6KZ02fb->

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way, they did not care so much about the coronavirus' spread through Holy Communion, but about the confrontation with the Church and its supremacy over it.⁵³

The pressure on the Church and the believers was just too much. No one dared to express a different point of view and a storm of articles and messages on social media targeted him/her. The pressure was exerted to such an extent that while at first the liberals were critical of the Church, they slowly began to call for a reduction in negative attitudes towards the Church and its followers. Liberal commentators have pointed out that some of those who accuse the Church and the clergy of not closing churches are in favor of open borders, the free movement of refugees and immigrants, and complain that closing borders in Evros is the cancellation of Europe.⁵⁴ They soberly noted that it is not possible not to accept the presence of 5 priests and chanters in a church, when there are dozens of people in a supermarke,⁵⁵ nor to be critical when the Church accepts the services on Holy Week without any person being inside the temples.⁵⁶ Finally, they noticed that on an individual level there were many who lived a very intense life and after the onset of the crisis they expelled those who violated the quarantine, did quarantine shaming, exposing them on social media and calling them 'covidots'.⁵⁷ Most of them bullied the Church on social media.

In essence, this is the case where we have an overreaction against a possible danger, the spread of COVID-19 through the gathering in the temples and mainly through Holy Communion. The concern for dealing with a pandemic that mainly targets the elderly, hence the target group of the Church, the experience from the past that State power usually does not want conflict with the Church and, when it does, it folds, as well as the ongoing social media blogging. The controversy over the closure of the temples broke out in the first days of the lockdown. Those were the days (from February 28th to March 18th, 2020) when there was a lot of anxiety about the future, criticism of the measures that should or should not have been taken, anxiety about the possible deaths and

9vRFSreR0ahkEBZ5SLQ>.

⁵³ Antipas, G. "Anthropakia". – Pagenews.gr, 9.3.2020, <<https://www.pagenews.gr/2020/03/09/apopsi/anthropakia/>>.

⁵⁴ Theodoropoulos, T. "From Evros to the pandemic". – Kathimerini, 26.3.2020, <<https://www.kathimerini.gr/1070879/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/apo-ton-evro-sthn-pandh-mia>>.

⁵⁵ Michailidis, Ch. "Shall we calm down a bit?". – Protagon.gr, 15.4.2020, <<https://www.protagon.gr/apopseis/mipws-na-iremisoume-ligo-44342037026>>.

⁵⁶ Theodoropoulos, T. "Closed Doors". – Kathimerini, 11.4.2020, <<https://www.kathimerini.gr/1073463/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/kekleismenwn-twn-8yrwn>>.

⁵⁷ Kounalaki, X. "Xeroles vs. Covidots". – Kathimerini, 26.3.2020, <<https://www.kathimerini.gr/1070873/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/3eroles-kata-covidots>>.

shock about the lockdown. The situation in the People's Republic of China was similar between January 31st and February 14th, 2020, when the same reactions were observed from the public, until the taking of drastic measures began.⁵⁸ Enforcement of the lockdown led to overreaction, unwarranted public fear of the Church. This is not a phenomenon that is found only in Greece, as it has been observed first in countries that were hit earlier by COVID-19.⁵⁹

The defeat of pro church voices on social media

Why could the social networks of the Church's supporters not prevail? Is it because they move in and around the Church and do not have a strong presence on the Internet? Was it a battle for the confession of faith or for public health for them? Did they defend the Church but inwardly knew that there was a problem with public health? Is not the metaphysical reason of the Church and as their own reason competitive with the announcements of the doctors? Was the defense struggle damaged by the presence of various conspiracy theorists?

First, the believers and supporters of the Church were not a single group. There were several religious people who disciplined the measures, but protested strongly and publicly about the war against Holy Communion that took place through the media and social media.⁶⁰

Secondly, the Church itself contributed to its communicative and political defeat. The way it reacted to the health crisis was extremely problematic. It did not realize the seriousness of the situation and the extent of the risks. Instead of cooperating with the State and the government, it chose to protest the intervention in matters that considered being exclusively its object. The public defense of the Church was undertaken by marginal and sometimes graphic forms, which made its supporters doubt the correctness of their positions and turned the general public against it.

It was very difficult to defend the need for the temples to remain open and for the believers to come to the Divine Liturgy and receive the Holy Communion. Even the so-called zealots could not articulate prudent and scientific reasoning, with substantiated arguments, against the critics of the Church. That is why the Old Calendarist Church asked all its members, clergy and laity, to abstain from social networks, not to make evaluative judgments on theological

⁵⁸ Hua & Shaw 2020.

⁵⁹ Huynh 2020;

⁶⁰ Giachnaki, M. "Finally let the ruthless war for the Holy Communion stop – Let the Standing Holy Synod put a barrier". – Orthodoxy News Agency, 29.3.2020, <https://www.orthodoxianewsagency.gr/epikairotita/epitelous-as-stamatisei-o-aneleitos-polemos-gia-ti-theia-koinonia-as-valei-ena-fragmo-i-dis/?fbclid=IwAR3VE_zyRus8NA4nmEYB8LRjHig94qTDt7FrtG-QMVQGwtEocGkCJ40fEGI>.

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issues and to use their time devoted to prayer.⁶¹

Eventually the battle between the followers of public health and therefore the inclusion of the Church in the rules for lockdown and the supporters of the Church ended with an overwhelming defeat of the latter. This does not reflect the real match but how much more active the former was compared to the latter and also younger in age and more active on social media. But there was an underground or silent reaction from the latter, as on Twitter many stopped following people because they had opposed the Church, or stopped being friends on Facebook or blocked them (less often). At other times, when there was a positive energy of people of the Church, they make sure to provide notifications.

What will be the Church's relationship with its flock after the crisis?

Has the prestige of the Church as a whole been eroded in society? Did the Church seem less strong to its opponents?

Although the leadership of the Church kept a low profile after the closing of the churches and did not make any resistance moves, it still comes out of the whole ordeal wounded. Its public image has been damaged. On March 3, 2020, the results of an MRB poll (MRB HELLAS S.A. is one of the biggest research agencies in Greece) were published for the 'Star' television channel, for the Greek government's handling of the coronavirus. 55.7% judged the attitude of the Church negative or rather negative and only 20.2% was definitely positive or rather positive.⁶² According to Opinion Poll, 78.6% said they were very satisfied with the Prime Minister's decision to close the churches and 11.4% quite happy.⁶³ These surveys were conducted during the crisis, so the results were expected as they were results of affect. However, in a survey conducted by the Laboratory of Journalistic Studies and Communication Applications of the Department of Communication and Media of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, during the crisis, when asked "How much do you trust the Church at the present time", only 9% answered that they trust Church, while 67% answered that they do not trust it at all. It should be noticed that the overriding majority of the sample was people highly educated, young and

⁶¹ Announcement of Decisions of the Holy Synod of 18/31.3.2020, Athens.

⁶² "MRB poll: Seven out of ten applaud the government's handling of the coronavirus". Protothema.gr, 20.3.2020, <<https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/987067/di-moskopisi-mrb-epta-stous-deka-epikrotoun-tous-heirismous-tis-kuvernisis-gia-ton-koronoio/>>.

⁶³ "Coronavirus- Barometer Opinion: 85% applaud the actions of Mitsotakis". - Protothema.gr, 26.3.2020, <<https://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/989207/koronoios-varometro-opinion-85-epikrotoun-tis-energeies-tou-mits>>.

currently living in Athens. Nevertheless, the results were really disappointing as regards to the Church.

This shows that the public image of the Church remains wounded, while for two decades it was the institution that the Greeks trusted the most, the same as the army.⁶⁴ In fact, opposite the Church were found two opposing political groups, the left and the liberals who are politically expressed by the New Democracy. Both groups fully supported the State in its conflict with the Church. As a result, in the long run, either they will open the agenda for the separation of the State-Church relations or in the next dispute they will side with any other body that will be an opponent against the Church.

Conclusions

The case of the pandemic has shown that institutions such as the Church cannot impose their views on critical issues to society as a whole, when these views are directly opposed to very important issues such as public health. Governments, even if Church-friendly parties are in power, as in the case of Greece, cannot ignore the opinion of scientists in order not to ruin their relations with the Church. The Greek government was not alone in its opposition to the Church. The citizens through social media were critical of the Church and its attitude, as a result of which they helped the government to take measures against the Church. The traditional Greek media, which used not to judge the Church, when they saw the wave of dissatisfaction, were also forced even with a delay to stand against the Church. From all the above, not only the power of the citizens and the social media towards powerful institutions such as the Church was shown, but also the possibility for an issue that does not want to be directly in the public sphere. The citizens, also, imposed their opinion on this issue through social media even when the mainstream media were not supportive of their position from the very beginning. Institutions such as the Church should take these results into account in order to adapt their strategy in the future to all critical social issues.

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⁶⁴ "The Greeks trust the Internet, the army and the Church". - To Vima, 12.12.2011. "Public Issue: Greeks trust the Army, the Police and the Schools". - Eleftheros Typos, 7.12.2018.

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