**////Title: Orthodox Christian Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**////Stand-first**:

Orthodox Christians often use tactile gestures during acts of religious devotion. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, such gestures had the potential to increase the spread of the virus. Dr Timothy Carroll, Dr Nicholas Lackenby and Ms Jenia [ZEE-ne-a] Gorbanenko [Gor-ban-en-ko] at University College London undertook an ethnographic study focused on how Orthodox Christian communities responded to public health advice that conflicted with their long-standing sacred practices.

**////Body text:**

Orthodox Christianity dates to the earliest days of the Christian Church, with the word ‘orthodox’ coming from the Greek language and meaning ‘right belief’ or ‘right worship’. It is the second-largest branch of Christianity, with over 220 million baptised members and thus representing a significant portion of the population.

As a highly tactile religion, it is common practice for worshippers to display public acts of devotion, such as kissing the hand of their priest or sacred works of art known as icons. Religious relics, often the bodily remains of saints, are taken on tours so that people can give honour to the saint and celebrate the miracles which they have performed. For example, in March 2020, the right arm of St George visited a Greek Orthodox temple in North London. Many people came to visit, stood in prayer, and kissed the relic as a sign of devotion. When the monks who accompanied this tour returned to Greece, they took with them not only the relic but also COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led Orthodox Christians to review the sacred and intimate practices that have long been performed as part of their religion. Initially, some members took the view that if a person had faith, they could not become ill from anything associated with the church. But soon, local parishes began to explore ways they could continue to perform their practices, whilst trying to reduce the risk of this virus.

The central act of the main Orthodox service is the Eucharist, which involves the priest using a sacred spoon to feed a piece of bread soaked in a mixture of water and wine, which is seen by the Orthodox to be the body and blood of Christ. Traditionally, a communal spoon is used, but, during the pandemic, church authorities across the world started to seek ways of modifying this practice. This resulted in a debate on both theological and ecological grounds.

To further explore how Orthodox Christians responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers Dr Timothy Carroll, Dr Nicholas Lackenby and Ms Jenia Gorbanenko from the Department of Anthropology at University College London conducted an ethnographic study of Orthodox Church communities in the UK, Greece, Serbia and Russia. They also used news outlets, social media and interviews to identify what was happening and how community members felt about it.

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During the pandemic, an area of concern and confusion for the Orthodox Community was the public celebration of the Eucharist, which allows for bodily participation in God. Whilst it was never banned, most governments did prohibit social gatherings. As a response, in the UK places of worship closed their doors and streamed online services. When the strict lockdowns were gradually lifted, some started to open up their doors to the congregation again, while continuing to stream the services for those still wanting to attend remotely.

However, concern developed within local church communities about who might be watching these live streams and whether complaints might be made to the authorities if practices did not fall within governmental guidelines. As a result, some sections of religious services would take place off-camera. In London, it was observed how those attending visibly relaxed when the cameras stop rolling, often embracing other worshippers and touching icons – behaviours which would not have been deemed appropriate in front of a wider audience.

Amongst churchgoers in Serbia, whilst the airborne virus was considered a threat, there remained the belief that you could not become ill from the Eucharist if it was approached in true faith. Similarly in Greece, it was considered that only the faithless would believe that components of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, could pose harm. It was even felt by some that there was a greater danger from denying the Eucharist than catching COVID-19 from taking part in the ritual.

Unlike other branches of Christianity, the Orthodox Christian church subscribes to apophatic [a-po-fa-tik] principles, a type of description based on what is known to not be the case. Therefore, during the pandemic, Orthodox Christians found themselves knowing more clearly what not to do, rather than what they should do.

This approach not only influenced how members worshipped but also how they would approach medicine and sciences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, statements were made by a national Orthodox Church acknowledging that vaccinations were not within their specialist field of theology, and therefore, they suggested that each faithful person had the right to choose whether to become vaccinated through consultation with their doctor. Dr Carroll, Dr Lackenby and Ms Gorbanenko provide this as an important example of how medical and spiritual fields were able to co-exist throughout the pandemic without conflict or integration.

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Dr Carroll, Dr Lackenby and Ms Gorbanenko noted that during the pandemic, Orthodox Christian leaders turned to messages of love to help guide their worshippers, consistent with the large outpouring of love from many organisations and individuals. Within the Orthodox Church, the principle of ‘loving thy neighbour’ is particularly important because it is believed that all mankind was created in the image of God.

This approach also aligned with the Christian principle of conducting oneself for the weaker brother, leading some orthodox Christians not to take advantage of their full freedoms as it may have brought harm to others. Whilst the love for one’s neighbour brought care and compassion, it also resulted in a heightened awareness of how others may be perceiving their actions at this time.

Dr Carroll, Dr Lackenby and Ms Gorbanenko explain that this led to performative security, meaning that people would act a certain way for the appearance of those outside the Orthodox communities. An example of this can be seen in the example given earlier, where people waited for the cameras to be turned off before they hugged each other and kissed icons. It was also noted that in rural temples, fewer changes to tradition (such as kissing icons) would occur than in metropolitan centres, because people were less concerned that an uninvited or unfamiliar guest would be watching them.

From their research in Orthodox Christian communities and their responses to COVID-19, Dr Carroll, Dr Lackenby and Ms Gorbanenko concluded that public health measures are not likely to be taken up by Orthodox Christians if they are enforced by the state at the expense of access to the Eucharist. It is a highly sacred act, and it is a life-giving act of obedience to participate in the Eucharist.

Dr Carroll, Dr Lackenby and Ms Gorbanenko argue that public health measures are more likely to be accepted by this religious community if they are presented within the ethics of love, following the principles of being concerned for one’s neighbour and acting on behalf of the weaker brother. Working with religious leadership, instead of forcing compliance upon communities directly, will help ensure the success of public health initiatives.

This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Apophatic love, contagion, and surveillance: Orthodox Christian responses to the global pandemic’, from Anthropology and Medicine. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2022.2080180>

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