



Greek Orthodox Church Altar

By **Romina Istratii**

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[Church and State](#) [coronavirus](#) [covid-19](#) [eucharist](#) [pandemic](#) [Political Theology](#) [public health](#) [religious freedom](#)

Restricting religious practice in the era of COVID-19: A de-westernised perspective on religious freedom with reference to the case of Greece

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These restrictions must take into careful consideration the historicity of each religious tradition, the social influence of religious beliefs among its citizens, but also theological and exegetical specificities that influence the tradition's adaptability to the current emergency. Without such

thoughtful considerations and a close collaboration with trusted religious authorities, religious communities could be alienated, which can be disruptive in times that require rather unity of thought and action.

The outbreak of the coronavirus has not only brought tremendous human loss but has also heightened racialised or essentialist representations of **certain groups**, a trend that has not left religious communities unaffected. Social media outlets and the wider web have become increasingly populated with negative comments or reports about religious believers; while some of these respond to a few unhelpful faith-based attitudes about the public health crisis, many are the manifestation of a deeper antagonism towards religious belief characteristic of secular modernity. The underlying assumption seems to be that any concerns expressed by religious communities at having their religious practices suspended reflects irrational thinking, contradicting what is perceived to be a superior, inerrant, secular science. This monolithic representation not only fails to acknowledge scientists' own limited understanding about COVID-19 currently but also ignores the fact that secular modernity was itself born out of western Christian experience; and it has never eschewed these religious underpinnings.

As anthropologist Talal Asad has previously **demonstrated**, the conception of 'religion' evolved in the socio-cultural conditions that defined western societies and was indivisible from the process of secularisation. Stages of western history included the reign of Roman Catholicism in society; Reformation struggles to separate theology from politics; and finally post-Reformation Enlightenments to 'liberate' reason from theology. This genealogy steadily resulted in the relegation of 'religion' to the private sphere as a way of containing its co-option by power. With secularisation and the domination of 'reason' in society, **thinkers of all sorts** proceeded to rationalise 'religion' as they saw fit to the times, approaching it as a 'natural' phenomenon, a transcendent *sui generis* (a thing 'of its own kind'), or a system of culture-specific symbols and rituals. Although in recent years this **epistemology of religion has diversified**, motivating the infamous 'world religions' paradigm and more hermeneutical approaches, deeply entrenched assumptions about what 'religion' is have yet to be overcome.

For example, it is generally expected in public discourse that religious communities should change or adapt their 'rituals' in response to the public health crisis. The idea that 'religions' are the sum of rules and rituals that can be easily changed or dictated by science reflects undoubtedly the experience of western secularisation and Enlightenment. It seems rather disconnected from the reality of most non-western communities, which have experienced their religious traditions as worldviews defined by unique theological or exegetical premises. These would be considered important points of reference and would dictate what 'innovations' might be possible within each context and

community. As an ethnographer of religious experience, I cannot stress enough the historic and contextual nature of all religious expressions, which deems simplistic representations inappropriate and unhelpful.

State prohibitions of religious activity

This recognition is especially important in the current health crisis and as states are called to introduce restrictions to reduce the risk of virus spread. These restrictions must take into careful consideration the historicity of each religious tradition, the social influence of religious beliefs among its citizens, but also theological and exegetical specificities that influence the tradition's adaptability to the current emergency. Without such thoughtful considerations and a close collaboration with trusted religious authorities, religious communities could be alienated, which can be disruptive in times that require unity of thought and action.

A **draconian decision** on the 16th of March by the Greek state to suspend all religious services for all faiths and religious denominations in the Greek territory begins to illustrate these problems and merits a closer look in my view. Given Orthodoxy's special relationship to Greek history and its Constitution (see my analysis in Greek **here**), the decision was anticipated to cause some reactions in the large majority of the population. The state prohibition followed after a formal meeting by the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, which discussed the public health crisis and agreed to suspend all weekly liturgies, except for the Sunday liturgy which would be shortened to one hour. The Church also instructed the elderly and the most vulnerable to stay at home and to avoid attending church. Despite these measures, all religious activity was afterwards prohibited by ministerial order.

In the aftermath, some **clergy defied** the restriction and **opened their churches** to offer Holy Communion, leading to some arrests. Citizens who attempted to attend churches were, in turn, **finned in large numbers**. Churches have had no option but to hold weekly liturgies behind closed doors, livestreaming to the faithful using digital technologies where possible. However, the controversy has not died out; legal scholars have **argued** that the decision violates religious freedom, others have composed **open letters or appeals** to the Prime Minister to reconsider the decision, and recently **a petition** was circulated to ask that the faithful be allowed to "participate in the Holy Week Services, one faithful every 15 sq.m., even outside the churches, on the sidewalks, on the streets." My reading of this online material and discussions with friends and colleagues in Greece suggest that the faithful have been responsive to the state's prohibition, but many have felt the decision extreme. In contradistinction, the Holy Synod of the Church has **asked** the faithful to "continue to pray fervently, encircle the throne of God with your supplications and stay at home praying."

While those in favour of the decision seem to have been concerned about the sacrament itself and its components (such as sharing one cup and spoon and using the same piece of holy cloth to wipe one's mouth following Holy Communion), **from the point of view of many of the faithful**, in the vernacular and historical experience of the Church, pandemics do not appear to have combined with a significantly higher proportion of deaths among the clergy, who per convention must consume what is left of the Holy Communion after each liturgy. This experience combines with a theological conviction that the bread and wine of the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ, Who is the giver of Life itself and does not entail the risk of infection. Without scientific evidence of the infectiousness of the Holy Communion, and considering that the lived experience of the Church suggests otherwise, some have found the state's preoccupation with the sacrament suspicious and discriminatory.

Other opinions have proposed that alternative measures could have been taken to limit the public's participation in the liturgy and to strengthen health control without prohibiting the Sunday liturgy, pointing to the examples of the Orthodox Churches in **Russia, Ukraine, Georgia**, or the **Orthodox Metropolis of Korea of the Ecumenical Patriarchate**. Why is it, people have asked, that supermarkets can continue to operate under strict health measures, but churches cannot remain functional if the same measures are applied and followed (e.g. by disinfecting hands before entering, keeping one's distance at all times, reducing the number of church attendants to the minimum, avoiding kissing icons or the hand of the priests, etc.)? Alternative proposals included holding the liturgy in the church yards, allowing people to watch from their cars or from a distance and calling them to approach orderly only for the Holy Communion.

An Emeritus Professor of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens **has argued** that the state has not explicitly contradicted the **European Convention of Human Rights** or the **Greek Constitution** by its decision. While these protect individual freedom of belief and religious conscience, they enable the state to act analogically to public health emergencies to restrict religious practice, if necessary. Beyond the fact that one should question whether the state's response has been analogical to the risk, given the alternatives mentioned, I consider problematic the limited consideration that was given by the state to the centrality of the Church in the life of the majority, especially in the time of the Great Lent. While restrictions had to be applied to minimise the risk of virus spread, state officials should have considered carefully the deeply entrenched nature of Orthodoxy in Greek conscience, which is also stipulated and protected in the Greek Constitution. This statement should not be threatening to those Greeks who do not identify with Orthodoxy, but aims to draw attention to a historical reality.

The **legal reasoning** that suspending religious activity has little to do with religious conscience becomes weaker when the specific conditions of this community are considered. By the rationale of the mentioned professor, the prohibition does not interfere with the individual freedom to choose what to believe, or even to attend church for individual prayer, which is still allowed currently provided that all health measures are strictly followed. It merely prohibits participation in (collective) church sacraments that present a higher risk of infection. The limitation of this rationale, however, is that it remains deeply grounded in a western epistemology of 'religion' and humanistic notions of conscience. This epistemology seems to assume a division between conscience (as belief) and its embodiment (as practice), as well as attaches an attribute of individuality to conscience, which need not be the case in societies whose faith is intertwined with collective values, histories and identities as in this one. Once these humanistic notions are overcome, it becomes possible to argue that the decision circumscribes the believer's ability to embody their religious worldview, which is fundamentally a matter of religious conscience.

I consider Amartya Sen's theorisation of **development as freedom** very useful here. Sen's thesis of development as freedom "to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value" is familiar to development practitioners and has provided the basic premises for the conceptualisation of the well-known human development approach. His thesis builds on the understanding that all people have certain states and activities ('beings' and 'doings') that they cherish or wish to achieve to be able to live in the ways they desire ('functionings'). Sen proposes that to achieve their 'functionings' people must have access to the right options and conditions to be able to enact their choices and achieve the valued states ('capabilities'). In other words, Sen's development as freedom thesis can be achieved only if the fundamental right of every human being to define their own worldviews, values and priorities is respected to such an extent that individuals can fully *embody* these worldviews, values and priorities wherever they are.

With the drastic lockdown of the churches, the ability of the Orthodox to embody their faith as they have known it has been made unfeasible. Orthodox Greeks, but also other **minority faith communities** who place equal emphasis on the Holy Communion, such as the Armenian Apostolic and the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* Church that are present in Greece, might find themselves unable to live the life they consider valuable to them. This is not merely a matter of being unable to congregate in church, which would make it similar to being unable to frequent the shops, the banks, or other public spaces. It is, rather, an existential problem – the faithful are deprived of their ability "to live the life they have reason to value" by being deprived of the 'capabilities' to embody this valued worldview. This is so because belief is not distinguished from praxis in this community, but acts with it co-substantially.

The other important factor that has also failed to be given substantial consideration on the part of the state is the extensive social role and philanthropic activity of the Orthodox Church in Greece. Just in 2018,

the **Church expended** over 121 million euro in philanthropic services, supporting the poor and homeless, single mothers, foreigners and migrants, families with many children, and other vulnerable groups, such as individuals with substance abuse and victims of domestic violence, by means of soup kitchens and ‘agape meals’, shelters, orphanages, endowments and other services and facilities. With the restriction of Church activity by the state, service provision has already been drastically affected. In parallel to imposing the draconian measures it did, the state should have proposed a convincing plan to replace the Church’s activity in the provision of this welfare support during the time of the lockdown. This would indicate effectively that the state prioritises the welfare of its citizens, as it claims to do.

A full and genuine assessment of the effects of restricting Church activity would also need to consider alongside the public health risks, the more positive health effects that faithfulness, and church attendance specifically, might have on the individual, the family and society overall. Already, since the virus outbreak and the imposition of lockdowns, evidence of a rise in **mental health problems** and **domestic violence incidents** has been reported across the world. Similar **reports** have emerged in Greece, where victims have related incidents of violence to the lockdown. Domestic violence is not necessarily the outcome of this close cohabitation, but it becomes more acute and threatening where it already exists. What is entirely missed in current reports, despite this being a predominantly Orthodox society, is any discussion of how this surge might have been affected by the closing of the churches and the restriction of Church-led welfare services provision to those in need.

Previous studies from North America suggest that Church attendance **can improve** intimate relationships, while faithfulness (and specifically Orthodox beliefs) **is associated** with attitudes of forgiveness and conflict resolution. In my own **ethnographic investigations** of domestic violence in the Orthodox community in Ethiopia, my female research participants invariably affirmed that going to church and observing the sacraments made their husbands calmer and more considerate towards them. If the women’s observation is empirically significant and has relevance to other Orthodox Christian communities in the world, what might happen when church attendance is entirely prohibited for a lengthy period of time? There are important associations between religious activity, faith and human behaviour in intimate relationships, which secular-minded scientists and state officials in Greece have failed to grasp and to wisely leverage.

State leadership that inspires faith

The Greek state rightfully acted to apply restrictions to religious activity in line with public health advice, but it ought to be questioned about its total suspension of religious practice. It has now had about a month to consider on the basis of holistic evidence the consequences of this decision and to find alternatives to respect the faith-oriented conscience of a large portion of its

citizenry, which it has not done. In contrast to those who praise the Greek Prime Minister for his bold decision, I would submit that a leader's capacity is not judged by their boldness to dictate actions to others, but by their ability to inspire confidence in their people. This requires skill to bridge different perspectives and wisdom to leverage the resourcefulness of the community to reduce public health risks effectively.



By [Romina Istratii](#)

Dr. Romina Istratii is Senior Teaching Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, teaching currently on Religions and Development. Her research lies at the intersection of gender, religious and development and applies a decolonial perspective to gender and development practice informed by a decade's experience in community-based research in sub-Saharan Africa. She has previously written on the ethics of international development, western gender metaphysics and religious knowledge systems, and the discourse of fundamentalism in gender studies. Dr Istratii's most recent research project was a decolonial ethnographic study of conjugal abuse in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahädo community of Aksum, which has evolved into the on-going HFGF-funded project "Religion, conscience and abusive behaviour: Understanding the role of faith and spirituality in the deterrence of intimate partner violence in rural Ethiopia." Dr Istratii is co-founder of the open-access publishing platform Decolonial Subversions.

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