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RELIGIOUS “COVID FUNDAMENTALISM” IN EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

By Vita Tytarenko and Iryna Bogachevska

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Abstract. The article examines specific religious and social challenges in the context of mass diseases that arose in the past and are present today during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors explain the concepts that characterize the “new” reality of state-church interactions in the time of COVID-19. The authors consider the arguments of the followers of “Covid Fundamentalism.” An analysis of the reactions of different Christian confessions to the COVID-19 pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe, emphasizing the Ukrainian segment and multiple religious trends, showed that the phenomenon of “COVID fundamentalism” did not become widespread. However, in every religious community some believers disagree with lockdown restrictions. During the lockdown, believers’ behavior directly influenced their belief that they are prioritizing God’s authority over secular authority, church laws over secular laws. No direct correlation between the manifestations of “COVID fundamentalism” and the level of religiosity of the population of the analyzed countries has been found. It was not possible to draw general conclusions. Many different factors influence the situation in each country of Central and Eastern Europe. This fact significantly complicates research. The examination of the characteristics of the reaction of religious organizations seemed to be more reasonable. The article shows the religious leaders’ position is a fundamental factor in shaping believers’ behavioral reactions. The article identifies vectors of changes in the functioning of religious organizations in the context of COVID-19. Inspired by the pandemic, changes in liturgical practice can stimulate the theological and social mobilization of churches and generate new trends in churches and society.

Keywords: religion, church, state, COVID-19, “COVID fundamentalism,” interfaith relations, challenges.

Introduction

The last global epidemic occurred a hundred years ago. Then a wave of active viral influenza, known as “Spanish flu,” spread from France around the world and, according to

various estimates, killed 50 to 100 million people.¹ Today, many doctors, sociologists, philosophers, historians, and theologians compare the COVID-19 pandemic to the “Spanish flu.” Despite the belief in the triumph of medical science, our contemporaries were nearly as unprepared to face the global pandemic as their ancestors were with “Spanish flu” or medieval “pestilences.”

The world community has relied heavily on the power of modern medicine. Several years before the pandemic, Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote: “Every few years we are frightened by new potential diseases such as SARS ..., bird flu ..., swine flu ..., Ebola... However, thanks to the effective response, these diseases have caused relatively few casualties. For example, SARS was initially perceived as a new “black death,” but it all ended with about a thousand victims worldwide.”² However, the optimistic forecasts did not come true, and the third millennium, despite profound advances in medicine, poses new challenges to humanity. These challenges have already faced people in the past. They also stood before the church, but they were well forgotten thanks to the progress of medicine.

At the time of this writing, COVID-19 has spread to 218 countries (as well as autonomous territories) worldwide.³ The virus became something that once again divided humankind’s history into periods “before” and “after.” The number of infected is rapidly approaching 100 million. The situation opened up new civilizational challenges for humanity. The government and society of each country react to them differently. However, in every country, religious people in their reactions to what is happening rely on God's single authority and their religious organization as the exponent of God’s will. As in the past, many believers declare that “it is God's will for everything.” And some of them consider the “wrath of heaven” to be the reason for this. The question of how churches and society respond to the challenges of the coronavirus, whether the church can offer believers an adequate strategy and tactics of behavior in conditions of total quarantine and lockdown, still awaits an answer. Has anything changed in the reaction of religion to the pandemic’s challenges, or has the response of the churches been the same since the Middle Ages?

¹ M. Nickol, J. Kindrachuk “A year of terror and a century of reflection: perspectives on the great influenza pandemic of 1918–1919.” *US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6364422/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

² Ю. Н. Харари. *Ното Deus. Краткая история будущего*. [*Noto Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*]. (Издательство Синдбад, 2015), p. 20.

³ “Минфин.” <https://index.minfin.com.ua/reference/coronavirus/geography/>. [“Ministry of Finance.”] <https://index.minfin.com.ua/reference/coronavirus/geography/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

The purpose of this article is to determine the positions of religious organizations regarding the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify the arguments of the so-called religious “COVID fundamentalists.” The article will help answer the critical question asked earlier: do religious organizations have a systemic approach and methods to provide a safe religious practice in the coronavirus pandemic context? If there are any, then what is their essence? We will look at the features of the religious structures’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic in some European countries, emphasizing Ukraine.

Marginal Reactions of Religious Organizations to the Threat of a Pandemic: An Attempt at Classification

The social regulatory function of religion is beyond doubt. Through the implementation of this function, most religions in the examined region seek to create and maintain their social structure and support the structures of their societies. However, the religious component never fully merges with other social institutions, and retains its autonomy. This is recorded, in particular, in the documents regulating life and work in the conditions of COVID-19 in most countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Religious organizations and religious activities in any state have specific preferences.

While the world's major religions and their leaders have unanimously imposed COVID restrictions on religious practices, within each religion there remain separate groups of believers who place religious rites above epidemiological safety standards. Under pandemic conditions, these groups seek ways to retain their privileges. It becomes the basis for the specific behavior of individual believers and entire religious communities in different states.

Such groups of believers—and they are not numerous—are confident that their faith gives them the right to ignore orders of secular authorities or to adhere to them selectively since they are primarily “under the jurisdiction of God.” Regarding the coronavirus, the Ukrainian researchers define this phenomenon as “coronavirus dissidence” (D. Gorevoy) and “COVID fundamentalism” (K. Govorun). Religious people who do not believe in the reality of the coronavirus are called “coronavirus dissidents.” These kinds of believers may be found in all Abrahamic religions. Among these are ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel and Brooklyn, USA, radical Shiites, Protestants in South Korea and the USA and many other countries or Orthodox Christians of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra in Ukraine. The term COVID fundamentalism in its meaning follows from the first. The commonality of positions of representatives of various religious beliefs is based on the denial of the virus (which is

commonly attributed to the belief that God's protection is more powerful than the virus). Those people show tough, uncompromising striving to fulfill their religious needs through their regular cult practice since they are convinced of their faith's omnipotence. As the religious scholar, D. Gorevoy points out, “all these inter-confessional and even inter-religious groups are united by only one thing—the denial of the virus, belief in the omnipotence of the ritual, literally magical perception of religious rituals and uncompromising attitude. This spiritual mix is commonly referred to as fundamentalism.”⁴ Such deviant social behavior, relative to majority of believers, is defined as fundamentalism (a form of religion that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of the Scripture and rigidly adhere to certain dogmas).⁵ Depending on the context, time, and conditions, a particular group's fundamentalism emphasizes different things related to quarantine restrictions. Nevertheless, what unites them all is the “fundamentalist worldview.” In the subject of this article, the definition of “fundamentalist worldview” is concretized as “COVID fundamentalism.”

Constructive and Fundamentalist Responses of Religious Organizations to the Threat of a Pandemic: The Parties' Facts and Arguments

By the end of 2020, daily World Health Organization statistics show no reason to talk about a decline in the pandemic.⁶ A year of life in the pandemic allows us to talk about the dynamics of adaptation of religious organizations to the “challenges of the time” to identify some trends in the world’s religious life under the influence of the coronavirus.

It is rather challenging to determine the place of religion and religious organizations in the confrontation/spread of the coronavirus disease and, in particular, the role of coronavirus in this controversial process. It is practically impossible to identify the presence or absence of a correlation between the level of religiosity of a particular country and the level or characteristics of the spread of the disease. Even in Eastern Europe, there are differences in the rate of spread and course of the incidence, in the ways government authorities, the religious community, and its regional governmental and religious leaders respond to it.

⁴ Д. Горево́й. “‘Не вірю в коронавірус’. Як релігійний фундаменталізм сприяє поширенню захворювання на COVID-19?” [“I don't believe in coronavirus”. (How does religious fundamentalism contribute to the spread of COVID-19?)”] <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30582431.html> /. Accessed 12.22.2020.

⁵ А. Арісто́ва. *Феномен релігійної девіації: теоретичні нариси*. [*The phenomenon of religious deviation: theoretical outlines*]. (Київ: Інтерсервіс, 2017)), p. 61.

⁶ *Всемирная организация здравоохранения. Глобальный веб-сайт*. [*World Health Organization. Global website*]. <https://www.who.int/ru/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>. Accessed 12.20.2020].

Most institutional religions have a clear hierarchical management structure. Therefore, the first of the fundamentally significant factors in shaping believers' behavior is the position of religious leaders along the entire vertical of religious power. The leaders form believers' mass consciousness, their position on the pandemic, and behavior under quarantine conditions.

Contrary to deviant forms of response to the crisis caused by the pandemic, almost all the leaders of the influential world religions have demonstrated a balanced and responsible position, consolidated with the secular authorities. For example, Pope Francis said that the outbreak of the coronavirus is one of the “responses of nature” to climate changes and those who do not respond to it.⁷ Pope Francis conveyed the *Urbi et Orbi*⁸ blessing from the empty St. Peter's Square after praying for the health of the world, calling on the faithful “all over the world to join spiritually in prayer with him.”⁹ The Christmas Mass in the Vatican was also held online ensuring believers' “spiritual presence.” The Holy See’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has become an example of behavior for millions of Catholics.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said that he was monitoring the situation with a full sense of responsibility for his parishioners and all people, and he urged everyone to limit travel and stay at home to protect the population.¹⁰ Most of the leaders of the Eastern Rite churches were in solidarity with him. The positions of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches regarding the danger of COVID-19 coincided. The leaders of the vast majority of Protestant churches and denominations made similar statements.

The Muslim leaders (Sunnis) almost unanimously urged believers not to risk their health for the sake of cult practice. Vivid proof of this is the closure of mosques during Ramadan and Kurban Bayram and the Hajj in 2020, which was attended by only about 1000 pilgrims despite millions of Muslims performing the Hajj every year.¹¹ The history of Islam has precedents for the repeated abolition of the Hajj during epidemics in the past. Information on the reaction of Shiites to quarantine measures is contradictory. The media have reported

⁷ “8 April, 2020 coronavirus news.” *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-04-08-20/index.html>. Accessed 12.20.2020.

⁸ “Pope Francis’ *Urbi et Orbi* address on coronavirus and Jesus calming the storm.” <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/27/read-pope-francis-urbi-et-orbi-address-coronavirus-and-jesus-calming-storm>. Accessed 12.20.2020.

⁹ “Declaration of the Director of the Holy See Press Office, Matteo Bruni.” <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/22/200322b.html>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

¹⁰ ““Вселенский патриарх приказал церквям прекратить службы до конца марта.” [“The Ecumenical Patriarch has ordered the churches to cease services by the end of March.”] <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/03/19/7244229/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

¹¹ Aya Batrawy. “Final Days of Hajj and Eid Celebrations Impacted by COVID-19” <https://time.com/5874203/hajj-eid-coronavirus-impacts/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

cases of “COVID fundamentalism” among Shiites in Iran, “Tablighi Jamaat” in India and Indonesia, etc., although many of them were later refuted.¹²

Focusing Christian churches’ attention on providing the sick with food, medical care and ensuring social justice for them, supporting social distancing in religious practices, developing a digital church and digital theology—these are the forms of global Christianity’s response to the challenges of the pandemic. They were voiced by the leaders of Christian denominations and are trying to adhere to most Christians in the world. However, Christian “COVID fundamentalists” do not agree with these innovations in religious life.

It turns out that the phenomenon of “COVID fundamentalism” raises the question of the willingness of groups of believers or their representatives to adhere to the rules of conduct proposed for implementation by religious leaders. Some religion groups are accustomed to prioritizing their religious norms over secular regulations of behavior. This follows from an utterly natural attitude for any religion that a believer must put certain religious principles above secular ones in certain circumstances. The only question is how to correctly interpret that the circumstances are not sufficient or the violation of secular principles, in the end, does not contradict religious tenets.

The phenomenon of “COVID fundamentalism” has not become widespread, although, in every religious community, there are some who disagree with the lockdown innovations. Such behavior periodically comes to the media’s attention (in Ukraine, for example, such precedents are known with representatives of Pentecostals, Greek Catholics, etc.), shocking the public. The mass media pick up such news, forcing religious leaders to make excuses, separating an individual believer’s position from the entire religious organization’s position.

When we speak of the overall situation with “COVID fundamentalism” in the Central and Eastern European countries, it is necessary to consider many factors. Therefore, it is impossible to make evidence-based generalizations. Countries with different types of religious culture coexist in this region. Regarding the degree of declared religiosity there are countries with large atheist populations—(Slovenia, the Czech Republic, the former GDR–East Germany), the predominantly religious countries (Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Croatia), and the countries with a mixed religious and atheistic culture (Hungary, Slovakia).¹³

¹² “Tablighi case: all foreigners released, court criticizes police, no evidence. The Indian Express.” <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tablighi-case-all-foreigners-freed-court-slams-police-says-no-proof-7106554/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

¹³ М. М. Палінчак, М. М. Лешанич. “Мережа релігійних організацій в Україні: стан та перспективи розвитку.” *Актуальні проблеми політики*. 2015. Вип. 55. pp. 211-212. [“Network of Religious Organizations in Ukraine: State and Prospects of Development.” *Current Policy Issues*. 2015. Issue 55], pp. 211-212.

In Eastern Europe, until the beginning of November, the mainly secularized Czech Republic demonstrated an increase in COVID mortality. The Czech Republic, whose population's displays low religiosity, has a rather difficult situation with the coronavirus.¹⁴ In Slovenia, about 3.6 million citizens out of 5.5 million have already had the antigen test done.¹⁵ Nearby ultra-Catholic Poland is also heavily infected. However, it is not possible to correctly compare these countries' statistics due to many mismatching factors. For example, in Poland, mass religious gatherings of people have been canceled due to the coronavirus. However, protesters (especially women) go into the streets at the pandemic's peak, disrupt church services, and organize sit-ins. This is not typical for a country where the Roman Catholic Church traditionally enjoys sufficient public authority. Nevertheless, such behavior in times of the quarantine is connected not with Poles' protest against the coronavirus, but with the public reaction to the Polish Constitutional Court's decision on the legality of the prohibition of abortion.

It is challenging to identify massive, long-term manifestations of "COVID fundamentalism" in the Central-Eastern European countries mentioned above due to the diversity of their religious life, religious obedience, etc. In the former socialist camp (Poland, Romania, Hungary), believers associated the restriction of religious freedom with the communist past.¹⁶

The reasons that provoke people to turn to the "COVID fundamentalism" also need to be analyzed. Most believers in the world have resigned themselves to the requirement not to visit churches for weekly services due to new pandemic realities. The deviation from the usual canons of marriage or funeral rites arouses a more significant protest among believers. However, it has a local character and is limited to small, disorganized groups of believers, which minimizes public resonance. On the other hand, "COVID fundamentalism" appears more frequently during important religious holidays. Let us consider some cases, mainly in Eastern Europe.

The religious holiday Rosh Hashanah in Ukraine became noticeable in 2020. Traditionally, the Hasidim (fundamentalist movement in Judaism) make a pilgrimage to

¹⁴ "Чехия начала кампанию массового тестирования на коронавирус." ["The Czech Republic has launched a mass coronavirus testing campaign."] <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/12/16/7117668/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

¹⁵ "Словаччина на вихідних вдруге проведе масове тестування на коронавірус." ["Slovakia will conduct mass testing for coronavirus for the second time over the weekend."] <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2020/11/6/7116218/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.]

¹⁶ Luxmoore, Jonathan (14 April 2020). "East European Catholics draw lockdown parallels with communist rule." *National Catholic Reporter*. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/east-european-catholics-draw-lockdown-parallels-communist-rule>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

Uman (Ukraine) to Tzadik Nachman's grave in September starting from the 18th century. The Bratslav Hasidim—the followers of Rabbi Nachman—have congregations in Israel, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Montreal, and Lakewood. The Israeli officials have called on Ukraine to ban the pilgrimage this year to prevent the spread of the infection. Nevertheless, thousands of pilgrims from all over the world flocked to Ukraine. Hundreds of Hasidim were stuck in airports, accusing the authorities of discrimination and anti-Semitism. In September, the Israeli government called the Hasidim, who sought to enter Ukraine through Belarus and were stuck at the border, to return home. According to the Belarusian government, over 2.5 thousand of Hasidic pilgrims stayed in the country. It is how Jewish “COVID fundamentalism” manifested itself.

In Ukraine, the lockdown coincided with important Christian holidays (Palm Sunday, Easter). Their celebration determined the churches' position on the question of what is more important—the law of faith or the health and lives of believers?

In many ways, the new rules of celebrating were formed based on the churches' leaders' voiced positions. On the eve of the holidays, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine published practical instructions for priests and believers regarding the coronavirus pandemic. The church called for compliance with all official orders and state quarantine restrictions. The leader of the OCU Epiphanius showed the church's concern for the Ukrainian society. He refused to travel for the Holy Fire and donated funds for this event to doctors. In his turn, the Supreme Archbishop of the UGCC, Svyatoslav Shevchuk, found an opportunity to manage Easter holidays and protect believers' health. Both church leaders urged their parishioners: “We can experience the Passover joy with you, without putting your health and life in danger. So let's pray together, let's pray online. Let's consecrate Easter baskets at home!”¹⁷

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) demonstrated a different position. From the lower ranks of the clergy to the head of the church, Metropolitan Onufry, priests convinced believers of the coronavirus' harmlessness and the impossibility of its transmission through the sacrament of communion. Numerous videos on YouTube confirm these “COVID fundamentalist” calls. In one of his addresses, Metropolitan of the UOC-MP Onufry voiced his position: “It is not so important whether the coronavirus is real or not, as experts and the media assure us incessantly.” Furthermore, he claims that this can be a “psychological” phenomenon, and people get sick under the

¹⁷ “Залишайтеся вдома”: УГКЦ та ПЦУ закликали вірян “правильно” святкувати Великдень.” [“Stay at home: The UGCC and the PCU called on the faithful to celebrate Easter “correctly.”] <https://chas.cv.ua/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

influence of panic and autosuggestion.¹⁸ Metropolitan Onufry did not call on believers to stay at home for Easter, did not specify the procedure for consecrating Easter baskets.

As a metropolis, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) only in Ukraine did not prohibit Easter services with the participation of believers. On the territory of Russia and in its other foreign metropolises, various degrees of restrictions were in effect. The UOC-MP defiantly ignored the quarantine measures. However, this was not a demonstration of the church's independence from its leadership in the ROC. Back in March, the synods in Moscow and Kyiv discussed security measures in connection with the pandemic. Both Synods adopted decisions that are reasonably regarded as lobbying for the church's interests, not for the health and life of their believers. It is not surprising that the demonstrative violation of sanitary requirements by the UOC-MP and the holding of Easter services with believers' participation led to harsh criticism in the media and social networks. The violation was assessed as an opposition to the state, laws, and common sense.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church initiated and supported fundamentalist sentiments among its believers. This position accelerated the spread of the coronavirus infection among members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The largest pilgrimage centers of the UOC-MP: the Kyiv-Pechersk and Pochaev Lavras, together with many other monasteries have become centers of the coronavirus infection. The Ministry of Health of Ukraine (MHU) reported suspicion of a large outbreak of the coronavirus in the Pochaev Lavra, but could not confirm this. The abbot of the Lavra refused to cooperate with the MHU. By these actions, the Lavra representatives demonstrated to the Ukrainian authorities some of their unreadiness to a dialogue.¹⁹

In early May, the governor of the Pochaev Lavra, Vladimir (Moroz) (UOC-MP), supported the statement of the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Moldova (Moscow Patriarchate) on behalf of the monastery. In it, the Moldovan authorities were accused of collusion with Bill Gates, who allegedly "wants to introduce microchips into the human body through vaccines against the coronavirus to control people using 5G technologies." Vladimir warned believers against using vaccinations against the coronavirus.

¹⁸ "Паніка й самонавіювання," 'молитва зціляє коронавірус.' Звернення Онуфрія (МП) пояснює саботаж карантину 20 квітня 2020." ["'Panic and self-suggestion,' 'prayer heals the coronavirus.' Onufriy's (MP) appeal explains the sabotage of the quarantine on April 20, 2020."] <https://texty.org.ua/fragments/100788/panika-j-samonaviyuvannya-molytva-zcilyaye-koronavirus-zvernennya-onufriya-mp-poyasnyuye-sabotazh-karantynu-video/>. Accessed 12.22.2020.

¹⁹ Т. Деркач. "Страсний Великдень-2020: підсумки та висновки." ["Holy Easter 2020: results and conclusions."] https://glavcom.ua/columns/tetyana_derkach/strasniy-velikoden-2020-pidsumki-ta-visnovki-675215.html. Accessed 12.19.2020.

As Archimandrite K. Govorun emphasizes: “Although the hierarchy itself, for the most part, is aware of the danger of COVID-19, including personally for themselves, they cannot cope with skepticism and even aggression concerning restrictive measures on the part of conventional church ‘conservatives’ and fundamentalists.”²⁰

There are representatives of both spiritual and secular authorities that use the coronavirus to lobby their interests, incite sectarian hatred and settle scores with religious competitors. In the city of Pershotravensk, Dnipropetrovsk region, the local authorities (active members of the Russian Orthodox Church) accused the International Christian Movement “New Generation” of the spread of the coronavirus. Even though there were no “COVID-fundamentalist” sentiments in the churches of the “New Generation” and the church leaders repeatedly warned believers to observe COVID-19 protection measures during online sermons. As a result of the escalation of tension, there was a night search of the New Generation church premises, carried out by a special unit of law enforcement agencies. They looked for materials confirming the violation of the quarantine by the members and leadership of this church. There were none. There was no official explanation or apology from the authorities. Simultaneously, in the same Pershotravensk, the service on Palm Sunday held in the church of the UOC-MP in violation of all the quarantine measures had no consequences. The authorities’ (primarily local) reaction, neutral towards the UOC-MP and sharply negative towards the New Generation Church, was perceived as artificially inspired persecution of the Protestants.²¹

It is difficult to imagine the possibility of conducting searches in pilgrim centers, monasteries, and churches of the UOC-MP, considering that it was here that the quarantine measures were openly ignored. We see that the coronavirus has identified pain points both in interfaith relations and in relations between the state and religious organizations. It can be stated that “COVID fundamentalism” manifestations may be the deterioration of interreligious, interfaith dialogue, and mutual understanding.

²⁰ К. Говорун. “Корона-фундаментализм считает причиной массового заражения в монастырях РПЦ МП архимандрит Кирилл (Говорун).” [“Corona-fundamentalism considers going to the monasteries of the ROC-MP to be the cause of mass infection. Archimandrite Cyril (Hovorun)”] <https://credo.press/231285/>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

²¹ В. Титаренко. “Українське суспільство в умовах COVID-19: місце і роль церков в процесі запобігання поширенню коронавірусу.” *Філософія релігії та медицини в постсекулярну добу: матеріали II Міжнар. наук.-практ. конф., присвяченої пам'яті свт. Луки (В. Ф. Войно-Ясенецького)*. [“Ukrainian Society in the Context of COVID-19: the Place and Role of Churches in the Process of Preventing the Spread of the Coronavirus.” *Philosophy of Religion and Medicine in the Post-Secular Era: materials II International scientific-practical conference dedicated to the memory of St. Luke (VF Voyno-Yasenetsky)*.] (Київ: НМУ ім. О. О. Богомольця, ВР ІФ ім. Г. С. Сковороди НАНУ, 2020), pp. 173-175.

We emphasize that the religious protests against the restrictions associated with the quarantine measure are more often expressed by the believers, among whom speculations about a conspiracy of a “world government,” an experiment on humankind, and the like are spread.

In post-Soviet countries, such narratives, regardless of coronavirus pandemic, have been actively promoted in the most conservative circles of Orthodox believers over the past 30 years as arguments in justification of church fundamentalism. During the pandemic, the coronavirus’ religious life restrictions became another argument against the modernization of Orthodoxy. The following allegations are circulating among Orthodox Christians in Ukraine and Russia in particular:

-Along with the coronavirus vaccine, the 666 chip will be introduced. A person who relies on God does not require vaccination.

-5G technology turns people into zombies and spreads the coronavirus. Bill Gates and George Soros create technologies for digital slavery.

In Ukraine, these ideas do not receive any meaningful distribution outside the Orthodox environment.

However, the coronavirus is “changing” the minds of believers, including the “COVID fundamentalists.” So, after the death of three bishops and the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irenaeus, the Orthodox priests in Serbia began to urge the flock to take the quarantine measures seriously.²²

Simultaneously, in the conditions of the quarantine restrictions, new forms of interfaith interaction, new ways of communicating with the flock with the help of information technologies appear. Online prayers and sermons attract not only believers of particular confessions, but also any interested person. It activates young people with free access to information resources and interest in religious topics. Theological differences are now receding in the face of life problems and the socio-evangelistic issues of concern to believers at all times: How to keep calm during a public panic? How to trust God not in words, but in action? What does God say about suffering? Why do the righteous suffer? Where to look for

²²Dusan Stojanovic. “Serbian Church leader dies after contracting COVID-19.” <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/serbian-church-leader-dies-after-contracting-covid-19-1.5197330>. Accessed 12.20.2020.

a cure for depression and oppressed spirit? There are questions about death and immortality and other relevant topics.²³

Conclusions

The main ideas propagated by the COVID Fundamentalists can be summarized as follows:

- There is no virus. It is just a way to establish a world dictatorship and prohibit churches from gathering;
- Do not wear masks, do not keep a distance, since this is all intimidation;
- The right not to believe in the coronavirus and the right not to surrender to the dictatorship and chips are common human rights.

The believers' religious worldview has an irrational basis and is therefore not able to critically perceive such conspiracy theories.

Most governments have taken note of guidelines for religious communities and leaders developed with religious representatives at the Office of the World Health Organization. In response to the challenges of COVID-19, the secular authorities oblige the religious communities to adapt their activities to the epidemiological situation. This adaptation takes place both thanks to and despite the specific actions of the heads of local religious communities. Given the growing COVID-19 pandemic in several European countries, including Ukraine, the upcoming Christmas and Easter holidays will be held subject to severe restrictions, which, in turn, may provoke a new surge of COVID fundamentalism.

However, for analysts, COVID fundamentalism raises several vital questions. Will religion play a positive or negative role in overcoming the challenges of COVID-19? Will the state authorities be able to attract the experience and resources of religion in solving the problems of the crisis caused by the coronavirus and for the recovery of humanity after the end of the global pandemic? Will the church and society learn a lesson from what is happening? Will it be a factor of tolerance and cooperation, or isolationism and fundamentalism? Time will tell.

²³ “11 сильних проповідей про випробування в житті християн.” [“11 Strong Sermons on Life Trials of Christians.”] <https://sobor.com.ua/news/10-silnikh-propovidei-pro-viprobuvannya-v-zhitti-khristiyan>. Accessed 12.23.2020.

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