

# Religious Controversies in COVID-19

## *Restrictions, State, Science, Conspiracies: Four Topics with Theological-Ethical Responses*



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## ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 30 April 2020  
Received in revised form 17 May 2020  
Accepted 20 May 2020  
Available online 30 June 2020  
doi: 10.18638/dialogo.2020.6.2.15

*Keywords:*

human rights; imposition; faith;  
religiousness; pandemic; Covid19;  
public gatherings; religion;  
conventional medicine; State law;  
holistic treatment; social conflicts;

## ABSTRACT

The new Coronavirus, namely Sars-CoV-2, took the world by surprise and grew into a pandemic worldwide (called COVID-19 pandemic) in a couple of months since the beginning of 2020. It managed to lockdown at home almost half of the world population under the threat of illness and sudden death. Due to the extreme medical advises of containing the spread and damages of this threat, mostly directed towards social distancing, public gatherings cancelation, and contact tracing, each State imposed such regulations to their people and for all areas of social activity, including the religious ones. This articles analyses four topics:

1. Restrictions imposed by the State and reactions by religious organizations. The theological-ethical response focused on the fact that all religions what to save lives and defeat death. 2. The pandemic shows the sensitive relation between the State and religions and shows the differences in power relations in the different countries. The theological-ethical response calls for a partnership between the State and the religions in their territory. 3. The relation between science and religion is tested during the pandemic. Whereas the majority of believers adhere to scientific results, a good part refuses scientific knowledge. The theological-ethical response of the authors is that science and religion are complementary and not contradictory. 4. Pandemics as situations of high uncertainty are often accompanied by conspiracy theories that claim to know who is guilty for the disaster, who is the scapegoat, which has to be punished. The theological-ethical response gives theological reasons to say no to conspiracies and scapegoats and yes to take responsibility wherever we are in order to save lives.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The new Coronavirus, namely Sars-CoV-2, took the world by surprise and grew into a pandemic worldwide (called COVID-19 pandemic) in a couple of months since the beginning of 2020. It managed to lockdown at home almost half of the world population under the threat of illness and sudden death. Due to the extreme medical advises of containing the spread and damages of this threat, mostly directed towards social distancing, public gatherings cancelation, and contact tracing, each State imposed such regulations to their people and for all areas of social activity, including the religious ones.

We have witnessed the religious denominations taking into consideration unprecedented changes in their cultic organization as well as into doctrinal argumentation concerning the actual threat of Coronavirus pandemic outbreak. Most religious denominations have gone through three stages concerning these impositions: firstly, disdaining them as most other public figures did by trivializing the outbreak size while associating it with the seasonal flu. The second step all religions took was to cancel all public gatherings, from the minor, weekly services, to those of major significance, as all those reunited in April. The last stage (at least until the moment we are writing this article) was the initiation of internal conservative movements against these impositions and the religious leadership that bend under while neglecting essential aspects of faith and tradition.

Nevertheless, while neglecting or consciously denying conventional medical advice, almost all religious denominations offered an alternative for their communities to comfort them and even protect against the pandemic. These religious means were also debated and most often criticized as hostile and offensive to people's health. This conflict between the State-Medicine-

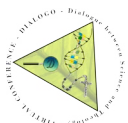
Religion brought into public attention many debates and consequently measures that aim to protect the population against the Covid19 spreading among it. From a culture to another, this relationship differs, both in its length, virulence, as well as the need to impose strict rules that violate civil rights and norms. In this context of both social and internal conflicts, some crucial and legitimate questions are being raised of ethical and theological concerns. *What are the grounds that religious communities rely on while protesting against the conventional medical advises? Can religion, no matter which we pick, State that it offers complete protection to those that seek shelter against the Covid-19 pandemic [or any other natural threat]? Can we rely fundamentally and utterly on religion's help in healing infected people? Furthermore, if so, is any State entitled to interfere with religious activity and amend, alter, cancel, or ban them? Under what circumstances is it allowed so and by invoking which right or authority?*

This article is the fruit of the cooperation between a Rumanian-orthodox theologian and specialist on the relation between science and theology, Cosmin-Tudor CIOCAN from Romania, and a reformed theologian and specialist in global ethics, Christoph Stückelberger from Switzerland. It underlines the importance of ecumenical, international and interdisciplinary cooperation in overcoming such life-threatening pandemics and other global challenges.

## II. RESTRICTIONS DURING PANDEMICS: ALSO FOR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES?

### A. Analysis: Global Restrictions around the World, also Holy Communion

The unexpected coronavirus outbreak [Sars-CoV-2, December 2019-2020]<sup>[1]</sup> and its swift spread around the globe in only a few



months affected almost all countries and all sectors of society, from private to public life, from business to education, from sports events to culture. Religious organizations have been equally affected. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused numerous changes in religious behavior everywhere, in which some religious communities could not accept them gladly, willingly, or without consequences. There was no religious community unaffected by the pandemic countermeasures. Religious public gatherings, from the minor, as the weekly services, to those of major significance, as all those reunited in April, were entirely canceled to public and done with closed doors. So was the case with Christian Easter on April 12 (a week later for Eastern Orthodox churches). Passover began on April 8 and continued with the Jewish Purim festival on April 9 and 10; it should have been a vibrant spectacle akin to the carnival. Instead, it was celebrated half-heartedly, if at all. The colorful Hindu Holi festival (March 10) in India also faced severe restrictions. The same happened to the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi, on April 13, with all the Gurdwaras closed worldwide, from Pakistan to the UK or the USA.

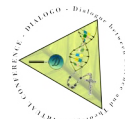
For the world's 1.8 billion Muslims, the holy month of Ramadan is a social and spiritual high point, a time to gather with friends and family and to focus on fasting, prayer, and scripture. Among the five pillars of Islam, the fourth - Sawm, or fasting, and the third - Zakāt, or almsgiving or charity, cannot be held without public gatherings. The word Zakāt can be defined as purification and growth because it allows an individual to achieve balance and encourages new growth. The principle of knowing that all things belong to God is essential to purification and growth. Zakāt consists of spending a portion of one's wealth for the benefit of the poor or needy, like debtors or travelers; it is obligatory for all Muslims who are able to do so.<sup>[2]</sup> "The

rigors of fasting have birthed a range of social customs. Families stay up all night or wake up before sunrise to eat. Breaking the fast and the nighttime meals that follow are opportunities to gather with relatives, entertain guests and, for the wealthy, give charity by offering drop-in meals at street banquets for the poor.

Nevertheless, the Coronavirus has added danger to many of the ways that Muslims have observed Ramadan for generations, forcing modifications. Some mosques, where men and women normally pray shoulder to shoulder and crowds spill into the streets, have made efforts to space out the faithful to prevent contagion. Others, from Paris to Brooklyn to Mecca, toward which all Muslims pray, have shut their doors altogether."<sup>[3]</sup> Doctors fear the virus will spread as Muslims gather for daily, shared meals after sundown.

For some, closure of a religious temple may not be seen as a huge demand and be so significant, but for others, the impossibility of *attending public worship places* is crucial for their religiousness, and moreover, it is considered as an act of altering faith, renunciation of belief, of God. It is inopportune and redundant to add that all these religious festivals require public reunion of their members, without whom an alternative of devotion and glorification could not be imagined. Also, there are related issues that come across while devotees come to worship in their public temples. We will mention some of the most commented and social-conflict-causing religious issues.

Nevertheless, the cancelation of all public gatherings was not the only restriction Religions came to perpetrate. The *closure of churches/mosques/temples to the public* was only the protuberant one, in the shade of which have grown many other adverse difficulties created by the social distancing and the impact of the spread of Coronavirus



from person to person. From other services until particular cases of religious acts, there were many waivers imposed by the State, some of them nominally and explicitly regulated by normative acts of the state government, while others implicitly discussed and forbidden by collateral infringement of the imposed interdictions. It is redundant to say that all the religious festivals and public celebrations require the exchange of food, drinks, and other liquids that are person-to-person shared, distributed, or even commonly drunk. "Religion becomes a central component of ritual actions involving food preparation (cooking) and consumption (eating) when a higher power or supernatural authority is intentionally made part of the ritual food process."<sup>[4]</sup> For example, Sikh communities offer free food or *langar* to a large number of people, between 300 and 400 meals each day. Hindu prepares and serve *modak* or sweet dumpling with a filling of fresh coconut and jaggery made, especially during Ganesh Chaturthi. Also, while doing the ritual *puja* or *pooja*<sup>[5]</sup>, water or food is shared among worshipers for all the traditional *sa skāras* (rites of passage) held weekly in the religious communities. This offering is the essential ritual of Hinduism but also held by Buddhists and Jains. Similarly, one of the hallmarks of the Passover holiday in Judaism is the eschewal of all foods containing leaven, the consumption only of foods that have been designated as *Kasher la-Pesach*, "kosher for Passover," and the use of particular sets of utensils during the *seder* dinner that have not been used during the rest of the year.



**Photo1,2:** Jews sharing online *seder*, the ritual meal held to commence the Jewish festival of Passover vs the ordinary and traditional way of doing it

The major life crises and rites of passage (birth, marriage, death etc.) are celebrated by feasts or other uses of food. Wine and other foods were integral parts of circumcision ceremonies and of a boy's attainment of ritual majority (Bar Mitzvah). Muslims of all social statuses, however, eat freely with each other, worship in the same mosques, and participate in ceremonies together, as they do during Eid al-Fitr, the feast marking the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.<sup>[6]</sup> All these religious manifestations are deeply against all medical advises of stopping any pandemic outbreak, and for that matter cannot be bypassed by such measures.

Among the issues that have started domino reactions, of both social and religions' internal conflicts, was also one that has rekindled a millennium-old debate within Christianity. *Should Eastern Orthodox priests use a shared spoon to distribute sacramental bread and wine to churchgoers or a common chalice between clergy?* The debate has resurfaced amid unprecedented coronavirus measures that are compelling religious institutions around the world to temporarily alter some traditional practices. The importance of the issue and its span was already proved by other researchers and writers that have been preparing articles in this regard, both PRO and CON; we just mention their point of view for a wider understanding of its cruciality in religious rituals.





**Photo 3,4:** 'Celebrating Holy Communion without shared wine is fine' in the age of COVID-19, many Romani-Catholic churches have decided.<sup>[7]</sup> Vs. the traditional Orthodox way of sharing 'the Blood of Christ'

Among the arguments [CONS] that agree with [at least] temporal cancelation of using a common meal to the ritual of Holy Communion sharing among clergy and devotees, is that we are a part of creation and we share this creation with viruses<sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, we need to learn how to learn to live with them in a way that makes everyone safe."<sup>[9]</sup> Furthermore, we can appoint at least one<sup>[10]</sup> that involves theological argumentation. It explains what underpins the widely spread belief that the Coronavirus cannot be transmitted through the communion of the Holy Gifts, accusing this belief of heresy namely Docetism, "as they would implicitly claim that Christ's Body and Blood are not subject to the laws of nature, as a true human body would be. Here Docetism would consist in rejecting the possibility that viruses that are part of God's creation and ontologically good would survive on our Lord's Body, as on any truly human body, unable to harm Him, but able to harm us, humans, that are neither divine or without sin."<sup>[11]</sup>

The other type of argumentation, PRO using continuously, without interruption religious means for the Holy Communion, points out the "Christ is but Life and healing, instead of death and illness." "The representatives of this camp (the majority), let us call them "traditionalists," believe that the Body and Blood of Christ cannot be the cause, source, or transmitter of disease. Instead, in the Twelfth Prayer of St. John Chrysostom before Holy Communion, we hear the words, "May my partaking of these Holy Mysteries of Christ be not unto judgment or condemnation O Lord, but to the healing of soul and body." The logic of the traditionalist camp is simple and understandable—Christ himself is in the Chalice, and therefore, it is impossible to get

sick from touching Him. After all, the Bible says that the Lord healed the lepers, the sick with various ailments, and even touching His clothing restored health. Otherwise, if the Body and Blood of Christ can transmit infection, then communion is just "fiction," a pretty rite that is, nonetheless, "unhygienic," and in some cases, possibly harmful."<sup>[12]</sup>

To all the impositions turned against religious manifestation in public alone, there were two opposite directions of getting 'the news': ones that follow them with diligence, while others are vehemently opposing to any attempt of altering religiousness with any costs. For example, in front of the Ramadan approaching Mouhanad Khorchide, a scholar of Islam and religious educationalist from the University of Munster, highlighted the closure of the Great Mosque in Mecca. "That was the most forthright measure conceivable and showed the extent of responsibility and how serious the situation is," said Khorchide in conversation with Deutsche Welle.<sup>[13]</sup>

### *B. Response: Religions for Saving Lives, Defeat Death, Strengthen Virtues*

As a response to this debate about accepting or refusing restrictions during the pandemic related to community, food sharing, and Holy Communion, we give four theological-ethical arguments, of *why believers and religious organizations should strictly follow restrictions and measures defined by the governments:*

[a] The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary crisis situation that needs *extra-ordinary responses*. Not only a pandemic, but also a tsunami, a flood, a drought, a war, or an unexpected death are extraordinary crises. Religious communities have officially defined rules for emergency situations. Example: Lay people can do emergency baptisms if no

priest is around and the person is in danger to die. It is officially allowed in the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox tradition, whereas churches derived from Calvin do not need it as baptism is not seen as a precondition for salvation. In new types of emergencies, religious communities are able and invited to develop adapted solutions based on the center of faith, love, and compassion to save lives.

[b] There are *different forms of the presence and impact of the Divine*. For Hindu, religion is mainly a personal affair. Worship can well be done at home if it is not possible in the temple during the pandemic. Believers of the Abrahamic religions (Christians, Muslim, and Jews) also practice their faith and family worship at home, but it is much expressed in the community. Manifold online services such as singing as choir each from home and connected through online platforms, online worship and prayers, pastoral counseling etc. are practiced as an extra-ordinary solution. Protestant Christians celebrate Eucharist online, led by a pastor from a church.[14] God/the Divine is unlimited in his ways of presence. Religious rules cannot limit him the Almighty, Benevolent and Savior.

[c] *Saving lives* is at the core of all religions. All precautionary measures to save lives during pandemic, but also in ordinary situations like “fasten your seatbelt”, “limit your consumption of alcohol”, “safety at the workplace”, “eat healthy food” etc. part of religious teaching and praxis. The pandemic and the need for lockdown, including the closing of schools shows the importance of educating values and virtues: Discipline and self-leadership are key part of character education where the religions have to play a key role. Confucian Asian Countries such as China and South Korea have shown greater self-discipline than co-called Christian countries such as the USA and Brazil, whereas in many other countries

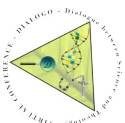
with majority Christians or Muslims, self-discipline was also well implemented.

[d] *Life after death* is at the core of the Christian faith. Giving hope in pandemic situations of despair and depressions, pastoral care with the message that ‘Christ defeated death and death has not the last word’ is a key-role of churches, and more essential and adequate than insisting on mass gatherings for jointly have Holy Communion during the pandemic.

### III. STATE: RELATIONS WITH RELIGIONS

#### A. Analysis: The Interference of governments and its limits

*Are governments allowed to interfere in religious affairs during the pandemic – and if so, where are the limits?* Does the State have the legal right to intervene and stop religious communities from practicing their own healing therapies, for any reason, with the explanation that they would work against conventional medical official statements or not work at all? To answering this we should watch what the reasons and the official statements some governments gave in regard to their reopening/never-to-close religious temples are. Concerning our last example, of reopening mosques in Pakistan amid coronavirus lockdown, the Pakistan Prime Minister, Imran Khan, stated on April 22, 2020, that “If worshippers want to go [to mosques], and we stop them by deploying police and putting people in jail - **this is not what free nations do.**”<sup>[15]</sup> This declaration and its following-up State measure were definitely against what the Pakistani doctors have said, that ‘bigger Ramadan congregations raise the risk of spreading the virus’. Also, Dr. Qaiser Sajjad, General Secretary of Pakistan Medical Association, says, “Unfortunately, our rulers have made a wrong decision, our clerics have shown a non-serious attitude. They have shown an



attitude of playing with human lives.”<sup>[16]</sup>

“Religious leaders in Pakistan have successfully pressured the government to lift coronavirus-fighting lockdown measures on mosques which had been in place ahead of Ramadan. As the Islamic fasting month started on April 24, 2020, Muslims were being allowed to visit mosques for prayers again. Doctors in the country have voiced concerns about the spread of Covid-19 in mosques, and urged the authorities to restore restrictions that had been in place since late March.”<sup>[17]</sup> However, the vast majority of Muslims, like other religions in most countries, respected the lockdown restrictions, and found ways for prayers at home and via the internet.

Behind the State restrictions of religious practice and pressures from religious leaders is the larger question of the relation between State and religious organizations within that State. Four main categories of states in relation to religious regulations can be distinguished, as shown in the global map of the PEW Research Center:

“States with an official religion confer official status on a particular religion in their constitution or basic law. These states do not necessarily provide benefits to that religious group over others. Nevertheless, in most cases, they do favor the state religion in some way.

States with a preferred or favored religion have government policies or actions that clearly favor one (or in some cases, more than one) religion over others, typically with legal, financial or other kinds of practical benefits. If these countries mention the favored religion in their constitution or laws, they do it as a “historical” religion (but not as the official state religion).

States with no official or preferred religion seek to avoid giving tangible benefits to one religious group over others (although they may evenhandedly provide benefits to many religious groups).

States with a hostile relationship toward religion exert a very high level of control over religious institutions in their countries or actively take a combative position toward religion in general. Some of these countries may have constitutions that proclaim freedom of religion, or leaders who describe themselves as adherents of a particular religion, such as Islam. Nonetheless, their governments seek to tightly restrict the legal status, funding, clergy, and political activity of religious groups.”<sup>[18]</sup>

These four types of relations between States and Religions are essential to understand the reaction of governments (representing the State) and religious leaders (representing their religious organizations). Governments want to be also re-elected after the Corona crisis and therefore avoid a conflict with the religious leaders. This is the case in the above example from Pakistan as for the President of the USA who needs to please the evangelicals among his supporters.

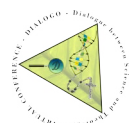
In addition to the four constitutional types listed above, we can distinguish five systematic types of (power-) relations between State and religions:

*Domination of the State over the religion/s.* The State controls, domesticates, and instrumentalizes the religious organizations in order to strengthen its own power.

*Domination of the Religion over the State.* The mainstream religion dominates and instrumentalizes the State and public life in order to strengthen its own power (e.g., Roman-Catholic church in medieval age in Europe).

*Unity of State and one Religion.* The State asks for loyalty; the religious organization gets privileges; together they represent the unity of the country (e.g., some Orthodox churches in the past).

*Separation of State and Church.* The State is by law strictly neutral towards religious



organizations (e.g., France and the US).

*Partnership of the State and religions.* The State guarantees religious freedom for all religions, but gives a special status of public law to majority religions with obligations of services like education and social services for the society (e.g., Germany, Switzerland).

#### B. Response: Partnership State and Religions

From a theological-ethical perspective, we suggest four responses to state interventions in religious affairs and religious interventions in state affairs during and after a crisis such as a pandemic:

[a] In most countries under *constitutional law*, the government can impose restrictions on a religious belief or practice. This is ethically justified under the value of equality and justice, as long as the law in question *applies to everyone* and does not target a specific religion or religious practice, which otherwise could be seen as discrimination of one religious group.<sup>[19]</sup>

[b] In ordinary and even more in extraordinary situations such as a pandemic, religious organizations and the State both have to serve the people with their respective means. The *partnership state-religions* is the ethically most appropriate expression of it.

[c] *Critical solidarity* includes reciprocal support, but also critique where needed. The State has an obligation to limit life-threatening practices of religious organizations, fake news, and conspiracies spread by them. Religious organizations have to raise their voice where governments do not take their responsibility in reacting too late, not providing medical or economic support in time.

[d] A *respectful, constructive relationship* between the State and religious organizations has to be established in ordinary times. Extraordinary times such as

the pandemic are the test, how resilient and sustainable they are.

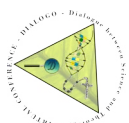
#### IV. SCIENCE: DOES GOD BETTER HELP THAN DOCTORS? IS FAITH THE BEST MEDICINE?

##### A. Analysis: Some Religious Believers Refusing Scientific-medical Knowledge

Evangelical Christian minister Gloria Copeland claims that Jesus himself protected him from the flu and suggested that people avoid the virus by repeating the phrase, "I'll never have the flu."<sup>[20]</sup> In the case of the Sues 'Veteran Affairs' "deems pastoral services for all patients, including veterans receiving outpatient medical services, to be a necessary part of medical treatment."<sup>[21]</sup> Other religious leaders are using the pulpit to spread misinformation. The evangelical pastor Kenneth Copeland, for example, claims to have cures for COVID-19<sup>[22]</sup> "Jesus is my protection," said Father Allawi, who belongs to the Maronite Catholic Church. "He is my sanitizer."<sup>[23]</sup>

The relation between science and religions is complex, controversial, and changed throughout the last 3000 years. Believers, spiritual genius, monks, and nuns, modern researchers with faith contributed even substantially to scientific research and progress. The majority of religious institutions, including Christian universities, Islamic, Jain, Sikh, Hindu or Buddhist research centers, Confucian Chinese medicine universities, indigenous medical plants research, and hundred of thousands of faith-driven enterprises, contribute to scientific knowledge. At the same time, a substantial number of believers refuse medical science (even though using IT technology and many other products resulting from scientific research).

Religion and science have shared a long history of antagonism, skepticism,





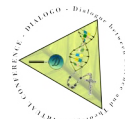
and mutual concessions. “For most of the sec. XX interest in psychobiological research, pragmatism, and behaviorism, experimentalism pushed these fields of science in a position totally refractory to religion. Freud<sup>[24]</sup> saw the religious person as a neurotic person with obsessive-compulsive traits, Ellis<sup>[25]</sup> considered Religion as the institutionalization of irrationality being inflexible and intolerant and Watters<sup>[26]</sup> said that religion is incompatible with many components of mental and physical health.”<sup>[27]</sup> It is a XX century trend in splitting religiosity from spirituality, emphasizing their features as opposed. For Shafranske and Malony<sup>[28]</sup>, *religiosity* refers to “adherence to the beliefs and practices of an organized church or religious institution,” while *spirituality* is seen as having a personal and experiential connotation. In this vision the polarization of ‘religion and spirituality’ in the paradigm ‘institutional versus individual’ ignores the fact that all forms of spiritual expression are revealed in a social context alone and that all religious beliefs are interested in ordering personal problems. This trend made the gap between religion and science even deeper. It places the institutions of religious matter as against scientific development due to the assertion that all religious institutions want to refrain people from being ‘enlightened’ other than ‘religiously’. Underlying the mass-mind-control on behalf of religious leadership in their interest, this vision tries to salve-guard the necessary, ontological need of human being, by creating this tri-party gap, religion-spirituality-science. “According to almost all the standard histories of medicine published over the last 50 years, the story of medicine is, in large part, the story of the progressive liberation of science - empirical, experimental, secular - from the religious slavery of superstition, tradition, and authority.”<sup>[29]</sup>

*Skepticism against medical treatment* comes to a good part from Pentecostal

churches with a strong emphasis on healing through the Holy Spirit, from free churches such as the anti-vaccine movement in the US, from traditional religions claiming that divine healing sources come through the healer with his/her super-natural energy of miracles. Then there are also charlatans, money-makers to sell their miraculous products, conspiracy-ideologists, and others. In a good number of cases, anti-science movements are also linked to populist political movements, which stimulate each other. Populist political leaders are often critical and negligent to scientific results; we could call them *confessing anti-science politicians*. It becomes really dangerous, when heads of states such as the Presidents of USA, Brazil, and Tanzania officially propagate scientifically non-proven or already proven as fake some treatment methods which can kill lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic with a new virus, with much scientific uncertainty, with a hectic search for vaccines or other solutions of treatments and the lack of affordability and accessibility of treatments in many places, are obviously the soil for the blossoming of “alternative solutions” by supernatural healing and non-traditional methods.

*Is there a right to refuse medical treatment or give it to own children?* Some religious groups forbid their partisans to take medical care, refusing for them or their children proper medication or treatment whatsoever. There are many cases in which the State sues these groups for denying the ‘right to life and medical treatment’. However, there are several countries in which “the right to die”<sup>[30]</sup> is accepted as a concept based on the opinion that human beings are entitled to end their life or undergo voluntary euthanasia – in most countries under very strict conditions and controls. This ‘right’ may be used for ages



by Hindu and Jain practices of non-violent suicide through fasting (Prayopavesa and Santhara, respectively), a practice that for others is considered a grave sin, as in Catholicism.<sup>[31]</sup>

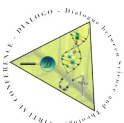
For official statements and as the front interface between Religion(s) and the secular world, everywhere it was taken a single concerted action, obeying the medical advice towards social distancing. But the costs for all social systems, altogether economical, tourism, commerce, trade, transportation et all. were equal with those for the religious phenomenon. *“Religion is the solace of first resort for billions of people grappling with a pandemic for which scientists, presidents, and the secular world seem, so far, to have few answers. With both sanitizer and leadership in short supply, dread over the Coronavirus has driven the globe’s faithful even closer to religion and ritual.”*<sup>[32]</sup> With a strong faith in divine aids against this malevolent pandemic, religions all over the words took an alternative ‘fight’ against the Coronavirus, and, instead of obeying the State impositions, led to several attempts of breaking them with a strong motivation, both internal and declared.

*Who is trustworthy?* An important indicator for the role of State and religions in fighting the pandemic is the level of trust in authorities. The latest survey of the annual Edelman Trust Barometer<sup>[33]</sup> was done in November and December 2019 in eleven markets across the globe. It shows that 80 percent of the people trust scientist, but only 46 percent of religious leaders and government leaders. The update in April 2020 showed a huge increase in the trust in governments, due to the pandemic, up to 65 percent. Over 70 percent want the governments to lead the pandemic response. Sixty-one percent are willing to give up personal health and location data, more than normal, in order to help contain the spread of the virus.<sup>[34]</sup> The April update

concentrated on governments and did not include religious leaders. At least one hypothesis can be made, that local pastors, priests, and imam get more trust than national or international religious leaders (after the many scandals reported). It would correspond to the trust in “people of my local community” in the table above with 69 percent trust. ‘The closer a person, the higher the trust’ is a proximity rule, which is seen in the Edelman Barometer for years.

While some, more resilient, used a humongous but diligent measure to contain pandemic among their followers, others denied obeying the impositions of secular society when tagging the formers as coward and apostate. *Pope Francis* directly addressed in his speech on Easter 2020 the coronavirus pandemic and laid out his vision for a “contagion of hope,” saying this is “an Easter of solitude lived amid the sorrow and hardship that the pandemic is causing.” He also called on politicians “to work actively for the common good” and “to provide the means and resources needed to enable everyone to lead a dignified life.” In this regard, the Pope warns against ‘selfishness’ during a pandemic to all those who disobey the advices of conventional Medicine to stay indoors and give up to social manifestations, religious ones included.<sup>[35]</sup>

It would be outrageous for devotees if, amid pandemic, religious leadership would only criticize the impositions and refrain their communities from accepting the suggested and enforced medical measures, without giving something in return, something to comfort them in times of sorrow. Since the pandemic is not the only illness humanity faced along the way, *religions have always thought about illness and diseases and came up with a ‘heavenly’ solutions* to address this major and important issue of humanity. “Religion serves at least three functions for the sick or dying patient. (a) It provides a theoretical framework in which



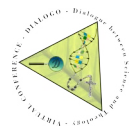
to make sense of illness and mortality by understanding them as punishment, education, purification, sacrifice, or mystery, and it does so without denying the reality of these experiences. (b) It provides such practical resources for coping with sickness, suffering, and mortality as prayer, social support, and ritual actions aimed at forgiveness, transcendence, and healing. (c) It gives hope in the face of inevitable death. The particular clinical benefits of religion, both physical and psychologic, as well as its possible distortions, are known anecdotally. Empirical studies are needed to test these impressions.”<sup>[36]</sup> Thus, the whole thing with a religious protest against conventional medical requirements and the aftermath State’s impositions to ban religious gatherings and public rituals is in fact, a way of saying ‘we have the cure’. The history of the relationship of religion and health care shows us that we are right to assert this unspoken, but rather vigorously emphasized reason within all the religious protest against churches’ closure. In other times of human existence, the health care was entirely the privilege of religious servants, either clergy or the healers. The historical involvements of various religious traditions in healing practices are scattered all over the world, and the contemporary denominations with the same claim inherited most of them.

Some religious groups, which are critical to classical mainstream medicine, call for a more *holistic approach*, which means that when treating a disease, the doctor takes into account all three layers of an individual: body, mind, and spirit. “The healing must, therefore, be not only physical, of the body, but of the complete being (body-mind-spirit). In the case of a cancer patient, for example, integrative Medicine aims not only to provide allopathic treatment, but also to solve all associated problems, namely to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy, to alleviate pain, to combat depression, to help

social reintegration of the patient, but also in the care in the terminal phases.”<sup>[37]</sup>

So, as we can see, there are law limitations that allow religious groups to hold that their practices/rituals to be treated as equal to conventional medical treatments. Besides this ‘conventional medical treatments’, from case to case, considering the health problems, the doctors (of soul and body, as in the holistic medicine) recommends a combination of therapies. These are personalized, taking into account all the physical and mental suffering of the patient, such as phytotherapy, apitherapy, homeopathy, acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, nutritional counseling, chiropractic, yoga, biofeedback, prayer, meditation, fasting, and any other methods with proven efficacy at least on some people, especially to saints or persons for whom there are related legends and stories about miracles performed in the respective religion.

There is no religious phenomenon/denomination that has not got this idea or practices, or even claims clearly stated publicly. The difference lies only in the claim to manifest publicly and ostentatiously against secular practices, as well as the obstinacy with which they seek to execute it against warnings, State prosecution, and the measures taken by the State in this regard. Thus, some religious denominations unveil this requisite into non-ostentatious practices (i.e., Holy Communion to almost all Christian groups, Holy unction to Orthodox and Romano Catholics), while others practice this idea of religious healing ostentatiously. But again, with the risk of being accused by some fellow theologians of theological exaggerations, that there is no such thing as ‘particular religious groups’ with this assertion, since ALL religions and their denominations have, in a form or another, the pretention of carrying medical healing, with a divine aid or spiritual or any



other means.

Are the religious healers and, consequently, the religious healing methods the only means people can rely upon while facing the Covid19 outbreak? Is it also the conventional Medicine absolutely sure that it can face and eventually stop this pandemic entirely without the religious aids? Or, on the contrary, they should both work together, each with their own methods, relying on each other without criticizing or absolutizing own aids against the other's practice? Should not be the religions left to assist health professionals in establishing effective prevention alliances and envision Churches as partners in this fight all humanity fights all-together?<sup>[38]</sup> Is the Christian/religious Faith and practice inadequate or incompatible with human rights paradigms?

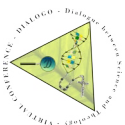
### B. Response: Science and Faith are Complementary

Our *theological-ethical response* to these questions on the relation of science and faith, especially on protecting and curing medical measures during Covid-19, contains four elements:

[a] *Science and Faith are complementary.* God acts through human brains, hands, and feet. If God is almighty, how can God be seen as opposed to science, which is part of His creation? John Calvin, the Reformer in Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had a weak body and was often in poor health conditions. He was often dependent on medicine. The believers in Geneva wanted to test him; they asked him to stop taking medication and instead of trusting in God. However, he believed that Medicine was sent by God. Doctors, nursing staff, medication, and vaccinations are talents and instruments of God and not of the devil, was his answer. "If the Lord wants to give us support through the help and service of the impious in natural science, the science of thinking or

mathematics or other sciences, we should make use of it. Otherwise, we would be scorning God's gifts, which are offered to us in them, and rightly be punished for our sluggishness."<sup>[39]</sup> Those who refuse the services of Medicine, which is a result of science, may refuse the help of God. This does not mean that there can be unethical outcomes and the implementation of science since human beings are able to use science for good and bad. Science cannot replace God and faith does not replace science; these are complementary approaches and perspectives on the one world made by the creator, liberator, and reconciler (in the Christian understanding of Trinity). "Beating coronavirus requires faith leaders have to bridge gap between religion and science."<sup>[40]</sup>

[b] *Holistic medical approach:* Traditional Medicine, western Medicine, and alternative Medicine can contribute to healing and have their limits. Religions are called to have a holistic approach to health and healing as they have a deep understanding of the interaction of body, mind, and soul, of life as well as of life, death and life beyond death (as resurrection or reincarnation, depending on the religion). Instead of campaigning against specific medical methods, drugs or vaccines, believers are called to promote this holistic approach. To treat the patient from this holistic perspective, both conventional and complementary therapies are to be used. The best methods of diagnosis and treatment are taken from each, those that have proven their efficiency and regardless their controversial overview. "Today medicine does not encompass the whole of our effort to relieve sickness and suffering, though as a society we do tend to 'medicalize' the problems of daily living and to ascribe them, in one form or another, to the domain of the physician. Many forms of health care, however, while including a major medical component, nonetheless transcend the boundaries of the traditional





medical model.”<sup>[41]</sup>

[c] *Holistic approach of medical, economic and environmental dimensions.* If religions are called to contribute to saving life in its fullness and to defeat death in its fakeness, they need not only to focus on health and healing but all aspects, which threaten life. This includes especially the disastrous economic effects of the pandemic with the recession, rocketing level of unemployment and related poverty, indebtedness, related potential increase of violence, and much more. It also includes the engagement of religious organizations for climate mitigation, green economy, sustainable lifestyle, and a new orientation of global markets, flights, holidays, and much more. Many believers and religious organizations are already engaged, but more is needed in the post-corona era.

[d] *Freedom with responsibility.* “A third theme bearing on issues of sickness and health and having important implications for current medical and health concerns is that of freedom and responsibility. To be sure, no religious tradition teaches the absolute and unlimited freedom of the person in all respects and in all situations. We are all limited in some way by who we are and by the situations in which we find ourselves. Yet the great world religions also stress the reality of freedom and the need to use that freedom correctly. Whether in obeying a divine command or in seeking the truth, in performing the meritorious deed or in giving the assent of faith, human freedom is presupposed. Conversely, people must necessarily take responsibility for their decisions. There is a price to be paid for the misuse of freedom, and often that price is heavy.”<sup>[42]</sup>

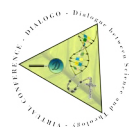
## V. CONSPIRACIES, GUILT, AND RESPONSIBILITY

### A. Analysis: China Lab, US Military and other Conspiracies

Scientists to the vast majority agree that the origin of the Coronavirus must be the transmission from animals to humans. They also identified 195'000 types of viruses, which all potentially could commute to humans. Nevertheless, the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 virus was produced as part of a biological weapons program and escaped from a famous virological lab in Wuhan continues to be mentioned by Americans. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson argued the American military might have brought it during their visit of military exposure in Wuhan (the article was deleted and not supported by the Chinese government). Others argue it could have been a human failure or the escape of a virus by accident. Lack of clarity and certainty is compensated by creating a false certainty. Fortunately, the scientist brought step by step light on the issue, even not yet final.

Behind conspiracy theories are often material interests. In the US-China case, it cannot be separated from the ongoing US-China trade war. Also, in the past, antisemitism was linked to get a hand on Jews assets. During the plague in the city of Zurich in 1349, the major of the city, Rudolf Brun, brought all Jews to one house, burnt it down, confiscated all Jews assets, and kept the more significant part for himself!

Believers of all religions are often receptive to conspiracies and scapegoat mechanisms as they thirst for certainty. Some religious organizations fuel them in cases when they see an opportunity to get rid of minority religions and strengthen their own position (like national churches under Hitler in Germany in favor of antisemitism). But believers and religious leaders are also



forerunners against conspiracies and are outspoken against related crimes (like the protestant confessing church in Germany against antisemitism).

### B. *Response: No to Conspiracies and Scapegoats, Yes to Responsibility*

Our *theological-ethical approach* to this central topic of faith – guilt and responsibility – is again fourfold:

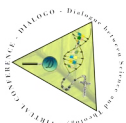
[a] *No more scapegoats*: the ‘natural’ reaction of human beings on problems, challenges, and mistakes is to ask, “Who is guilty?” Once we know the answer, we identify the root cause, isolate it, and feel more secure. Even more so, in times of crisis as the pandemic with so much uncertainty, the need for adaptation to everyday new situations is required.. If humans are not able to identify the guilty person or group, they project the evil and guilt on a person or group which can be targeted as a scapegoat (deputy, proxy, representative) of the unknown guilty person or group. This scapegoat-mechanism is as old as humanity and led to immense tragedies, suffering and genocide like the holocaust. During the history of pandemics, especially the plague in Europe during medieval centuries, the Jews have been identified as the reason for the epidemic and have been killed. Christian faith has a different approach, especially in the New Testament: “God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn people, but to save/heal them.” (John 3:17). This is an important message that should be a priority for churches and believers. It is also the essence of the Easter message: We no longer need scapegoats, but Jesus has taken the cross upon himself and freed us from the constant mechanism of looking for guilty parties and liberated humans once for all from blaming scapegoats. God does not want to harm us, but to help us.

[b] *No to conspiracies search for guilt*.

Conspiracy theories are linked to the scapegoat mechanism. Lack of clarity and certainty is compensated by creating a false certainty. The simple example of guilt a sickness was given 200 years ago: The friends of Jesus saw a blind man and asked Jesus who was guilty of this blindness, the blind man, or his parents? Jesus refused to find anyone guilty. Instead, he immediately made a healing mass with his saliva and earth and placed it on the eyes of the blind man who was cured of his blindness. Immediately afterward, the lawyers (Pharisees), who had been watching like onlookers, broke off a lawsuit against Jesus because he was working on a Sabbath - and could not even show a certificate as a doctor (John 9:1-34).

[c] Some catastrophes such as the eruption of a volcano, happen without human intervention. But many catastrophes are human-made, the result of a technical ‘accident’, which means a human failure, such as Chernobyl, Fukushima or oil in the gulf of Mexiko, but human failure can also be seen in case of a volcano eruption or tsunami: was the early warning system developed enough? Was the help fast enough? Was the communication happening as it should? Endless numbers of human failures can be listed in a catastrophe. It does not solve the problem. The main beneficiaries of all such legal cases after the pandemic are the lawyers.

[d] *Yes to Responsibility*: Religions have the task in such pandemic times as in normal life to break through the vicious downwards spiral of blaming and shaming, guilt and condemnation, mistrust, and hate. Religions – and especially Christianity from its values – have to and can contribute to a virtuous upward spiral of trust and love, care and help, responsibility and inclusion. Responsibility means answering with solutions for those who are entrusted to us. Acting with responsibility means



looking forward and not backward. It means acting with integrity, which includes admitting weaknesses, mistakes, and “sin” as individual believers or religious organizations. This applies to politics, business, science and all other sectors. Those who can admit mistakes and thus assume responsibility are stronger than those who deport them, moreover in a pandemic period, where incorrect decisions are easily possible due to a lack of reliable knowledge.

[e] *Religion as a service for society and not firstly for self-interest.* During the pandemic, solidarity and trust in governments seem high. But as soon as lockdown is reduced, the political power games come up again. Everyone in politics wants to survive the crisis as a political winner. The cooperation during the pandemic is fast replaced by division, competition, and self-interests. Religions should stand for defending the common good and the interests of the people in society. If they mainly defend their dogmatic, material or power interests, they cannot make a difference and do not win the trust of the people (see graph above). Believers and religious organizations during and after the pandemic serve best their own interests and values if they first serve the others and the society and world as a whole.

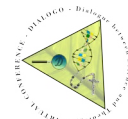
### CONCLUSIONS

Whereas the spread of the new coronavirus outbreak, developing into a global pandemic situation, the governments everywhere have declared a ‘state of emergency’ to stop the spread of the pandemic as much as possible. Many of the citizens’ rights have been restricted and temporarily annulled under this pretext, including the right to religious practice<sup>[43]</sup>. Under current constitutional law, the government can impose restrictions on a religious belief or practice, as long as the law

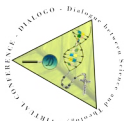
in question applies to everyone and does not target a specific religion or religious practice and as long the restriction is limited in time and linked to specific reasons such as this pandemic.<sup>[44]</sup> In this framework, all affected religious communities have responded in kind, either by diligently cooperating with authorities and even more than that with physicians specialists in this regard and temporarily cancel and alter religious rituals, while others, more conservative, have vigorously protested and denied these impositions of the State. Arguments were thrown into the discussion by both parties, emphasizing either on the convergence care for people’s health on behalf of secular State as well as of Religion’s, or emphasizing the narrow and incomplete understanding of medical science over this new Coronavirus. It is important for that latter position to understand that the religious communities were eager to help in this regard by offering to people alternative and holistic aids of healing. But the counter denial from the conventional medicine was not late to appear and ask for these ‘religious medicine means’ to be banned or even declared illegal for being ‘unsafe, unscientific, ineffective, and even harmful’ as seen in particular cases.

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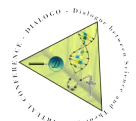
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2010. He was ordained as an orthodox priest in 2002. Highschool teacher from 1998, then Professor assistant and Lecturer from 2012, he has written more than 65 articles on theology and psychology, along with 4 single-author books in the past two decades. In 2013 he started a multidisciplinary program aiming to engage scholars from different files into friendly and academic debates with theology, and in the same year, a Research Center was founded in Ovidius University with researchers from 11 fields. In less than one year, he managed to gather people from around the globe around this idea, and thus the Dialogo Conferences project has started. In 2014 he received a Fulbright scholarship, and spent the summer in California along with four other states in the USA, gathering data and understanding how religious pluralism is possible at a high level of involvement; in the meanwhile he made friends from many different countries and religions that are now involved in this project or another, helping in his endeavor. Now he researches and teaches in this direction, towards building bridges between science and theology on the one side, and interfaith dialogue, on the other hand.