



COVID-19 AND THE CHURCH: THE CHALLENGE TO SECULARISM

Marios Sarris

This article addresses the refusal of a small number of senior Greek Orthodox clergymen in Cyprus to abide by government restrictions during the Covid-19 epidemic. It approaches the subject from a liberal centrist political standpoint. The primary aim of the article is to provide a social scientific perspective on what became a matter of public controversy in the media and examine its implications with regard to secularization. The author, who is a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, has spent a significant part of his professional life studying the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece, Cyprus and, more recently, the Middle East.

To start with, I need to clarify a couple of key terms as used in this article. From a liberal centrist political standpoint, a society is 'secular' when its members and its institutions observe the distinction between religion and politics and respect the separation of Church from State. In the liberal order of things, being 'religious' does not preclude the possibility of being 'secular' and vice versa. In other words, 'religious' and 'secular' are not mutually exclusive categories. Moreover, I use the term 'radical' in the article to describe the stance of bishops whose views deviate radically from what might be described as a 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' attitude in the Synod. In full accordance with social scientific practice, I avoid employing the term 'fundamentalist' that I consider completely inappropriate. As far as I am concerned, a scientist who adheres to the positivist paradigm with religious fervour is as 'fundamentalist' as a Syrian Jihadist.

Out of seventeen bishops in the Synod of the Church of Cyprus, three publicly resisted government attempts to impose restrictions on collective religious worship. The three bishops expressed dissent in both word and practice, and to varying degrees. In view of their acts, I have one primary goal to attain in this article. I briefly identify the central lines of argument that the radical bishops followed in public discourse in an effort to legitimize their practices. In doing so, I strictly adhere to the standard ethnographic strategy of maintaining the anonymity of actors despite the very public nature of the controversy. My purpose is to highlight the fact that the principles to which the radical bishops appealed in order to renounce and resist restrictions on collective worship are in conflict with

basic tenets of liberal democratic thinking. In this respect, they constitute a fundamental challenge to secularism.

The radical bishops employed three main rhetorical ploys to justify their positions. The first is an expression of what I term the *heroic religious ethic*. In his address to a congregation, a bishop announced that 'Orthodox Christians are not afraid to die'. The statement echoes Balkan forms of heroism and capitalizes on the New Testament idea that Christ, through His death, triumphed over death. Not only did the bishop fail to catch the imagination of his own congregation, some of the bystanders later threw scorn at the idea. Put simply, most people I know in Cyprus do not actually want to die. After the statement had backfired, acolytes of the radical bishops used the mass media to promote what I term the *libertarian civic ethic*. They appealed to the right of worship and the freedom of religious conscience to justify their opposition to government measures. This argument fared better than the previous one although many of my informants remained sceptical and quizzical about the true motives of the religious radicals. This line of argument reasoned better with the public because both the government and the opposition made conscious efforts not to confront the religious radicals in the public sphere and on purely ideological grounds. It is, however, the third rhetorical ploy that had the greatest impact and it will continue to be with us in the years to come. Articulated by the most outspoken of the three radical bishops, it fused with beliefs entertained by members of both the extreme Left and the extreme Right. Exactly because it capitalized on conspiracy theories regarding the source and scope of the coronavirus epidemic, I chose to term it the *social conspiracy ethic*.

None of these arguments squares with liberal democratic principles. In liberal democracies, freedom of choice, freedom of religious consciousness and the right to worship are inalienable liberties. Yet this is only half the story and the religious radicals do not grasp or acknowledge the other half. According to that other half of the story, a citizen's rights end where another citizen's rights begin. Had the heroic bishop caught the virus in church, and died instantly, no one would refute his right to choose death. In fact, we might have erected a statue to his memory to remind us of his heroic attempts to defy death. The problem arises only when the bishop walks out of church and starts spreading the virus to unsuspecting citizens who, in lack of his religious zeal, *chose to live*. As for the conspiracy theories, people are free to propagate them in a liberal democracy. Yet, again, this is only half the story. When we have to decide on policy, especially in matters of life and death, we first need to agree on a minimum set of principles irrespective of our diverse religious and social backgrounds. In modern democratic societies, that minimum layer of understanding is available to us through *science*. I have no intention to reify science especially in view of the extent to which scientific knowledge is socially constructed and politically informed. However, I need to acknowledge that we have no other common tool in establishing universally verifiable 'truths' other than science. The nonsense advocated by the conspiracy theorists in radical religious groups simply fails any test of science.

Not only does the stance of the radical bishops contradict liberal democratic principles, it also betrays the Christian religious tradition to which they belong. The admonition of Jesus to 'render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' is in full compliance with the liberal project of establishing a demarcation line between matters political and matters religious. Practitioners in the Greek Orthodox monastic tradition from which the radical bishops have emerged habitually observe this separation. The coenobitic monks of Athos make a clear distinction between 'spiritual' and 'political' issues. On matters spiritual, a Greek monk owes complete obedience to the monastery's spiritual expert, his elder or abbot. On matters political, the most junior of monks can stand up in the monastery's general assembly, contradict the views of his abbot, and vote against him. This is the democratic religious tradition that the radical bishops have inherited and they have betrayed. Public health is undoubtedly and unquestionably part of the political and not the religious sphere. In *our* parliamentary democracy, it is solely up to *us*, the citizens of the Republic, to determine *our* policies on public health through our democratically elected bodies and our imperfect civic institutions. In voicing and practicing an opposition to those policies, the religious radicals are breaching the line. To be fair to them, I would be prepared to extend the same argument to those radical members of both Left and Right when they gather crowds of protesters in full disregard to social distancing measures. They might think that they can appeal to the citizens' democratic right to assemble. Yet, again, this is only half the story. According to the other half of the story, their right to practice civic disobedience is in conflict with my right to live.