A Pandemic of Polarisation

The social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

EARS
European Academy on Religion and Society

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About this whitepaper

With the war in Ukraine, we would almost forget that Europe was experiencing another calamity until very recently. However, the social effects of the pandemic should not be underestimated. COVID-19 has highlighted existing polarisation across the continent and beyond, illustrated by conspiracy theories and division between those who are and are not vaccinated.

This polarisation is visible beyond the pandemic as well. For instance, consider the recent presidential elections in France. Or think about how these times of war have clearly shown that religion is an integral part of modern polarisation.

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of two virtual round table meetings on the topic of *polarisation*. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussions. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: Ryszard Bobrowicz, Muhammad Faisal Khalil, Ghila Amati, Sam Slewe, and Matthias Smalbrugge.

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Introduction

Written by Matthias Smalbrugge

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The French elections had a clear winner, Emmanuel Macron. Yet his adversary had had 40% of the votes. Of course, when the choice is only between two candidates the outcome of 60/40 seems quite normal, it may even be interpreted as a healthy equilibrium between two parts of the electorate. Unfortunately, this is not the case. France is a strongly divided country and polarization characterized these last elections. However, France is not the only case of such a polarized society. Everywhere in Europe as well as elsewhere deep cleavages cut through the cultural, political, and sociological landscape. Cleavages that do not have a single cause, but that nevertheless seem rooted in social and economic troubles. Many people in Western society did not benefit from the globalizing structures that invaded our societies in the last decades. Neoliberalism created free markets but, paradoxically, often didn't create freedom but obliged people to obey dynamics they couldn't influence, let alone reject. Many therefore felt abandoned and political differences became unbridgeable. In addition to this, the crises our society had to face — think of the financial crisis of 2008 — increased this feeling of abandonment, of politics that did not care about the large parts of the population of our society. This gave rise to fierce nationalism that took many forms.

In addition, political oppositions were not only due to the social and economic transformation of our society, there was also a political difference between autocratic and liberal societies. This latter difference became clearly visible in the war that started almost three months ago. The conclusion can only be that polarization is overwhelmingly present in our society, moreover, its powerful dynamics are still increasing, up to a point that The Guardian even organizes regularly 'across the divide dinners' between political and social opponents. In addition to this already widening gap in our society, we had to deal with the pandemic of Covid-19. It took almost two years before we could return to a normal situation which in fact was no longer a normal situation. Again, polarization had increased and debates on vaccination, isolation, and mistrust were not only debates, they were clashes allowing different parties to take an even sharper stance.

Nevertheless, recently polarization has gained a new dimension. In these times of war it has become clearly visible that religion is an integral part of this modern polarization. It already was, at least conceptually, from the day of Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations, but recently it has become even clearer. The Russian Orthodox Church is entirely involved in the Russian imperialistic politics, but let us remind that the right-wing use of the opposition 'Jewish-Christian culture' against Muslim culture is no less proof of the role of religion in the polarization process. Finally, the struggle around Covid ended up in a new dimension of polarization.

The aim therefore of this round table is to discover some elements of this role of religion, to analyze the relationship between religion and secular power, and to look for a healthy relationship with secularity.

The polarising world

Report written by Sam Slewe

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Polarisation is seen in various locations throughout the world. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, is one of several factors that impact the polarisation process. This attitude is reinforced by the divide between those who are and are not vaccinated, as well as the belief in conspiracy theories. COVID-19 is not the only calamity that exacerbates polarisation. It is also observable beyond the pandemic; for instance, the recent presidential elections in France revealed a stark divide between two factions. Polarisation is also not a recent phenomenon; it has existed for a longer amount of time. However, the modern world is evolving at a faster rate than ever before, posing some intriguing questions. For instance, is polarisation worse than ever? What processes strengthen or weaken polarisation? What about religion's part in all of this? These questions were addressed in a roundtable discussion with several Dutch specialists in the field.

The history of polarisation

In the past, polarisation was necessary for progress and change to occur. As a result, polarisation has been present for a longer time and is not something that occurs suddenly. It is a two-step procedure with a beginning and a conclusion. Furthermore, polarisation is a progressive process that does not occur overnight; it takes time, although it is happening at a quicker rate than in the past. There are, however, notable distinctions between polarisation in the past and polarisation today.

Although communities lived in isolation in the past, there was still contact between them via the higher echelons of society. Nowadays, there is a dearth of connections between various groups, and respect is lost. People do not listen to each other and tend to become more extreme in their ways of thinking towards another group. This more radical way of thinking has also been connected to voting patterns; extreme parties receive more votes, and centrist voters are less apparent. Additionally, people only feel connected to their 'own' group, so they continue to isolate themselves from others. As a result of their lack of connection, people sense uncertainty.

Drivers of polarisation

The polarising world is influenced by a number of variables. Some may claim that one of these elements is neoliberalism. Brexit may be one example where citizens feel abandoned by the neoliberal system. Trust in the government and institutions is playing a significant role that might be strengthened by neoliberalism. People may assume that they are not being treated seriously or that they have no voice in situations in which they have a stake. Currently, there is an increased polarisation about many themes or socioeconomic concerns. People will feel threatened and dissatisfied if they believe that they are not being heard or taken seriously. So, in a polarising society, there are a number of elements that contribute to emotions of uncertainty.

The role of religion

Others feel that religion is a part of the polarisation of society. The world may grow even more split as more individuals become orthodox throughout the world and religious organisations are perceived as conservative by others. As a result, the question of whether religion is a source of polarisation has arisen. People seek significance and a group to express their worries in times of uncertainty. Religious organisations can provide a social safety net in these times, allowing people to talk to others who are going through similar experiences. In a rapidly changing and complex world, people seek guidance, which religious institutions can provide. However, it is uncertain if religion is a primary driver of polarisation; it undoubtedly plays a part, but several factors influence the process.

The influence of COVID-19

Other discussions are based on the influence of COVID-19. Many people's lives have been thrown into disarray as a result of the pandemic. Polarisation has become considerably more prominent as a result of the pandemic's insecurity and the vaccination discussion that has accompanied it. Did the pandemic, on the other hand, highlight the polarisation that was already present? It might be the case that the pandemic has been used to indicate discontent with things other than the pandemic. Instead of working together, a new movement has

emerged that pits ‘us’ against ‘them’. People often overlook the importance of thinking beyond the box. A person who does not get the vaccine is not automatically a refuser. It is vital to go beyond shared views to connect with someone who is not a member of the same group. As a result of the pandemic, polarisation has, thus, become more obvious. However, this does not indicate that the pandemic initiated polarisation; rather, it may have highlighted something that was previously existing.

Binding identities

To cope with a polarising world, it is important to remember that a person has several identities to keep thinking beyond the box to prevent further divisions amongst factions. Polarisation encourages people to believe that there is only one identity to a person, causing them to believe that someone does not belong to the same group. The intertwining of people’s identities is critical. Rather than focusing just on differences, look for connections and overarching identities. This makes it easier for people to interact and understand one another, as well as produces a less fragmented society with isolated groups.

Appendix

COVID-19: A slippery slope or a turning point of polarisation?

Written by Ryszard Bobrowicz

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Unexpected global upheaval

The first information about an outbreak of a novel virus in China at the end of 2019 did not forecast a global upheaval. Yet, over 2 years, 6 million deaths, and 10 billion vaccine doses later,[1] it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has redefined our understanding of globalisation, public health, social welfare, and many other things. It also offered insight into the importance of social sustainability. While multiple, highly effective vaccinations have been developed and provided to the broader public in record time, their rollout was anything but smooth. Other measures were also deeply contested by large parts of societies worldwide.

Affective polarisation is the leading cause behind problems in Europe

Affective polarisation has been both a cause and an effect of the social problems during the pandemic in Europe. Peaking during the 2010s,[2][3][4] polarisation constituted a significant hindrance in dealing with one of the most significant global crises after the Second World War.

Quo Vadis Europe?

While polarisation was a significant problem during the pandemic, what happened with it over the last two years? Was the COVID-19 outbreak a slippery slope, which deepened the existing problems? Or was it a turning point, redirecting us towards a better future? The data responding to these questions is still unclear, with suggestions pointing to both answers. The articles prepared for the EARS round table on *A Pandemic of Polarisation* are taking a closer look at some areas that might help us better understand where will we find ourselves post-pandemic.

Vaccines and conspiracy theories are primarily about belief and trust

Accompanied by issues such as misinformation about the vaccines and the rising conspiracy theories, belief and trust, two phenomena that are hard to completely differentiate from each other, played a significant role in the polarised public during the pandemic. As Muhammad Faisal Khalil points out in his article, the left- and the right-wing were split in terms of whom they trusted and believed. However, these choices were not dominated by their religious positions, as sometimes suggested,[5] but by their political stances. The left-wing voters located their trust in the public authorities, the right-wing ones in alternative sources, including, but not exclusively following the religious authorities. Thus, as Khalil concludes, how belief will be approached going forward will influence the direction of polarisation tendencies.

Looking for a scapegoat

Identity and classification were two further terms crucial for understanding the development of polarisation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As Ghila Amati shows in her article, while both secular and religious leaders called for solidarity, the pandemic led to a significant split between different groups: the secular and the religious, the majority and the minority. Amati highlights the dynamics of scapegoating that increased the polarisation in a destructive blame game, reinvigorating old conflicts and creating new ones.

What will the rising insecurity lead to?

Instead of receding, at what seems to be the end of the pandemic, the insecurity increased further in Europe due to the compilation of the cost-of-living crisis, the war in Ukraine, and the nuclear threat. How will it fare for polarisation? In his article, Ryszard Bobrowicz argues that it has the potential to both increase and decrease polarisation. The key question is whether the burdens will be shared equally between individuals and whether coalitions will be built across the national, political, class, and religious boundaries.

Despite the uncertainty, we can act today

As with all complex questions, there are no clear answers on the horizon concerning the effects of COVID-19 on polarisation. Only time will tell whether it was a slippery slope or a turning point for polarisation. The short-term effects of the pandemic on polarisation are unclear. The long-term effects are still unknown. Nonetheless, it is clear that there is a potential for improvement of the situation. The writers in this round table point towards areas and problems that need to be addressed and concrete actions that can be undertaken in order for the polarisation to decrease.

Will increasing insecurity lead us beyond polarisation?

Written by Ryszard Bobrowicz

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The decade of crises

Following many years of polarisation, the 2020s could be described as the ‘decade of crises’. From the COVID-19 pandemic, through the cost-of-living crisis, to war in Eastern Europe, the mounting concerns increase insecurity in Europe to levels unknown for nearly a century. Considering what happens, many ask now: Will the growing insecurity decrease polarisation, or will we become even more divided than before?

Two possible directions

It is not easy to assess which direction will dominate in the coming years. On the one hand, we may observe worrying signs around the anti-vaccination movements and misinformation concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other, some early studies indicate that affective polarisation decreased during the first years of the 20th century’s third decade.[1] The Atlantic’s prognosis for the 2020s suggests that the following years might bring diversification of both left and right, more moderate populism, fall out of the grace of populist governments, and the return of liberal democracy’s allure.[2] The mass mobilisation across political boundaries of individual families to host under their roof over 2 million Ukrainian refugees at the time of writing also provides glimmers of hope.[3 4]

The economic troubles

The economic effects of the mounting crises may have a long-term impact on the potential for polarisation. An uptake of inflation has followed the economic downturn during the pandemic. The IMF warns that the Russian invasion will have serious economic consequences too. The early signs of that are visible in the rapid increases in energy and commodities prices,[5] and the global shortages of food may follow.[6]

The impact of economic security on polarisation

The levels of economic security have been linked to the potential for polarisation. Some studies argue that financial distress might reduce partisan hostility, provided that there is a cross-partisan consensus.[7 8] Other studies claimed that economic security correlates with the combination of strong belief and strong religious practice, leading to an increase in religion-based political cleavages.[9] The recent crises seem to disrupt this combination. On the one hand, insecurity, including economic[10] and health[11] insecurity, might increase religious belief.[12] On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the drop in religious practice[13 14], which some predict not to return to the same levels later on.[15 16] These studies could suggest that we may expect a decline in polarisation.

Leadership and inequality may pose risks

However, several risks emerge in light of these studies. First, while economic distress may decrease partisan hostility where cross-party consensus exists, it is not as clear what happens without that consensus. Lack of consensus combined with economic distress risks deepening polarisation,[17] especially if supported by overarching narratives and ideologies, for example nationalism and scapegoating, as visible in such examples as the role of antimigration rhetoric in Brexit in the UK,[18] reactions to sanctions in Russia,[19] or the ideas of ‘great replacement’ in the 2022 presidential elections in France.[20 21] Second, a drop in religious practice may change the points of reference for the faithful, from the local religious community to the broader faith community, increasing the importance of religious leadership. Two recent examples may be given with regard to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, the support for invasion by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow split the Orthodox Church.[22 23] On the other hand, the ‘soft’ stance of the Vatican, the careful choice of words by Pope Francis, and his video call with Patriarch Kirill are viewed by some as highly problematic.[24 25 26] Third, economic inequality has been correlated with class[27] and political polarisation.[28] If financial burdens are unequally distributed, the growing group of underprivileged may undermine the tentative unification.

We need coalition-building

While hopeful signs point to a possible move beyond polarisation in the light of emerging crises, multiple risks remain. We need to work on coalition-building beyond class, political, and religious boundaries to overcome these risks. Equally shared economic burdens, cross-party consensus, and united religious leadership seem to be the most critical elements for decreasing polarisation in the coming years.

COVID-19-related conspiracy theories: Belief in a time of pandemic

Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil

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Conspiracy theories are often associated with religious belief. The famous philosopher of science Karl Popper called conspiracy theories "the secularization of religious superstition,"[1] where God is replaced with "the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists."[2] This association became highly credible to many during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the anti-vaccine sentiments among Polish Roman Catholics have been explained away as their belief in "superstition and magic spells."[3]

If one were to accept this account of conspiracy and belief, then conspiracy theories appear to fulfil some of the psychological needs once addressed by religion. With the decline of traditional religion in Europe and the larger West, people have sought to impose "a sense of order and agency upon the world"[4] with the increasing use of conspiracy theories.[5]

Is belief the source of conspiracy theories?

More nuanced readings of this relationship between conspiracy and belief offer a different account, however. A 2021 research on Spain, one of the first European countries to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted that susceptibility to conspiracy theories during the pandemic was determined not by religious belief but by political polarisation.[6]

When facing the uncertainties of the pandemic, people made decisions primarily based on whether they trusted the government or not. In the case of Spain, this public trust was determined by a specific political polarisation in the country. While left-wing voters in Spain trusted public authorities more during the pandemic, right-wing voters trusted their religious beliefs, such as "God answering prayers"[7] and "the existence of an afterlife."[8] The research concluded that pre-existing political polarisation was the key determinant of how people reacted during the pandemic.[9]

The role of public trust and political polarisation has proved to be similarly true for many other countries in Europe. Many of the countries with the lowest levels of vaccination rates in Europe also had the lowest levels of trust in government. Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia - countries with the lowest vaccination rates in Europe - also have one of the lowest levels of trust in government, at 22%, 31%, and 21%, respectively. [10] University of Pennsylvania academics on Eastern Europe, Professors Kristen Ghodsee and Mitchell A. Orenstein, together explain that Eastern Europe's low rates of public trust are because of the lingering effects of decades of communist rule and its collapse.[11] After 1989, many of the region's countries underwent deep post-communist recessions, and with it, a profound erosion of public trust.[12]

The role of belief

One has to acknowledge that in many of these countries, religious belief still appears to play a role. The Orthodox Church in Bulgaria, for example, has refused to endorse mass vaccination and instead asked for believers to rely on the sacredness of the body of Christ.[13] This again reinforces the case, as in the case of Spain, that religious institutions may offer trustworthy guidance in contexts of distrusted public institutions. It appears then that people who distrust public institutions are likely to be suspicious of them. Instead of seeking guidance and services from the government, they may hold conspiracy theories about it.

It can be argued, therefore, that conspiracy theories are often the result of a preexisting set of choices, often polarised, that are presented to us in a complex, unpredictable world. As David G. Robertson of the Open University, explains, religious belief is arguably only one of a number of commitments that influence the choices we finally make.[14] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the choices presented to us have been distinctly political in nature because politics has played an unusually heightened role. As Faisal Devji of the University of Oxford explains, the pandemic represents the "state's greatest moment of authority"[15] over public life in recent history.

Can beliefs be used to fight conspiracy theories?

A key question that arises at this stage is whether the role of belief can be harnessed to fight conspiracy theories.

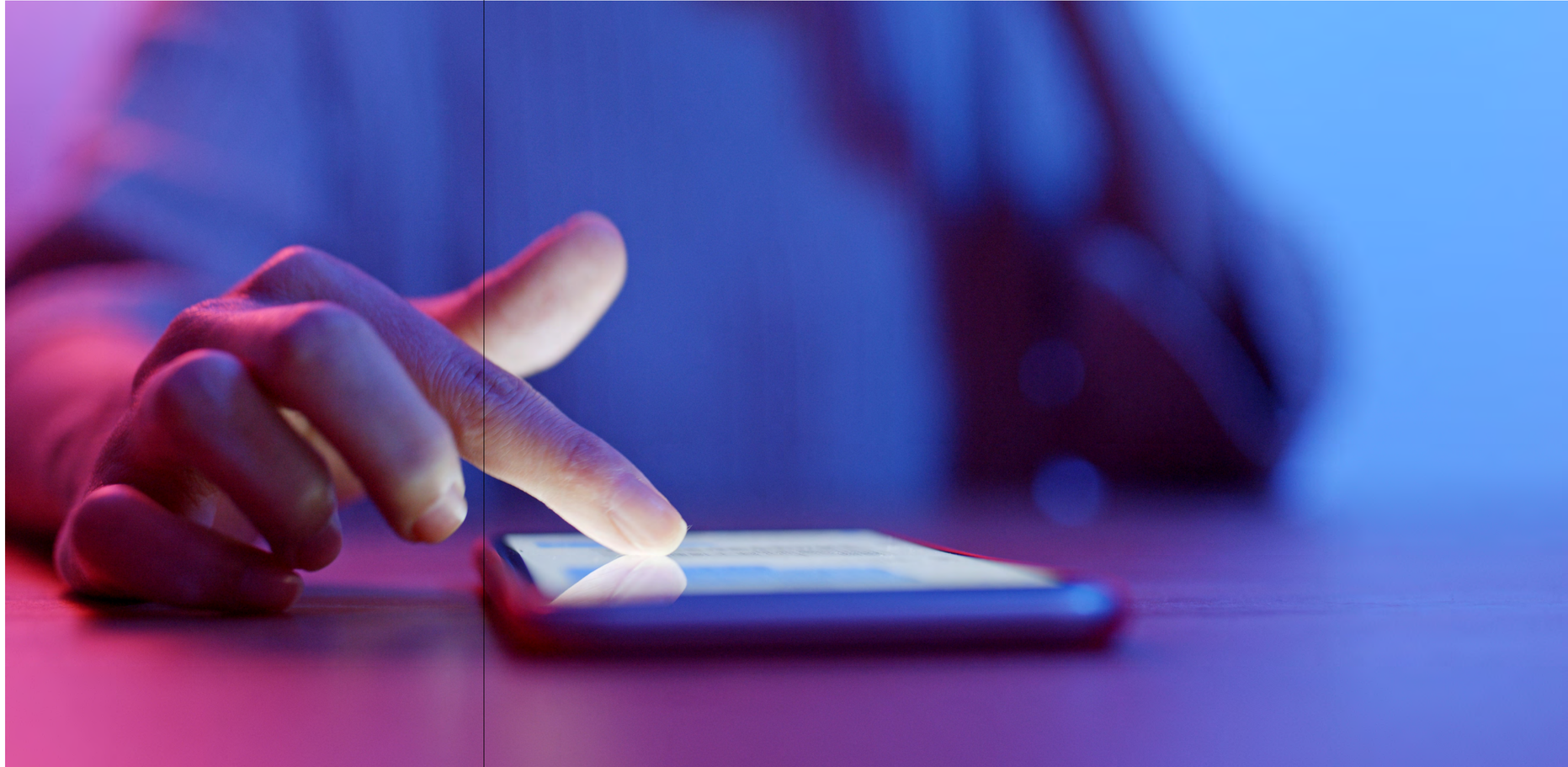
National COVID-19 emergency responses across the world, including in Europe, made a key mistake of not recognising that the taking up of new health-related knowledge is an active cognitive process. As Estes's research on 'information processing theory'[16]

suggests: to inform themselves about any disease (in this case COVID-19) and about ways to protect themselves, people actively select knowledge. Their context, emotions, and selective attention influence this selection.[17] This active and personalised mode of selection can introduce a potential selection bias because of which people may seek knowledge that primarily confirms the beliefs they already hold, and ignores or discards information that contradicts these beliefs.[18]

This highlights the risks presented by belief and also explains why people accept misinformation, such as conspiracy theories, as the truth. Misinformation can reinforce false beliefs and even create a false social consensus about misinformation. As the WHO observes, the inability of the emergency responses to COVID-19 to account for the role of beliefs strongly suggests a need for policy that supports people to not only know about healthy behaviours but also "believe in" them.[19]

It is, therefore, as Champion and Skinner argue, essential to go beyond knowledge and use policy to address people's beliefs about COVID-19.[20] And most significantly, not just their beliefs about religion but their other 'beliefs' (such as political or other health-related).

In other words, if people's underlying beliefs are adequately understood and addressed, one can more successfully dispel, or even prevent, conspiracy theories. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, one key set of beliefs that needs to be addressed is people's polarised beliefs about government and politics.



Did COVID-19 help us get closer or rather increase polarisation?

Written by Ghila Amati

EARS

Challenging times

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the world in many different ways these past two years. It has brought up questions of solidarity between nations, of responsibility for the other, and conflicts regarding the way we should approach the virus. This article focuses on how the pandemic affected polarisation among nations, religious and secular groups, and people in general.

COVID should make us closer

One religious figure who has been especially vocal on this topic is Pope Francis. On many different occasions, he has underlined the possibility to look at COVID-19 as an opportunity to decrease polarisation among human beings and as an occasion to show solidarity. He argued that the pandemic can be a 'place of conversion'[1] and claimed that the only way to overcome the crisis is through solidarity.[2] In 'Fratelli tutti' - published by the pope in October 2020 - he emphasised that we should live as one large family and proposed concrete actions to overcome the COVID-19 health, economic, social, and political crises. These actions include peace, dialogue, the strengthening of multilateralism, the fight against indifference, and the promotion of social inclusion.[3][4][5]

Moreover, the pope has also expressed the importance and need for solidarity regarding the vaccine. When the vaccines were first developed, he emphasised that the vaccine is "for everyone, we need to get out of the logic of profit." Francis also added that we should share it equally among people and nations, regardless of their economic abilities or any other alien consideration of market and profit. He stated: "It would be sad if in providing the vaccine priority was given to the richest, or if this vaccine became the property of this or that nation, and it was not for everyone."[6]

An example of a solidarity act made by the pope during COVID-19 towards the 'other' was his support to the transgender community in April 2020.[7][8][9] In addition, in March 2020, Pope Francis criticised the fact that many of the poorest people in the world are ignored by those in power and donated 100,000 euros to the Italian branch of the church charity, Caritas, to help the poor in the COVID-19 crisis.[10] In June 2020, the pope established a fund containing a million euros, dedicated to Roman citizens who are suffering from problems at work due to COVID-19. This mainly concerned daily workers, those with non-renewed contracts, and those who no longer had a job because of coronavirus.[11]

Another important religious figure in the fight against COVID-19 was the Archbishop of Canterbury, of the Anglican Church, Justin Welby. He repeatedly called people to get a vaccine in the name of the commandment of 'loving thy neighbour'. He stated: "Jesus Christ calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Getting the vaccine is part of that commandment: we can show our love for each other by keeping each other safe from this terrible disease."[12] He also added that people who refuse to get a vaccine are immoral.[13]

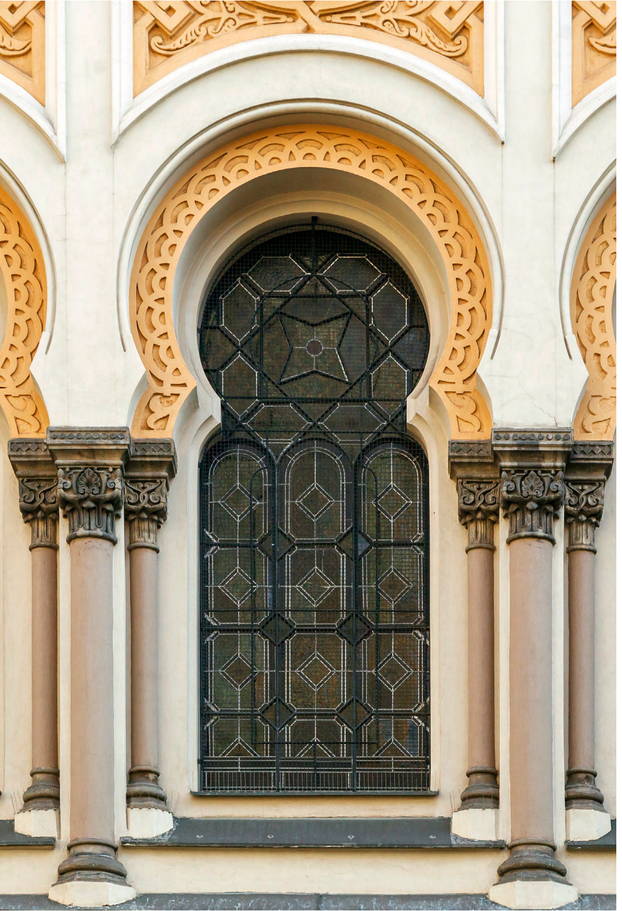
Religious institutions and solidarity

Another call to solidarity was a podcast made by the World Economic Forum. The podcast underlined the importance of religious leaders from all three monotheistic religions - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam - to unite in the US and "develop creative ways to provide comfort, care and worship services to individuals and families via different digital media (e.g., Zoom calls, Facetime, Facebook Live, and Skype)."[14][15]

Moreover, the institutions Religions for Peace (RfP) and UNICEF started the global Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Initiative.[16] The goal of this program was "to strengthen the critical roles of religious leaders in shaping community mobilisation to fight the pandemic." It aimed to bring together the most important leaders from different religious groups and to develop "common theological opinions" that would help convince people to comply with international and national health authorities' guidance regarding religious gatherings, services, and rituals, and that would push religious institutions to teach about hygiene, sanitation, and cleanliness.[17]

The G20 Interfaith Forum

In October 2020, a group of hundreds of religious leaders from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, policymakers, and other experts gathered online to discuss action in the COVID-19 crisis. They emphasised



the essential role that religious communities play in helping to reduce the suffering caused by COVID-19. In the online conference, they underlined the importance of solidarity and stated: "Today solidarity is not a choice or act of charity. It is a must. No one state or one leader can do it alone. This is the time of joint action."[18]

The forum underlined the importance of more easily sharing information between different religious groups and between religious institutions and health/business sectors in order to create partnerships.[19] Marco Ventura, Professor of Law and Religion at the University of Siena, Italy, stated: "Faith communities have to be acknowledged as a partner with laboratories of human centred artificial intelligence and digital technologies in general for health and well-being as far as our analysis of COVID-19 is concerned."[20] It is this cross-sector cooperation that will help overcome COVID-19, according to Dr. Tamader Al-Rammah, Member of the United Nations Committee of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Finally, the forum highlighted the importance for faith leaders to take care of children - an extremely vulnerable group in the pandemic and in regards to their spiritual well-being.[21]

Increased polarisation and COVID-19: Haredi and Hasidic groups

Despite these many calls for solidarity, COVID-19 has also increased polarisation between several religious and secular groups. In Israel, for instance, the pandemic

almost divided the nation in two. On the one hand, some ultra-Orthodox denied the gravity of the pandemic and disregarded lockdowns. On the other hand, most secular people took the danger of the pandemic seriously. In some cases, the ultra-Orthodox communities were even blamed for the pandemic in Israel.[22][23] In the US, there were also many conflicts between the state and ultra-Orthodox communities.[24][25][26] For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, ultra-Orthodox groups - despite warnings of the authorities - continued gathering in New York, increasing the rate of spread of the virus.[27]

Similar developments touched Europe as well. In October, as part of the celebration of the Jewish new year, thousands of Hasidic groups went from Israel to Ukraine to visit the grave of an important Rabbi for their tradition - Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. On their way back to Israel they faked negative COVID-19 tests, again arousing polarisation between secular and religious groups in Israel and around Europe.[28][29][30]

Blaming Jews for the pandemic

COVID-19 also brought back to life antisemitic accuses.[31] Conspiracy theories blamed Jews and Israel for the pandemic. These theories, according to researcher Efraim Karsh, are "new mutations of historical strains of antisemitic conspiracy theories, including the 'poisoning of gentiles' motif and the accusation that the Jews want to control the world."[32] In July 2021, in the Polish city of Głogów, during an anti-vaccine rally, participants chanted that the Jews are responsible for COVID-19 and that Jews "rule the world."[33][34] In Switzerland, Ivo Sasek, the founder of the *Organic Christian Generation*, spread a flyer accusing the Jewish Holocaust survivor George Soros of using COVID-19 as a biological weapon against the world. In Austria, Martin Sellner, a right-wing extremist and a member of the neo-fascist group *Identitäre*, also claimed that the Soros Open Society Foundation is to be blamed for the pandemic. Similar accusations were made in Iran, Turkey, and the US.[35]

Blaming Muslims for the pandemic

In India, conspiracy theories accused Muslims of being responsible for the spreading of COVID-19 to the Hindu majority. As a consequence of the accusations, Muslim businesses were boycotted across the country and Muslims were accused of "spitting in food and infecting water supplies with the virus."[36]

The pandemic also led to an increase in Islamophobic online attacks in Europe. Islamophobic 'cyber hubs' were published that accused Muslims of being responsible for COVID-19.[37] Moreover, according to the European Islamophobia Report 2020, there was an increase in online Islamophobia throughout Europe during lockdowns. According to the study, "Islamophobia has moved to the private sphere and is being spread especially in social media."[38] Other studies have also reported on rising levels of Islamophobia as the virus spread.[39]

Between solidarity and polarisation

In this article, we have seen on the one hand how religious leaders have stressed the necessity of solidarity among religions, nations, and people throughout the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic often brought an increase in polarisation between religious and secular people, such as in the case of Haredi groups, but also inside religious groups themselves - such as between Orthodox and liberals. Moreover, some found a scapegoat in minorities, leading to blaming Jews or Muslims for spreading the virus.

It therefore appears that COVID-19 has had mixed effects on society and on individuals. At times, it has helped in showing the good and the importance that there is in solidarity, such as in the example of the pope's gesture towards transgender communities and his donations towards the poor and developing countries. However, in many other situations, the tension brought about by the pandemic increased conflicts and polarisation among different groups, such as in the case of the Jewish and Muslim populations.

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