

PETROS VASSILIADIS - GEORGE DEMACOPOULOS (eds)

***THE CHURCH***  
**IN A PERIOD OF PANDEMIC**

CAN THE PRESENT PANDEMIC CRISIS BECOME A  
MEANINGFUL STORM FOR RENEWAL IN OUR CHURCHES?

CEMES AND FORDHAM PUBLICATIONS

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The book **THE CHURCH IN A PERIOD OF PANDEMIC**, edited by Petros Vassiliadis and George Demacopoulos, contains the papers presented at the International Theological Web-Seminar on this issue, organized by CEMES, and the relevant posts that were published in the OCSC Public Orthodoxy site.

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**ΠΕΤΡΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑΔΗΣ -ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΣ ΔΗΜΑΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (εκδ.)**

***Η ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ***  
**ΣΕ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΟ ΠΑΝΔΗΜΙΑΣ**  
**ΜΠΟΡΕΙ Η ΠΑΡΟΥΣΑ ΚΡΙΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΝΔΗΜΙΑΣ ΝΑ**  
**ΣΥΜΒΑΛΕΙ ΚΑΤΑΙΓΙΣΤΙΚΑ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΝΑΓΕΝΝΗΣΗ ΤΗΣ**  
**ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ;**

*Dedicated to His All-Holiness  
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*

## *Chapter 24*

### **ETHICAL RESPONSES TO FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACIES DURING AND POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Christoph Stueckelberger*

#### *1. Fake News: “You Shall not Lie”*

Fake News are more than a little joke. They can kill lives, especially in times like the Covid-19 pandemic. It can lead to false medication and deadly wrong reactions. Fake news and ‘You shall not lie’ gets new importance and will be further in the post-pandemic world order.<sup>1</sup> What are the ethical guidelines to overcome fake news and what are practical measures?

Honesty is worldwide promoted as a virtue. It is key for all human relations. Without honesty no trust, without trust no family and business. The ninth biblical commandment ‘You shall not lie’ is basic in children’s education. “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16) is not limited to a court case, but for all situations of sharing information in a truthful way.

Today, social media play a key role in sharing information. We receive an interesting videoclip and with a clic forward it to a friend. We read an online news and post it on Facebook. Did we check if it is true of a fake news? Do we lie if we forward a fake news without knowing? What is our obligation to check news before sharing?

Gossiping and sharing rumours is as old as humanity. It is a form of entertainment and the person who shares a rumour gets attention and if he/she is a good storyteller and exaggerates a bit, get even more attention and prestige. But in a village or oral tradition, gossiping was shared with a few friends or limited group. Today, gossiping can go with a clic to thousands of twitter or facebook ‘friends’. US President Trump uses Twitter since twelve years as his main communication tool and now has 80 million direct followers. It is documented that he sent out many lies through his messages, but now, on 27 May 2020, for the first time in history Twitter stopped a tweet of President Donald Trump as a lie and in others added a sentence that the information is wrong. The President became furious and threatened Twitter to be banned. Behind is the debate of the responsibility of platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Are they just offering a technological platform or do they have an editorial responsibility like a publisher or a journalist?

The cyber world kicked the issue of truth and lie to global level of massive global, for many years unregulated communication. As key instrument of globalization and free market, every person can act as journalist and editor and spread whatever news he/she wants to the world. Every fourth human being on this planet, over 2 billion people, have a facebook account. Facebook majority owner Zuckerberg with the age of 33 was much more powerful than the Greek Emperor Alexander the Great on the peak of his Empire, also at the age of 33, from Greek to India. He controlled much less of humanity than emperor Zuckerberg can influence. Election campaigns around the

world and the Corona pandemic made this influence and responsibility of social media very visible.

*Ethical principles* to handle news and fake news are:

1. The Golden Rule of reciprocity as universally accepted rule in all world religions and philosophies: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Or in the positive version of the New Testament: “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” (Mt 7:12)
2. “Do not lie”. Lies undermine trust, destroy relations, are short term but cannot survive in long term and contradict the virtue of honesty and the value of justice and fairness.
3. “Do no harm”. Fake news can destroy the reputation of persons, groups and institutions.
4. “Do not kill”. Fake news can kill lives. Not only that they push young people, e.g. in case of bullying or false accusation, to suicide, but in the pandemic, spreading news about non-proven or clearly false recipes against the corona virus can lead to deadly wrong medication.

*Practical measures* against fake news are need on all three levels of ethics: individual, interpersonal and institutional. On *individual level*, the right to information includes also the responsibility to be informed which means to collect information from different sources and as much as digestible. On *interpersonal level*, it includes caution in sharing information and if shared, then to first think twice if it can be true and if not sure not to share or with a remark for caution. But fake news, even fake videos with image manipulation e.g. of personalities, are so professionally done and with Artificial Intelligence tools almost perfect, that it is often difficult as lay persons to distinguish lie and truth. On *institutional level*<sup>2</sup>, media education and training in critical analysis and thinking is a special responsibility for higher education. Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon (the GAFSA companies. In China BAT: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) as big data collector and with their global social platforms have a duty to filter fake news and the regulators have to oblige them to do it. It is of course a sensitive effort as it can violate the freedom of expression and freedom of press.<sup>3</sup> But the classical media have clear rules and regulations which have to be adopted also to these new platforms. Facebook and Tencent already have to employ ten thousand of staff who daily have to clean the platform from fake news. The corona pandemic lead to a clear increase of information through public, recognized media and decrease in social media, also among young people. In times of vital threats like a virus, reliable information is crucial. More and more initiatives of volunteers, often younger academics and journalists, and non-profit NGOs offer fact checking services<sup>4</sup> and news literacy trainings<sup>5</sup>.

## *2. Conspiracies, Guilt and Responsibility*

Conspiracies<sup>6</sup> are a special form of fake news, but with a direct ideological goal of blaming a group of people or countries to be the reason and origin of an evil. the Christian ethical response is no to sacrificed scapegoats. God sacrificed himself as scapegoat, once for all and forever.

Scientists to the great 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 it might have been



brought by the American military 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 human failure or the escape of a virus by accident. Lack of clarity and certainty is compensated by creating a fake 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 larger part for himself!

Believers of all religions are often receptive of 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).

*What are ethical responses to deal with conspiracies?*

1. *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.

2. *No to conspiracies search for guilt.* Conspiracy theories are linked to the scapegoat mechanism. Lack of clarity and certainty is compensated by creating a fake certainty. The simple example of guilt a sickness was given 2000 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).

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 Mexico, 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.

3. *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. "God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn people, but to save / heal them." (John 3:17). God does not want to harm humanity, but to help and liberate. 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.

4. *Yes to Science:* The belief that faith protects us from all evil is unfortunately widespread: The virus spread explosively in South Korea because a mass church continued to worship against warnings. We also experience this in Africa. Up to the Zurich auxiliary bishop, who wants to stick to the award of the host. This is negligent. It can become a crime as it can kill lives - and it is unchristian. Many believers and church leaders support that medical science and methods are a gift of God, as John Calvin said: The Geneva Reformer in the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup> was in poor health conditions and was often dependent on medicine. The believers in Geneva wanted to test him; they asked him to stop taking medication and instead trust in God. But 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.

##### *5. Hope, Gratitude and Solidarity: A Message to Canadians from Religious Leaders in Canada in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.*

The fifth initiative was a common message to all Canadians from a wide range of religious leaders in Canada in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The message was initiated by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Canadian Rabbinic Caucus. The preparation of the final version and the signatures were coordinated by the Canadian Council of Churches and the Canadian Interfaith Conversation. The *Message* is signed by 95 faith leaders.

The *Message* themes are hope, gratitude and solidarity – the title given to the published pamphlet. Hope is drawn from “religious beliefs, the love of our families, the relationships with friends and the work we do.” These provide “rays of hope to our daily lives,” and hope “assures us of the caring embrace of the Creator, a sacred relationship sustained by prayer, and which flows into our human relationships whereby we care for one another and bear each other’s burden.”

Gratitude is expressed in particular not only in the first instance to health care professionals, but also to the many others essential front-line jobs in the supply chain and retailing of food, medicine and other essentials daily living, and to hard-pressed governments striving to serve their people in new and unexpected ways.

Solidarity is reflected to a call for “greater attention to the needs of the homeless, the incarcerated, the elderly and those already suffering from social isolation,” especially women and children who face abuse and violence, indigenous communities, isolated communities in the far north, refugees and migrant workers in Canada.

The Message concludes:

Religion and spirituality can indeed contribute to building people up, to providing a sense of meaning, inner strength, new horizons and openness of hearts. As religious leaders, we wish to emphasize, especially in times like these, the power and importance of prayer. We earnestly pray for healing, for the continued efforts to relieve human suffering, and for perseverance throughout these challenging times. As history records these moments for our country’s future let us pray that, in the face of Covid-19, we respond with an abundance of hope, gratitude and solidarity, trusting in the loving and ever merciful God, the source of all hope.

##### *6. Statement of the Faith and Life Sciences Reference Group.*

The Faith and Life Sciences Reference Group of the CCC focuses on gathering and exchange of information on biotechnology, and expressing a faith perspective on the many complex issues involved in the biotechnical sciences and their application. On April 20, 2020, the Reference Group issued a statement praising and supporting the scientific and medical communities working to eliminate Covid-19.<sup>9</sup> The statement said notably: “We are moved by the sense of duty and self-sacrificial love shown by those healthcare workers who care for those afflicted by Covid-19, risking their own health and safety. Those of us who must stay home to avoid spreading the disease can do our part by praying for their protection and success as they work tirelessly for our common good. Their efforts demonstrate both solidarity and cooperation, and it is heartening to see those virtues in practice in so many countries and in so many ways.”

##### *7. “Together in One Place” - Online Ecumenical Prayer Service for Pentecost.*

An online ecumenical service was the idea of Rev. Dr. Scott Sharman, animator for ecumenical and interfaith relations of the Anglican Church of Canada. Initial

reaction to the idea was uniformly positive and at the beginning of April, a working group of representatives of several CCC members began planning the service. Preparation proved complex, seeking a balance between the liturgical traditions of different churches and unacceptable syncretism. Such a service could not be sacramental or eucharistic, but rather centred on shared traditions of scripture, prayer and hymns.

The first meeting set some parameters for the online ecumenical service. An initial idea was to center the service on Easter/Pascha, thus highlighting the joy, hope and light of the Lord's Resurrection, as a Christian light shining on the growing gloom and pessimism as Covid-19 continued its ravages throughout the world. The planning group quickly realized that this was impractical for three reasons: the time-frame – two weeks was too short for the preparation such a service; many members of the planning group were themselves active clergy involved in preparing for alternative services for Holy Week and Easter/Pascha to conform with confinement conditions; and the different days for Easter/Pascha in the Western and Orthodox calendars. The group therefore decided to link the event to Pentecost, and settled on Saturday, May 30, 2020, falling between Ascension and Pentecost in both the Western and Eastern liturgical calendars.

The planning group also decided to look to the order of service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, as adapted for use in Canada, as the starting point for the design of a service. Thus the “skeleton” of a service was already available and the planning group gathered materials from member churches for the service.

The bilingual (English and French) Ecumenical Prayer Service for Pentecost, held using Zoom videoconferencing technology, featured lighting a candle by each of the church leaders to begin the service, readings from Scripture, prayers, hymns, thanksgiving for baptism, two short homilies, an affirmation of faith stressing God's presence in the world, intercessions, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, and a final blessing and sending into the world by the church leaders. A booklet in English and French facilitated participation in the service.<sup>10</sup> The heads of six major churches in Canada (Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, United Church, Ukrainian Orthodox), and senior representatives of the Roman Catholic and the Armenian Holy Apostolic Churches led the service. Several portions of the service, especially hymns, were pre-recorded, but most of the service was conducted live. Although publicity was possible only about ten days prior to the event, about 520 persons connected with the service, which lasted about 90 minutes.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the range and diversity of ecumenical responses to the Covid-19 crisis in Canada shows a broad commitment to ecumenical and interfaith undertakings by numerous Christian and other faith groups and leaders. Some of these undertakings occurred within the framework of the Canadian Council of Churches, while others involve a much broader range of both Christian and non-Christian faith institutions. Four of the initiatives took place within the Council itself:

- 1) The Statement by Rev. Stephen Kendall, President of the Canadian Council of Churches on March 11, 2020;
- 2) The letters to the Prime Minister Trudeau and finance ministers urging government support for church relief organizations and special attention to vulnerable groups in government responses to the Covid-19 crisis sent by a number of member churches, rather than under the CCC auspices as such;
- 3) A statement supporting health workers and researchers by the CCC Faith and Life Sciences Working Group; and
- 4) The online ecumenical prayer service for Pentecost held on May 30, 2020.

Three initiatives go beyond the Canadian Council of Churches as an ecumenical institution:

1) The letter to the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, thanking the Government of Canada for including registered charities in federal economic support measures involved the CCC, the Canadian Council of Christian Charities and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada;

2) The Joint Statement from the World Council of Churches and regional ecumenical organizations is a global Christian response to a global problem, underscoring Christian solidarity surpassing denominational divides with all those affected by the pandemic – in effect, the entire world population;

3) The pamphlet *Hope, Gratitude and Solidarity* is a message to all Canadians from a very broad range of religious leaders in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Signatories include Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religious leaders, and many Christian and interfaith-intercultural associations and six Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches (Greek, Ukrainian, OCA, Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian). Other perhaps unexpected signatories include a good number of evangelical churches, the Chaplain General of the Canadian Armed Forces, and elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), which is generally not very involved in ecumenical activities.

In conclusion, the Christian and inter-faith response to the Covid-19 crisis has stimulated many initiatives both within the Christian community and beyond it, showing a deep and unbreakable human solidarity in the face of a common crisis. Hopefully, the spirit of hope and collaboration will continue well beyond the horizon of the immediate crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Christoph Stückelberger, *Globalance. Values and Ways for the Post-Corona World Order*, Geneva: Globethics.net, Sept.2020 (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> I thank Dr. Simon Stückelberger, lecturer in political science, for inputs in this part.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

<sup>4</sup> E.g. [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org), a project of the Annenberg Public Policy center of the University of Pennsylvania. In Germany <https://correctiv.org> as non-profit, independent research center for fact checking.

<sup>5</sup> The US News Literacy Project seems one of the most advanced: <https://newslit.org/about/>.

<sup>6</sup> This part of the article is partly also published in Stückelberger, Christoph/ Ciocan, Cosmin-Tudor, *Religious Controversies in Covid-19. Restrictions, State, Science, Conspiracies: Four Topics with theological-Ethical Responses*, Dialogo, 1/20, open access journal, June 2020., forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Christoph Stückelberger, *No Interests from the Poor. Calvin's Economic and Banking Ethics*, in Christoph Stückelberger/ Reinhold Bernhardt, Calvin Gobal. *How Faith Influences Societies*, Geneva: Globethics.net, Global Series, 2009, 53-70 (67f). Free download: [www.globethics.net/publications](http://www.globethics.net/publications).

<sup>8</sup> *Hope, Gratitude and Solidarity: A Message to Canadians from Religious Leaders in Canada in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (30 March 2020)

<<https://www.councilofchurches.ca/news/hope-gratitude-and-solidarity/>>.

<sup>9</sup> "Statement by the Faith and Life Sciences Reference Group on COVID-19" (20 April 2020)

<<https://www.councilofchurches.ca/news/statement-by-the-faith-and-life-sciences-reference-group-on-covid-19/>>.

<sup>10</sup> Canadian Council of Churches. "'Together in One Place' (Acts 2:1): An Online Ecumenical Prayer Service for Pentecost" (Toronto, May 2020) <> ().