

Pandemic as a Challenge for Future of Humanity: Philosophical and Religious Studies Aspects

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Kharkovshchenko, Yevhen, Olena Predko and Vitalii Turenko (2020) Pandemic as a Challenge for Future of Humanity: Philosophical and Religious Studies Aspects. *Future Human Image*, Volume 14, 13-20. <https://doi.org/10.29202/fhi/14/2>

In the article, the phenomenon of a pandemic is conceptualized as a challenge for humanity's future in the context of philosophical and religious studies discourse. It is proved that the philosophical discourse considers the phenomenon of a pandemic as a potential threat to human freedom since, thanks to "biopolitics," the authorities can manipulate the epidemiological situation in the context of limiting the expression of will and ensuring rights. At the same time, it has been established that the pandemic is a challenge for a new understanding of a person's lifestyle and relationship to the Other.

It is revealed that in the religious context, the pandemic is viewed as a threat and challenge to humanity in the context of the further activities of religious organizations. Consequently, the pandemic prompts religious organizations to act in new ways in relation to their supporters, including creating

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new, innovative forms of interaction. Therefore, among religious studies scholars and theologians, a discussion arose about the possible introduction of online sacraments to ensure the safety of both society in general and a specific person.

Keywords: pandemic, future of humanity, philosophical discourse, religious studies discourse, COVID-19, biopolitics, religion life

Received: 25 August 2020 / Accepted: 30 September 2020 / Published: 3 November 2020

Introduction

The complexity and inconsistency of the processes associated with the coronavirus epidemic have caused a number of problems that have recently been observed in many countries of the world, having a decisive impact on international and national security. That is why we can see the problem of security is so relevant today in the context of its ideological and philosophical understanding. The coronavirus pandemic has affected various social institutions, including also religion. As one of the brightest evidence is that already in the English-language Wikipedia, there is a rather voluminous article called “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion” (Impact of the COVID-19, 2020), which still has ten versions in other languages. In turn, work on the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on religion and society and vice versa, to some extent, is already in the Ukrainian and western humanitarian discourse in general and religious studies discourse in particular.

Heuristically fruitful for the disclosure of the research topic are the works of Veronika Lukanova (Lukanova, 2019), which presents the socio-philosophical understanding of the pandemic as an antisystem in the unity of its structural and functional characteristics, as well as the study of Roman Lunkin (Lunkin, 2020), who raises the question of changing European identity during the corona crisis. which will be the thesis: “From “new responsibility” to “new manageability.” The authors used research by Chinese scholars and jurists (Tan, 2020; Tang & Qiu, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Also important were the studies of a number of Western philosophers Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2020), Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2020a), John Manoussakis (Manoussakis, 2020), who critically comprehend the nature and meaning of the epidemic in general and the coronavirus in particular.

It is necessary to mention information-analytical materials (Dmytro Gorevoy (Gorevoy, 2020), Vadim Rozin (Rozin, 2020), Kateryna Shchotkina (Shchotkina, 2020)) and sociological studies (Belanenko et al., 2020), devoted to the reactions of religious organizations to pandemic challenges and clarifications. Public opinion on the coronavirus pandemic, the threats, and dangers it has caused in Ukraine. Also, a series of scientific and journalistic materials on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on religious relations, ritual and cult practice was posted on the leading Internet sites of Ukrainian religious studies “Religious Information Service of Ukraine,” “Church.” To understand the position of various religious organizations in Ukraine, it is important to use the materials of official websites and printed periodicals (including the “Local Church” of the PCU, the “Patriarchate” of the UGCC, and others).

Accordingly, the **purpose** of this article is to highlight key aspects of the pandemic as a challenge for the future of mankind in the context of philosophical and religious studies discourses.

Philosophical aspects of the challenge of a pandemic: between individual and social

Ukrainian researcher Veronika Lukanova identifies the following approaches to a philosophical understanding of the pandemic phenomenon (Lukanova, 2019: 3):

- a) archaic;
- b) as a phenomenon of the life of an individual;
- c) as a problem of modern humanity;
- d) system-structural.

However, in our opinion, it is not enough to understand certain challenges of the future in the context of understanding the pandemic. We think that the key binary opposition for the studied phenomenon's philosophical hermeneutics is individual and social. In support of this, it is worth noting the opinion of Western thinker John Manoussakis, who in his work "The City is Sick: Sophocles, Thucydides, and Camus on the Coronaviru" note: "The plague is a sickness of the community, of the city, of the polis. In fact, one could say that the plague is a political disease. As a political disease — the plague appears to be both epidemics—that is, adventitious, coming from the other outside my body — but also endemic — from inside the polis's metaphorical body, the body politic, as a sickness of the same. For the polis by extending the right to its citizenship to each of its members appropriates them all to itself (even those excluded from it are excluded by reference to it). Whatever is not in the city and of the city is its other. The polis founds itself upon this exclusion" (Manoussakis, 2020).

Accordingly, the opposition between personal and political, individual, and social is most clearly traced in this situation. The epidemic is most vividly expressed by the opposition of social life and each of us's lives. Hence, the issue of freedom and non-freedom in such a crisis situation is especially important.

After all, it is appropriate to mention the works of Michel Foucault, who speaks of new mechanisms for managing social communities, introducing the concept of "biopolitics." According to Paul Preciado, he used the term "biopolitics" to describe the government's relationship with the social body in the modern era. It describes the transition from what he calls a sovereign society, in which sovereignty is defined in terms of managing the ritualization of death, to a "disciplinary society" that controls and maximizes the lives of the population as a function of national interests. For Foucault, the techniques of biopolitical governance spread through a network of power that went beyond the realm of law and became a horizontal, tentacle-like force, covering the entire territory of life experience and penetrating each individual body (Preciado, 2020).

Giorgio Agamben looks at this even more radically. Despite the severe restrictions in a number of European countries, which he believes are sometimes exaggerated, he speaks of a new form of terrorism based on fear. In particular, the Italian philosopher writes: "The disproportionate reaction to what according to the CNR is something not too different from the normal flu that affects us every year is quite blatant. It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation. The other no less disturbing factor is the state of fear that has evidently spread among individual consciences and translates into an authentic need for situations of collective panic for which the epidemic provides once again the ideal pretext. Therefore, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are

accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it” (Agamben, 2020b).

Accordingly, according to the Western scientist, such epidemiological situations can be the basis for manipulation by countries’ leaders to limit their citizens’ rights. Behind the “mask” of concern for the health of the population, the lives of the citizens of a country may well be hidden completely selfish and far from the goals of the state’s leaders. A pandemic can be a threat not so much to humanity’s existence as a whole but to prevent citizens of a particular country from revealing their rights, responsibilities, and beliefs.

At the same time, the pandemic in the light of philosophical discourse reveals the contradiction of human existence in society. It reveals the dialectic of human presence alone and among people in the masses. Questions arise as to where we are most vulnerable — when we are alone, or when we are among people, not only in terms of health but also in general about our existence.

In this regard, the famous Western thinker Elias Canetti in his masterpiece “Mass and Power,” defines the mass on which power is based through the inversion of fear of being touched. While people are usually afraid that a stranger will touch them, and all the distances that people create around them are a consequence of this fear, the mass is the only situation in which this fear is reversed. “It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. ... As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. ... The man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything was happening in one and the same body. ... This reversal of the fear of being touched belongs to the nature of crowds. The feeling of relief is most striking where the density of the crowd is greatest” (Canetti, 1978: 15-16).

Because of this, the opinion of John Manoussakis is correct: that: “The difficulties of our new reality — restrictions in travel and mobility, restrictions in the availability of various goods, limitations imposed on work and pleasure — are precisely the difficulties that await the individualized citizen as the plague forces him to accommodate others while he rehabilitates himself in the space of the political. One can live with others only to the extent one also lives for others. If I do not live for others, then living with others is hell” (Manoussakis, 2020).

As we can see, the epidemic has a kind of “positive” moment because it encourages each of us to think about the Other, that he is also important to us. The life of everyone around us sometimes depends on us. At the same time, the pandemic forces us to look at each of us in a completely different way. After all, as Slavoj Žižek rightly points out: “The catch is that, even when life eventually returns to normal, it will not be the same normal we were used to before the outbreak: things we were used to as part of our daily life will no longer be taken for granted; we’ll have to learn to live a much more fragile life with constant threats lurking just behind the corner. For this reason, we can expect that viral epidemics will affect our most elementary interactions with other people and objects around, inclusive of our bodies: avoid touching things which may be (invisibly) “dirty,” do not touch hooks, do not sit on public toilets or benches in public places, avoid embracing others and shaking their hands... And even be careful about how you control your own body and your spontaneous gestures: do not touch your nose or rub your eyes — in short, do not play with yourself. So, it is not only the state and other agencies that will control us; we should learn to control and discipline ourselves! Maybe, only virtual reality will be considered safe, and moving freely in an open space will be reserved for the islands owned by the ultra-rich” (Žižek, 2020).

However, although the pandemic emphasizes social distancing, society, as Giorgio Agamben emphasizes: “based on prohibition, but, therefore, especially dense and patient” (Agamben, 2020a). Thus, we can say that a person distancing himself from people necessarily reflects on their further participation in social life and, in general, on interpersonal relationships — between family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues.

In this context, it needs to remember that during a pandemic, the “mask” phenomenon acquires a new semantic sound. Usually, a mask is worn to hide, reveal their anonymity, and appropriate someone else’s, not their own face. It is believed that the mask is as easy to remove as to put on. After removing the mask, a person finds the “true self” again. But is that so? In fact, a mask is not just a piece of colored paper or paper-mâché, but a certain model, a type of behavior that cannot be neutral in relation to the “I.” The mask is a kind of compensation for what the “I” lacks; it seems to complement the personality, serves as a kind of addition to increasing human self-worth. During a pandemic, the semantic nuances of the mask change; it serves as a protective barrier for a person, a phenomenon that alleviates a person’s psychological stress. His confidence, to some extent, removes insecurity and anxiety. But in fiction, often depicts the fact that the mask, growing to the face, changes the “I,” changes the individual’s identification. This tragic theme can be found in the Japanese writer Abe Kobo in the novel “The Face of Another” (Kobo, 1988). The plotline of the novel combines fiction with reality. The scientist, whose face is distorted by burns, cannot bear his injury and alienates him from everything around him; he makes himself a mask that is almost indistinguishable from a normal human face. He thinks that the mask will give him freedom. However, freedom was only imaginary. The mask, growing to the face, changes it. As a result, a person’s identity changes: “The mask got thicker and thicker. In the end, it turned into a fortress that surrounded me with concrete, and, chained in this concrete armor, I made my way out into the night street, feeling like a heavily equipped hunter. Through the embrasures of this fortress, I saw the streets as a refuge for homeless freak cats. They wandered, gathering in flocks, sniffing incredulously, trying to find their torn off tails, ears, paws. I hid behind a mask that had no name, no social status, no age, and felt like a winner, intoxicated with the security I had guaranteed myself. If the freedom of the people around me was the freedom of frosted glass, then mine is the freedom of absolutely transparent glass” (Kobo, 1988).

From a means of protection from the outside world, it becomes a prison from which there is no way out. Do such mask metamorphoses occur during a pandemic? Does it not alienate the Other as the one who acts as the bearer of danger? Does it not act as a factor that imposes its way of acting, its style of thinking? Thus, communication is encapsulated, alienating, and splitting the personality. Characteristically, in the conflict between the mask and the “true self,” the mask usually acts as a negative force that seeks victory. Who will be the winner, which value orientations will win — “I” or masks? In this clash, the one who is stronger often wins, who takes into account the contextual changes and the requirements of the real social situation, which forces the individual to adapt. However, the power of the mask is not only in social imperatives. These imperatives are invisibly present in the “I.”

In summary, we can note that for philosophical discourse, a pandemic in the context of the future of humanity can serve as a means of biopolitics or manipulation of citizens’ freedom by the authorities. At the same time, thinkers emphasize that this crisis situation will force them to look at the Other and oneself differently in the post-quarantine period.

Religious studies understanding of the pandemic: between threat and challenge

Undoubtedly, religious studies did not stand aside in understanding the phenomenon of the pandemic and the “quarantine period.” Accordingly, it is necessary to determine the difference between religious discourse and philosophical.

Conceptually, religious studies, in our view, see the pandemic as both a threat and a challenge to religious organizations. The danger is that certain recommendations of the world or government agencies responsible for human health in general and the country, in particular, may lead to a kind of “stop” in the activities of a network of religious organizations. Leonid Vyhovskyi emphasizes: “After all, in the conditions of a pandemic, the mass attendance of temples by the laity, the kissing of icons and the reception of the Eucharist are a source of infection. In such circumstances, the church was forced to reconsider the forms of its own functioning. And because of this, discussions on the introduction of quarantine have arisen (and continue to take place) among the clergy and laity. Their main topic was solving the problem: can the church, as a sacred space, be a place of transmission of COVID-19 viruses” (Vyhovskyi, 2020).

Foreign theologians also speak about the same. In particular, the fundamental monograph “Religious Fundamentalism in the Age of Pandemic” emphasizes how the government influences religious institutions’ activities during epidemics and how religion becomes a compelling factor in believers’ perception. This situation is entirely different, unlike other ordinary citizens (Religious Fundamentalism, 2020). For example, religious organizations in the crisis of the fight against coronavirus were able to sacrifice the most important — public worship, which is the basis of believers’ lives in any confessions and religions. For the majority, this refusal was a test of strength since the absence of joint prayers in person is the disunity of members of religious communities, the termination of the activities of individual parishes, as well as the deprivation of part of their income. People who do not go to churches and mosques do not bring donations either. Although in many churches (among Catholics, and among Protestants in almost all churches in Russia and Europe, among Orthodox to a lesser extent), the practice of online donations is already common, which can be made without leaving your home on the website of a religious association. In general, all religions and confessions can be called law-abiding. Christians, Muslims, Jews took the necessary measures, according to the recommendations of the national authorities. The question of the attitude towards the conduct of divine services and the partaking of the sacrament has become a kind of test for “tradition” in various European countries. Two options were presented to solve this problem in conditions of full or partial quarantine for the population:

- a) a complete refusal from any public gatherings, including services in temples;
- b) partial restriction on attending services with an emphasis on the fact that churches cannot refuse services altogether since it would be contrary to their nature and mission.

At the same time, epidemics are a challenge for religious organizations. Because any social, political cataclysms push to behave differently, develop and implement other, perhaps completely new models of cooperation with believers, representatives of a particular religious tradition, and citizens of the country in general.

“A coronavirus pandemic can affect the religious environment much more than just a communion discussion. Modern churches are very close to resolving issues that will concern their very foundation and, consequently, their future functioning. What exactly is a church? Why does it exist? Previously, a limited number of theologians dealt with this issue because the parishioners had enough of the rite. With the introduction of quarantine, worship will go online. Will the church be able not only to perform rites but also to give people the meaning of life in their existence’s new conditions? Worship services in quarantine will require new preaching. And general phrases about what is possible in fasting and what is not possible will no longer be perceived as it was before. And it should be borne in mind that in the online environment, a person’s attention is by nature much less focused on the sermon than in the temple dimension. Under such conditions, the churches will have to justify the relevance of the sacraments and rituals. Thus, as the world changes, churches must understand the depth of the challenges they face. And these challenges will require further modernization of church life” (Vyhovskyi, 2020).

Therefore, we can say that the religious understanding is focused not so much on the study of the causes of epidemics, diseases, etc., but focuses on highlighting the specifics of the functioning of religious organizations in such a crisis situation, the peculiarities of state-confessional relations during a pandemic, as well as consequences for both the clergy and the laity.

Conclusions

Thus, having studied and revealed the phenomenon of the pandemic as a challenge for the future of mankind in the context of philosophical and religious discourses, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Philosophical discourse considers the pandemic as a challenge in the context of humanity’s future in three aspects: in the context of freedom and non-freedom, the peculiarities of interpersonal relationships, and the specifics of each person’s private life.
2. Religious discourse examines the pandemic in the context of the challenge to the future of humanity, emphasizing that this situation stimulates the creation of new conditions and forms of interaction between the state and religious organizations and the latter with their adherents.

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