



DiReSoM

Diritto Religione Società Multiculturali
Law Religion Multicultural Societies

Право Религия Мультикультурные Общества

انون والدين في المجتمعات متعددة الثقافات
多元化社会中的法与宗教

LAW, RELIGION AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

EDITED BY
PIERLUIGI CONSORTI

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DiReSoM Papers

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Pierluigi Consorti

DiReSoM (Diritto e Religione nelle Società Multiculturali – Law and Religion in Multicultural Societies) is a research group created in 2017 by Italian Scholars in Law and Religion.
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STATE LAW

ORTHODOX EASTER CoViD-19: ISRAEL ALLOWS THE OPENING OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER TO RECEIVE THE “LIGHT OF RESURRECTION”*

Enrica Martinelli

The past week has truly been one of passion for the Orthodox ecumene, already marked by suffering due to the impossibility to participate in the celebrations of Holy Week due to the [pandemic](#), but, even more so, being suspended in the anguished doubt as to the accomplishment of the miracle of the lighting of the “Sacred Fire”, the central fulcrum of the celebrations of Orthodox Easter, this year or perhaps especially this year.

Given the strict restrictive measures adopted by Israel to contain the contagion from Covid-19- which led to the closure of the Basilica of the Resurrection in Jerusalem until a date yet to be decided - until the last minute there was great uncertainty as to the possibility to draw on the “Holy Light”, which is released at the time of “Anastasi” from the Savior’s tomb.

In fact, since time immemorial, inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher during the Easter liturgy, the spontaneous ignition of a prodigious flame has taken place in the hands of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch. In the place where Christ, by rising, defeated

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death, the miracle is renewed every year and, according to Eastern tradition, will cease only at the advent of the final apocalypse.

During Vespers on Holy Saturday evening, after being stripped of all liturgical vestments - except for the sticarium - and being scrupulously searched by the Israeli civil authorities, the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem¹, enters, accompanied by the Armenian Patriarch, into the Sepulcher, bringing with him the extinguished torches.

Even the shrine of the tomb of Christ is previously searched and closed with honey and wax seals, on which the Christian confessions and the civil authorities affix their effigy, having for centuries, in various capacities, boasted rights over the Basilica².

The Patriarch gathers in prayer, in absolute silence until a hiss is heard, accompanied almost simultaneously by blue and white flashes which, flickering from all sides, invade the Church of the Resurrection. At that moment, the Patriarch's torches light up spontaneously with a blue flame that is lit but does not burn³: it is the "Sacred Fire", which miraculously symbolizes the resurrection of Christ, light of the world.

Released from the Sepulcher, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch distributes the "Holy Light" to the faithful gathered in prayer and

¹ Among the representatives of the Christian churches in the Holy Land, he is the only person authorized to welcome the "Sacred Fire".

² The Latin, Greek and Armenian churches alone, which are entrusted with the daily opening and closing of the Holy Sepulcher, recognize the right to celebrate liturgies *there*. Further prerogatives are boasted by other Christian communities, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church. By ancient tradition, two Muslim Palestinian families have the key to the only access door to the Sepulcher.

³ The sacred fire is lit for thirty-three minutes exactly, after which it begins to burn and the flame changes color, from blue-green to red.

to the representatives of the other Orthodox churches, who wait outside and then transport it, with great solemnity, to their respective countries⁴.

The miracle of the ignition of the *Άγιο Φως*, documented from ancient sources, has never been interrupted over the centuries⁵. On the only occasion of 1349, entry to the Savior's tomb was prohibited, due to the spread of the "black plague", which was causing millions of victims in Europe and Asia and almost permanently marking that painful period of the Middle Ages.

Covid-19 is therefore the second pandemic in history to have imposed the closure of the Holy Sepulcher, decreed precisely by the Israeli Minister of Health, Rabbi Yaakov Litzam.

Thus even Jerusalem, the Holy City *par excellence*, has had to bow to the invisible enemy⁶: this caused bewilderment in the Orthodox world where the miraculous gift of the "Holy Light" and its distribution in every church, even in the most small and remote parish, is a unique and essential part of the Easter celebrations, awaited with extreme emotion and trepidation by worshippers.

In order to preserve this age-old tradition and to protect freedom of worship - already severely compressed everywhere by measures to contain the epidemic - feverish consultations have begun between the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III, the Custos of the Holy Land Francesco Patton, the Patriarch Armenian Nourhan Manougian and the Israeli authorities.

⁴ In most Orthodox countries, the event is televised live and takes on a particular symbolic and liturgical value during Holy Week.

⁵ See F. Cardini, S. Della Seta, *Il Guardiano del santo Sepolcro*, Mondadori, 2000.

⁶ The epidemic also prevented the celebrations of Latin Easter at the Holy Sepulcher, including the *Via Crucis* on the Via Dolorosa and the Passion. Compare [here](#) and [here](#).

Not without some understandable difficulties⁷, the Foreign Minister of Israel, with a decision greatly appreciated by the Orthodox world, has finally granted permission to the religious authorities, in observance of all the precautions imposed by the health emergency, to enter the tomb of Christ to receive and transfer the Light of the Resurrection to the representatives of all the Orthodox countries gathered in Jerusalem.

The ceremony, which in normal times would have seen thousands of worshippers waiting in the medieval courtyard of the Holy Sepulcher and all around the Basilica, took place this year in a [deserted Jerusalem](#), in the presence of the few representatives of the Orthodox churches⁸, who were able to witness the repetition of the prodigious event.

During the trip to Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, the “Holy Light”, escorted by the Israeli police, stopped at the Jaffa Gate, one of the eight oldest gates of the old city of Jerusalem, where representatives of the Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Romanian, Georgian and Vltava Churches were waiting for it in order to transport it in time for the *Ἀνάσταση* to the lands of origin.

⁷ For the government of Israel to comply with the requests of Christian leaders and give them access to the Sepulcher to welcome the “Sacred Fire”, it meant opening a dispute with Jews and Muslims since the Minister of Health has ordered the closure of every place of worship, also of the Western Wall, of all mosques and synagogues.

⁸ The Greek Orthodox Church, in observance of the contagion prevention measures ordered by the government, avoided sending, as usual, its own representation to the Greek delegation who went to Jerusalem to receive the *Ἅγιο Φῶς* and accompany it during the journey to Athens. This year it was the Consul General of Greece in Israel who delivered the “Holy Light”, to the steps of the Air Force aircraft (provided by the Greek State for this purpose) to the crew, who were not allowed to step onto Israeli soil, due to the quarantine. See [here](#).

The current exceptional circumstances thus imposed drastic downsizing even of the ceremonies scheduled on arrival at the destination of the *Άγιο Φως*.

According to custom, the ceremony reserved for Heads of State is applied in Greece upon the arrival of the extraordinary “guest of honor”. On the contrary, this year, at Athens airport, solemnities were limited, reduced to the presence of a small military procession, a few representatives of the government and the local Church – including the Exarch of the Holy Sepulcher – and a very reduced number of members of the press, all [at a safe distance](#).

Despite the satisfaction deriving from the successful outcome of the diplomatic negotiations with the Israeli government, conducted with “[surgical caution](#)”, the Greek government’s dilemma for days was that of the possible risk implications of the distribution of the “Holy Light” throughout the national territory.

In the face of the unavoidable dangers of spreading the virus associated with the numerous journeys - by land, air and sea - necessary to reach the most distant places, the scattered islands and the most isolated parishes, the government had to take into due consideration the high expectations of Orthodox worshippers, already intensely tested by the closure of the churches unilaterally ordered by the Government at the end of a long tug-of-war with the ecclesiastical authorities, of which significant controversial reflections have not yet been extinguished.

For the executive power, it was a matter of finding a fair and delicate balance between the irrepressible requirements to protect public health and the right of religious freedom of citizens.

The statement by the Deputy Foreign Minister, Konstantinos Vlassis, expressed on Good Friday evening, finally put an end to the expectations of the ecclesiastical authorities and worshippers:

the *Άγιο Φως*, which arrived from Jerusalem to Athens on the afternoon of Holy Saturday, “from the airport will only be transferred to the Exarchate of the Holy Sepulcher, where it will be kept. In observance of the measures taken against the pandemic by CoViD-19, it will not be transferred to other parishes nor will it be distributed to the faithful”⁹.

This decision was certainly difficult to make as it was very unpopular; however, on this occasion, the Orthodox Church sided with the Government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis and through the mouth of the [Archbishop of Athens](#) and all of Greece, Ieronimos, encouraged his flock not to disperse, but to “experience the Resurrection in the ecclesial communion of domestic churches, staying at home for love, placing the we before the I”.

The intense and penetrating verse of the poet Kostas Varnalis, seems to have been written for the painful Easter celebrations of this year, at the end of which worshippers would not be able to bring the “Holy Light” to their homes, but only to keep it in their hearts: “It is not worthy to see your holy light / the eye without crying tears of blood”¹⁰.

⁹See [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁰Kostas Varnalis, *Ντροπή* (“Shame”)

“Δε ’ναι άξιο ν’ αντικρίσει το άγιο φως σου
το μάτι χωρίς αίμα να δακρύσει”



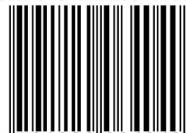
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1 – *Law, Religion and Covid-19 Emergency*, edited by Pierluigi Consorti

As scholars engaged in the study of the legal regulation of the religious phenomenon, we decided to create a web space to collect documents, comments and other useful materials related to the Covid-19 emergency, in order to assess the outcomes of the normative decisions made by state and religious authorities. So, on March 8th we have created www.diresom.net. By the end of April, we had already published more than 500 documents and comments related to this issue, and more than 20.000 unique visitors had surfed our website. Therefore, we decide to edit an open source book to share in a more orderly way the comments that we have already published online, thus giving the possibility to consult these first guidelines to all those who want to study or analyze the legal reaction, both state and religious, to this pandemic.

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