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Leadership, mobilization of risky behaviours and accountability: The Church of Greece leaders' public talk during the COVID-19 pandemic

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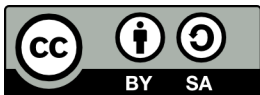
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Abstract

Social psychologists have typically examined leadership and risk-taking behaviours through a social identity lens. However, the rhetorical/ideological aspects of such processes as well as leaders' accountability management practices have not been adequately studied. We address this gap by focusing on leaders of the Church of Greece (CoG), who, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, insisted that their congregation should keep receiving the Holy Communion, which typically involves the practice of spoon-sharing. We present a discursive analysis of 17 interviews with leaders of the CoG given in Greek media channels, exploring how they construct participation in the ritual. When Church leaders urged their audiences to engage in risky practices, they assumed various social identity positions (e.g. scientifically informed; civic minded), implicating competing ideological frameworks. They also managed their personal and institutional accountability for potential viral transmissions by placing responsibility for adverse effects on their followers. Implications for social psychological theory are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Church of Greece, COVID-19, critical discursive psychology, ideological dilemmas, leadership, religious discourse, risk, social identity

INTRODUCTION

Social psychologists have long employed social identity and the self-categorization approach to explore processes of social influence (Turner, 1982, 1985, 1991). This theoretical framework has more recently been used to investigate issues of practical importance such as engagement in risk-taking behaviours (Cruwys et al., 2020, 2021), leadership and mass mobilization (Haslam et al., 2020, 2022).

This article examines social psychological processes at the intersection between (religious) leadership and the mobilization of risk behaviours. It does so through focusing on how leading figures of the Church of Greece (CoG hereafter), during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, publicly mobilized their audiences to participate in risk behaviours such as the rite of the Eucharist, which typically involves the practice of spoon-sharing for receiving Holy Communion. Through a discursive analysis of CoG leaders' public argumentation, we complement the existing literature on leadership and risk by considering the dimensions of rhetoric/ideology and of personal/institutional accountability management. Our analysis considers participants' discursive orientation to identity categories (Antaki et al., 1996; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998), the social action-functions of identity use in talk (Stokoe & Edwards, 2009) and the personal/institutional accountability management work brought-off through such orientations (Bozatzis, 2009; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Figgou et al., 2023).

Religious leadership, health/risk behaviours and the CoG's rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic

Religious institutions and their representatives can be influential in supporting the uptake of healthy and risk-reducing behaviours. Adedini et al. (2018), for instance, report successful interventions in Nigeria, where family planning messages coming from religious leaders significantly increased the uptake of contraceptive measures. Also, during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, religious leaders advocated for the public adopting a range of risk-reduction behaviours such as handwashing and safe burials, improving community responses to the epidemic (Greyling et al., 2016). Thus, religion-based identities and leadership can play a crucial role in responding to public health-related issues (Duff & Buckingham, 2015; Van Bavel et al., 2020). This is because spiritual leaders already belong to and have strong ties with other community members, possess knowledge of communities' characteristics and traditions, are seen as credible and are treated with respect. Moreover, they possess effective communication and persuasion skills, often justifying suggestions to their followers by drawing on sacred religious scriptures (Anshel & Smith, 2014).

In some cases, however, the role of religious figures over public health initiatives stands in contrast to the positive picture painted by the aforementioned literature. Wildman et al. (2020) describe cases across different countries where religious leaders refused to stop the congregations and associated rituals in order to limit the spread of COVID-19. Similar was the case in Greece. In the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak and at the outset of the emergency measures taken by the Greek government, the CoG found itself at the epicentre of extensive negative commentaries in mass and social media due to its refusal to temporarily halt its regular and crowded Sunday congregations. The rite of Eucharist (or Holy Communion) typically involves the practice of spoon-sharing for participants, so scientifically minded public critics argued that the ritual constitutes a major health risk (e.g. Naftemporiki, 2020) and CoG's religious leaders were criticized for mobilizing lay members of the Church to participate in the ritual (e.g. News247, 2020; Το Βήμα, 2020).

In such discourses, the CoG's refusal either to temporarily suspend the ritual or to introduce risk-reducing practical modifications was treated as a major fault, illuminative of its, alleged, 'irrational' character. Moreover, such refusals were treated as indication of the political power and influence of the CoG over the ruling right-wing government to the extent that the State seemed reluctant to intervene and regulate over public health issues in the CoG's sphere of operation (Efsyn, 2020a). Similar was the case during subsequent pandemic waves in Greece (Efsyn, 2020b, 2020c). The upsurge of confirmed cases and related deaths led the government to take radical measures that affected important areas of civic life (e.g. 'lockdowns', restrictions in movement, closing and restricting access to workplaces, schools and universities, markets, shops, bars, cafes, theatres etc). In contrast, the policy response towards the CoG was mostly tokenistic, with congregations tolerated for a long period of time and, thereafter, with governmental mandates for restricted attendance

hardly ever monitored by the police. By mid-2022 and during the so far five waves of the pandemic, the rite of Eucharist has been going on mostly uninterrupted.

The aforementioned context lends itself for explorations of how, in the context of a global crisis, leaders of a powerful religious institution with a historical and constitutionally sanctioned privileged position within the modern Greek polity (Anastassiadis, 2004; Roudometof & Makrides, 2013) attempted to mobilize potentially harmful behaviours at odds with mandates to protect public health.

Social identity, leadership and risk

Social identity has been shown to be an important component of leadership. While past approaches emphasized leaders' charisma or personality traits (Haslam et al., 2020), current advances employ social identity to explore processes through which leaders create the rhetorical and material conditions by means of which followers can be mobilized and particular social identities expressed (Haslam et al., 2020, 2022; Reicher & Haslam, 2017). For instance, research shows that to be influential, leaders often appear as prototypical group members that embody the group identity and act to secure the interests of their group (Haslam et al., 2020). However, in this literature, social identity is often conceptualized through a cognitive lens, focusing on people's levels of group identification. For example, Stevens et al. (2020) showed that identity leadership in physical activity groups was associated with group identification over time, which in turn was related to participation in group-based activities. Meta-analyses have highlighted that leadership is more effective when leaders are perceived as prototypical group members that appear as serving collective interests, and when followers strongly identify with the group (Steffens et al., 2021).

However, within the same tradition of research, in addition to the cognitive perspective, researchers have employed a rhetorical approach, exploring how leaders use language *strategically* in flexible and dynamic ways to define the characteristics of prototypical group members, to (re)define the boundaries of categories between 'us'/'them', as well as to define the content, stereotypes, norms and behaviours of respective identities (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Analyses of leaders' speeches show, for example, how political leaders position themselves as members of their respective audiences or construct their audience members as aligned with proposed policies and positions (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Vignoles et al., 2021).

As well as leadership, the social identity approach has also been used to understand risk behaviours. Mass gatherings, and especially those of a religious and ritualistic nature, can facilitate social connectedness (Hobson et al., 2018) and positive psychosocial changes such as the validation of one's beliefs; feelings of recognition and acceptance; increased intimacy and expectations of solidarity and support, and identification with other group members (Alnabulsi et al., 2020; Hopkins et al., 2019). However, shared social identity can also lead to negative outcomes. The increased intimacy that characterizes psychological groups can pose dangers for public health since closer proximity can facilitate the transmission of infections (Hopkins & Reicher, 2016, 2021). Shared group identity can reduce disgust (Reicher et al., 2016), with people potentially engaging in practices such as sharing utensils, food or water bottles or not maintaining physical distance from others that might be ill. Ingroup members can be perceived as posing low risks for the individual and can influence other ingroup members to engage in risk-taking behaviours, mainly through higher levels of trust towards them (Cruwys et al., 2020, 2021).

Limitations of existing approaches on leadership, collective mobilization and risk-taking

When questioning occasions in which leaders of powerful institutions, like the CoG, attempt to mobilize audiences to engage in risky behaviours, thinking along the social identity approach line can undeniably be insightful. This approach helps us understand cognitive mechanisms that facilitate changes

in people's self-perception and shift their perceptions of their relationships with other people, subsequently affecting their behaviours. However, existing approaches can take us only half-way through the analytic trajectory we envisage.

The social identity approach to risk is based on a cognitive model and often a quantitative methodological approach that primarily uses participants'—verbally expressed and statistically measured—strength of identification with specific social categories (often vis-à-vis other social categories) to explore its effects. However, despite their conceptualization of social identity as dynamic and contextual (Turner, 1982, 1985, 1991), such studies either manipulate social identities or measure participants' strength of identification with a particular identity. Either way, identities are assumed and imposed on participants based on a frame of reference devised and/or occasioned by the researchers (Antaki et al., 1996). Thus, such designs are unable to capture the interactional nature and indexicality of identities and the ways in which their rhetorical instantiation implicates, dilemmatic and, thus, *thoughtful* processes of ideological reproduction (Billig et al., 1988).

The social identity approach to leadership is more diverse and employs both cognitive and rhetorical frameworks. The cognitive framework often measures participants' identification with their group or leader and explores its effects (e.g. Stevens et al., 2020). In contrast, the rhetorical strand of work within the social identity approach (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) is more sensitive to language constructing group identities. What both approaches lack, however, is an emphasis on the interactional and indexical character of language. Their commitment to the social context remains quite limited and largely focuses on how participants *perceive* themselves *vis-à-vis* other social categories or on how leaders rhetorically attend to their audiences and manage their communication content and practices. Also, they do not consider speakers' interactional concerns and interest management at a micro-level, or the wider socially and culturally available resources for defining particular actions in specific ways. Finally, while the cognitive approach assumes the operant categories, the rhetorical approach within the social identity tradition methodologically focuses on the ways in which social identities genuinely appear in talk. Nevertheless, from an ethnomethodological perspective (Sacks, 1992), a major limitation is that the focus is on exogenously specified categories and is not often open enough to analysing how identities and positions might be constituent parts of activity sequences and, thus, part of context as endogenously worked up by the participants themselves (Antaki et al., 1996; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards, 2007; Fitzgerald & Rintel, 2016; Widdicombe, 2016).

Using a discursive lens, in this article, we explore public talk by leading figures of the CoG to shed light into how influential group members communicate and encourage followers to engage in potentially harmful behaviours. Due to its insistence to continue with the rite of Eucharist and being charged with irrationality and hazardous, irresponsible conduct, the CoG was facing, at the time, a pressing dilemma: stopping the rite of the Eucharist could be treated as an indirect admittance it entails dangers for participants. Such a position, though, was seen by the CoG as a major *faux pas* since it would go against its metaphysical dogma on the 'nature' of the Holy Communion, endangering, thus, its domineering ideological standing within Greek society. Thus, our analysis maps out diverse identities and positionings that religious leaders mobilize rhetorically, as well as ways in which they attend to personal and institutional accountability, on the face of this ideological and political conundrum.

METHOD

Data set

Our analysis is based on interview talk by leading figures of the CoG during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. The content was publicly available online on YouTube and other webpages. The Greek search terms for 'Church', 'Coronavirus' and 'Holy Communion' were used on YouTube and Google to identify relevant videos, uploaded between late February and April 2020, a time when a great deal of debate about the health risks of Holy Communion had arisen. Videos that did not

meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the corpus of data, namely videos without references to the Holy Communion in relation to COVID-19. After removing duplicates, the sample consisted of 17 videos: 14 interviews, two sermons, one statement and the official statement of the Permanent Holy Synod. The speaking representatives of the Church were nine Bishops, two priests, one Archbishop and one Elder. The selected videos were between 3.5 and 23 min in duration, amounting to a total of 171 min of talk and were transcribed verbatim. Data collection and transcription were conducted between March and May 2020.

Analytical approach

Our analysis is informed by critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998), which synthesizes analytic approaches that focus, equally, on the ordering of local conversational practices, as well as on the implication of broader cultural, historical and social issues in discourse. Within this perspective, the notion of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) is incorporated, enabling analysts to re-frame local, interactionally consequential and often contradictory identity positions within a wider cultural plane, fused with political implications. As far as the rhetorical aspects of the interview talk are concerned, the analysis was conducted using discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Deploying discursive psychology, we highlight how speakers work-up the 'out-there-ness' (Potter, 1996) of their reports, establishing them as factual and, thus, warding-off obnoxious inferences about their identity.

ANALYSIS

Church leaders participating in public and media talk were engaged in a dual, argumentative task: on the one hand to defend and propagate the CoG's metaphysical dogma, mobilizing their audience into participating in Eucharist; on the other, to manage their and the CoG's accountability for so doing, both on the face of the pandemic-induced threats and of the threat to be heard as irrational by secular as well as moderately religious audiences. Unfolding such a complex rhetorical endeavour involved the public speaking clerics in refined positioning work (Korobov, 2010; Wetherell, 1998). Our analysis focuses upon the articulation of these two rhetorical orientations exemplifying how they involve intricate identity work.

Analysing our data, we identified three activity sequences (Edwards & Potter, 1992) or argumentative lines (Billig, 1991), unfolding within long stretches of talk, which instantiate, variably, these broad argumentative orientations: first, CoG leaders calling for their followers to participate in Holy Communion through pronouncing doctrinal faith and dogma. A second argumentative trope involved leaders moderating their stance and abstaining from using purely dogmatic discourse. For example, by arguing that their followers ought to participate in the ritual while, at the same time, emphasizing the civic mindedness of the CoG and their awareness of measures that must be taken to mitigate risks. Finally, a third line of argumentation involved leaders managing their and their institution's accountability for potentially harmful consequences of people participating in Holy Communion by emphasizing their spiritual worthiness.

a. Calling for participation in Holy Communion through pronouncements of doctrinal faith

Within our data set, direct calls for participation in Eucharist through pronouncements of doctrinal faith—or religious identity—were rare. Given the vociferous public criticisms that the CoG was facing, such an absence is not surprising. Doctrinal faith hardly provides solid grounds for warranting the practice of Holy Communion at times when secular, public criticism took aboard a (lay) scientific—therefore rational—outlook and charging the Church for its unscientific—therefore irrational—insistence on hazardous doctrinal, ritual practices. Their rarity notwithstanding, such calls did appear within our data

set. In this section, we focus on two different ways in which such calls were articulated, by two clerics standing on diametrically opposing positions in the hierarchy of the CoG leadership structure: at the very top and at the bottom.

The first extract comes from a public statement that the Archbishop of the CoG, Hieronymos, made on 14/4/2020 to television crews outside the Archdiocese of Athens, restating the official position of the Holy Synod regarding the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Extract 1

1	AB.H.	We have Liturgy and life after the Liturgy. So, Liturgy is something clear
2		((−cut)). Indisputable. I should just say a few words about my thoughts which I
3		also said in a speech of mine. We have two elements here. The element of Holy
4		Communion and the issue of the assembly. These are different things. In Holy
5		Communion there is no room for perdition/discount.[1] There is no room for
6		illness, there is no room, but anyway this is not something that is up for
7		discussion. The other issue with the assembly is an issue that relates to
8		intelligence, to prevention, to the policy prevailing in each country; and here in
9		Greece, as things stand, there is at least a good relation between the church
10		and the State and on those matters we ought to keep pace. To join hands.

(*Archbishop Hieronymos, 14/04/2020, National TV*)

This brief statement, which may be treated as a supreme leader's agenda-setting act, contains interesting rhetorical features, indicative of the centrepiece quality of political rhetoric: it addressing multiple audiences (Condor et al., 2013). The Archbishop (line 1) reminds critical audiences that Liturgy (and its attendance) is *just one* of the events of a churchgoer's everyday life and, therefore, any infection with the virus could be hard to be pinned down to receiving the Holy Communion. But the Archbishop is doing more than that here: he asserts that Liturgy is 'something clear ((-cut))', 'undisputable', assuring, thus mobilizing the community of the faithful to keep on attending mass.

However, in lines 3–7, the Archbishop does orient to Holy Communion as a contentious issue. In so doing, he sets up a contrast (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986) between the rite per se and the 'issue of the assembly'. This contrast involves a differentiation between two realms: the transcendental and the physical. The transcendental realm of Divine Providence corresponds to the rite of Holy Communion; it is a realm within which there is no room for 'perdition/discount' and 'illness'. The choice of the word 'ἐκπτωση' here is important. In the biblical Greek register, 'ἐκπτωση' denotes 'perdition' (moral ruin, damnation and hell); however, in vernacular, contemporary Greek it denotes 'discount', literally (as in commercial transactions) and metaphorically, as in making concessions and allowances. Indeed, in lines 4–7, the Archbishop, blurring the boundaries between theological and political prescription, states that when it comes to Holy Communion, the 'perdition/discount' is/ought not to be 'up for discussion', making, thus, both a theological and a political assertion for the national media audience: on the theological front, 'nobody is/ought to be challenging Divine Providence' and on the political front, 'nobody is/ ought to be asking the Church to step back from its position to keep with the rite of Eucharist.

However, the Archbishop is, indeed, making an allowance or opens the door for one through the contrast he occasioned: his reference to 'the issue of the assembly' signals the realm of the physical world and its undisputed regulation by the State. As far as this realm is concerned, the Archbishop eagerly concedes that is a matter of (personal) 'intelligence', 'prevention' and state-regulated 'policies' on which the Church 'keeps pace' and 'joins hands' with the (secular) State. Thus, an intergroup alliance is set up between two social actors that in critical media discourses of the days were often pitched as opposed. With this delicately crafted contrast, the Archbishop leaves the door open both for 'intelligent' personal

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[1] The word used in Greek is 'ἐκπτωση' which translates both as 'perdition' in the biblical linguistic register but also as 'discount' in colloquial modern Greek.

decisions of the faithful to participate *or not* in Holy Communion due to 'prevention' reasons, as well as for the State to regulate and take appropriate measures.

This statement encapsulates features that we shall further comment upon subsequently. What should be underscored here is the way in which the Archbishop: (a) mobilizes the community of the faithful into participating in Eucharist by asserting the position of a spiritual leader pronouncing doctrinal faith, (b) asserts the position of the leader of a powerful institution that has the power to address national audiences and to dictate to the over-hearing (Goffman, 1979) politicians 'what is up for discussion' and (c) works up his and the CoG's accountability by setting up a contrast between the transcendental and the physical domain allowing, thus, ample room for 'back-tracking' from Eucharist, both for individual churchgoers and for the government, the entitled par excellence institution for policy making with regard to worldly affairs like 'assemblies'. The rhetorical strand within SCT research tradition we reviewed above capitalizes upon the conceptualization of identity(−ies) as *strategically* deployed by leaders in pursuing political agendas. Our analysis supports this finding and, at the same time, complements it by highlighting the intricate discursive way in which the identity positions of the 'spiritual' and 'political' leader are worked up and occasioned through the speaker's orientation to constructing the context of his talk: the contrast between the metaphysical and the physical realms as relevant dual *foci* of interest for the Archbishop's national audience.

The following extract comes from the YouTube channel of Elder Nektarios, a cleric with fundamentalist, fringe positions and endorser of wider conspiratorial (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013) themes.

Extract 2

1	E.N.	'Beware of Holy Communion, because with the same little spoon', the Holy Lavida,
2		'you might get infected' and they spread panic to the people. Of course, the faithful
3		never panicked. They never stopped taking the Communion. Because they know that
4		within the chalice resides Christ who is life itself. Christ is life and transmits life. He
5		does not transmit death.
		[…]
6		Therefore, I recommend ((it)) to all of you. We the faithful ones let us prove that Christ
7		is life itself. Christ is not death, he bestrews life. Therefore, I invite all of you, infants,
8		babies, youth, adults, elders as often as you can to the chalice of life. Because within
9		the chalice it is life itself that is hidden. Let us prove to all of them who have the virus
10		of impiety that we as Christians, as living with the Lord, we are not afraid of Holy
11		Communion. Because it is the fountain of life. Life springs ((from it)). Holy
12		Communion is the best vaccine for any illness.
		[…]
13		I wish you to have powerful and strong faith. Keep on receiving the Communion. Take
14		life inside you. And don't forget, we also take the Communion from the same Lavida
15		with all the faithful ones and for 2000 years now nobody has contracted leprosy, AIDS,
16		tuberculosis or any other disease. Because life kills death. And life resides within the
17		Chalice

(*Elder Nektrarios, 27/2/2020, 'Geron Nektarios' YouTube Channel*)

In this extract, calls for participation to Eucharist from the position of a prototypical group member are explicit: 'I recommend it to all of you' (line 6); 'I invite all of you' (line 7); 'keep on receiving the communion' (line 13). Through such calls the speaker asserts the identity position of the *spiritual* leader, entitled to 'recommend', 'invite' and advice on religious practice. A noticeable difference to Extract 1 is its un-mitigated formulation. Nektarios' mobilizing calls are co-articulated with passionate

pronouncements of dogmatic faith, to the effect that Christ is co-terminus with life and that the substance matter of the ritual is Christ himself (lines, 3–5, 6–7, 11, 13–14 and 16–17). The explicitness of participation calling and the pronouncing of doctrinal faith notwithstanding, Nektarios' sermon orients to the public contestation and instantiates an analytically intriguing rhetorical effort to warrant his calls and doctrinal pronouncements by trading in the currency of 'knowledge' and 'knowledge-based' identity(−ies) (e.g. Raymond & Heritage, 2006).

Nektarios' orientation to the public criticism of Holy Communion is evidenced in lines 1–2: he active voices (Wiggins, 2017) a non-specified public critic, putatively warning a non-specified audience, of the dangers of 'infection' lurking in receiving Holy Communion. This occasioning of the key theme of public criticism is only used, of course, as grounds for its subversion. For Nektarios, such warnings only managed to 'spread panic' to the general public, or more precisely 'to the people'. In this discursive junction, Nektarios juxtaposes the category 'people' to the category 'faithful': they, the latter, 'of course', 'never panicked' and 'never stopped taking the Communion' 'because they know'; and what 'they know' is explicated by Nektrarios as the subject matter of Christian Orthodox doctrinal faith. In Nektarios' rhetorical juxtaposition, therefore, one finds, on the one side, the irresponsible—infidel—critics of the CoG together with the 'un-knowledgeable' generalized 'people', the former keen to 'spread panic', the latter prone to get 'panicked'; and, on the other side, the 'faithful' who 'know'.

This occasioning of 'knowledge' as a differentiating factor between the 'faithful' and the (rest of the) 'people' is not a one-off feature within Nektarios' sermon. Next, he embarks on a lengthy exploitation of the premium value placed within secular and liberal discourses on (empirical) 'knowledge' in order to defend what is commonly treated within such discourses as the very antithesis of (empirical) 'knowledge' (i.e. religious dogma). Nektarios, managing his hearable stake (Edwards & Potter, 1992) in advancing a dogmatically 'interested' position, resorts to the deployment of an empiricist—*quasi-medical*—repertoire (Potter, 1996). His mobilizing calls are embellished with terminology particular to the discursive universe of medicine. He 'recommends[2]' Holy Communion, with the verb chosen reminding the relevant speech act normatively undertaken by doctors (line 6); he calls the faithful to 'prove[3]' empirically the veracity of religious dogma (lines 6, 9); he equates 'impiety' with viral disease (line 6); he describes Holy Communion as 'the best vaccine for any illness' (line 12); and, finally, he invokes the imagery of a quasi-longitudinal medical study through an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) and a list construction (Jefferson, 1990): 'for 2,000 years now' clerics have been taking Holy Communion by using the same utensil and 'nobody has contracted leprosy, AIDS, tuberculosis or any other disease'.

Invocations of knowledge and knowledge-based identities do important rhetorical work for the speaker and work also effectively at an ideological plane. While doctrinal faith, from the Enlightenment onwards, has been typically associated in liberal thinking with metaphors of 'blinded-ness' and lack of empirical grounding (Billig et al., 1988), in Nektarios' talk, it is transformed to a knowledge-based domain. In this way, charges of irrationality voiced within public discourse are deflected or re-directed to the secular, infidel, panic-mongering critics and the un-knowledgeable 'people' prone to panic. With the same token, an act of positioning is intricately executed for Nektarios' audience; speaking from a position of a (claimed) spiritual authority, he prescribes the outmost criterion for being positioned within the community of the 'faithful': they should not fear contagion. As mentioned above, the rhetorical strand within the SCT research on leadership literature provides ample evidence of leaders' claims to represent a common ingroup in order to pursue political agendas. In this extract, Nektarios emphatically positions himself within the 'faithful' ingroup in order to mobilize his audiences to (keep) participating into Eucharist. However, as our analysis of his intricate rhetoric indicates, this ingroup positioning is part only of his overall social influence enterprise. It is Nektarios' (re)constitution

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[2]'Συνιστώ' in Greek.

[3]'Αποδείξουμε' in Greek.

of the contextual meaning of the category 'faithful' as a 'knowledge-based' category and the ensuing identity positioning of 'us the faithful' as 'knowledgeable' that brings off his mobilizing call.

a. Establishing the civic mindedness of the CoG and prescribing the individual, civic responsibility of churchgoers

As indicated, direct calls for participation in Holy Communion through pronouncements of doctrinal faith were rare within our data. Situated within a context of rising public criticism, the rhetoric was more defensive. Indeed, the most prominent pattern within the clerics' media discourse entailed a twin-forked argument. On the one hand, they engaged in the descriptive establishment of the CoG as civic minded, cooperating with State authorities and placing premium value on public health. On the other hand, they would attend to the accountability for the CoG's insistence on the continuation of Eucharist by invoking and prescribing the personal responsibility and civic mindedness of the churchgoers. Mitigated mobilization calls for participation would typically follow only after such pre-emptive rhetoric was unfolded. Extract 3 is indicative in that respect. This comes from a telephone interview with the Bishop of Patras Chrysostomos, broadcasted on live morning TV.

Extract 3

1	B.P.C.	Look, the Church has always cooperated with the competent services[4] and so
2		have we over here with the regional ((office)) and the competent officials[5] in
3		order to deal with this situation. And of course, in any case, as I also wrote about
4		in a text of mine, panic is the worst possible councillor. And of course, we
5		recommend everyone to be careful and those of a vulnerable age also, because
6		indeed this issue, as any illness, is a serious matter and pertains to a person's
7		health. But as you understand, since you referred before to the coming Sunday,
8		which is the Orthodoxy Sunday, but in any other case also, <u>it is not</u> possible for
9		the Churches not to have Liturgies and to be closed or for the Holy Communion
10		not to be given to people. This is a sine qua non, it is necessary for the Churches
11		to hold Liturgies and they will
		[…]
12	Jnl.	But is it safe? Because faith is one thing and health is another because –because
13		the elder people are part of the vulnerable groups-
14	B.P.C.	Listen to me, listen to me. In all cases, I told you, we recommend to people with
15		health problems to be careful. And for the sanitary regulations to be followed.
16		And this we always take care to be understood in every case. What I have to
17		stress, because there is too much talk about attending Liturgy and the Holy
18		Communion, is that whoever believes that the Holy Communion and the
19		Church mean life, they have nothing to be afraid of. It is a matter of faith and
20		participation in the sacramental life of the Church, which is a life mystery.
21		Christ is life.

(*Bishop of Patras Chrysostomos, 06/03/2020, Open TV*)

The argumentative pattern evidenced in Extract 3 is indicative of a wealth of material within our data. A doctrinal statement, mobilizing for participation in Eucharist surfaces here also (lines 14–21).

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[4] 'Αρμόδιες υπηρεσίες' in Greek.

[5] 'Αρμοδίους' in Greek.

However, it only comes after a prolonged sequence (lines 1–7, 14–16) in which the Bishop constructs, through a series of extreme case formulations, a reasonable, civic-minded outlook for the CoG. This is the outlook of a socially responsible institution that 'always co-operated' (line 1) with secular authorities; that 'of course' (line 3) recognizes that 'panic' constitutes a problem; that 'of course' (line 4) partakes in the propagation to the population of the message that 'everyone' (line 4) ought to be 'careful'; and 'indeed' (line 5) treats the COVID outbreak as a 'serious matter' (line 6). The CoG emerges as a rational partner to State authorities. At the face of the public criticism of the CoG, it is the common *national* in-groupness between State authorities and CoG that is invoked here: the CoG partakes to an intra-national alliance with a mission: to keep the population safe.

As in the previous extract, a contrast is set up here between the rational, calm, caring and responsible stance of the CoG and the secular 'panic-spreading public critics making a demand for the churches to be closed, for the suspension of Liturgies and for the 'Holy Communion not to be given to people'. Resembling the Archbishop's discourse in Extract 1, the Bishop of Patras adopts a syntax of hegemony (Billig, 1995), treating such proposals as *self-evidently* ('as you understand', line 7) out of question. Indeed, in his response to the journalist's raising of safety concerns, the Bishop constructs the practices and choices made by *individual* church goers as hazardous and *not* the institutional/ritual practices of the CoG. For the latter, the Bishop reserves transcendental assurance: faith guarantees safety. Surfacing at this junction of the interview, this pronouncement of doctrine works as a formulaic expression or a common *topos* (Billig, 1991), designed, interactionally, to close-off an argument. Evidently, any argumentative juxtaposition to it would necessitate a full-blown take on Christian-Orthodox doctrine on behalf of the media journalist—a position hardly available and hardly ever taken up within mainstream media nowadays in Greece (Βασιλάκη & Σουβλής, 2021).

In terms of positioning choreography, this extract starts with the Bishop's claim to the identity of a law-abiding, co-operating with secular authorities, leader of a powerful institution. This position is complemented by an implicit identity claim as a caring leader, who is enough scientifically minded as to think in terms of age-related vulnerability in health issues and population prevention policies. The invocation of such identity positions pertaining to civic-mindedness, opens the way for further positioning work: the Bishop, on the one hand, adopts the position of a powerful institutional leader, informing the national public, as well as the overhearing government, of what is the bottom-line in the CoG's political negotiation over pandemic measures; on the other hand, he adopts the position of a spiritual and doctrinal authority, bestowed with the power of making transcendental claims about the (lack of) hazard in crowded churches. Both these identity positions instantiate a specific orientation to the context of his talk: the political and spiritual authority and responsibility of the CoG over matters of national interest. The hegemonic position of the CoG within the Greek polity both affords and is reiterated through such rhetorical enterprises, substantiating claims to speaking on behalf of the 'national we' (Billig, 1995; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

In the following extract, the rhetoric of civic mindedness couples with a claim to rationality through the dispelling of superstitions or 'magic'. The speaker, Bishop of Peiraeus Seraphim, is interviewed on national television.

Extract 4

1	B.P.S.	yes, look, faith and the church are not a magical space. No magical things
2		happen there. What happens is free communions of God with Man. That
3		is what happens. Who could possibly know, what the background of those
4		people was? Or how exactly happened all this process of the transmission of the
5		disease? Or how -who is responsible for this affair? Whether it was somebody
6		in the airplane or in the airport or anywhere? In the Church things are not
7		working magically and of course, the Holy Synod has stated it that the
8		people who have -vulnerable groups, people who have underlying diseases, they

9	should be careful. Indeed, even somebody having a simple flu, a simple
10	gastroenteritis, they should not attend any assembly because they would
11	transmit it. This is another thing; and a different thing is the participation in the
12	unsullied rites. We should not confuse these things, we should not homogenize
13	them, because this is a mistake. Do you understand?

(*Bishop of Peiraeus Seraphim, 10/03/2020, Open TV*)

In this extract, the rationality of the CoG is claimed by *invoking-and-disavowing* superstitious, deficient lay understandings of doctrine. It comes after an exchange in which the journalist hosting the interview inquired about something that attracted much media coverage on that early phase of the pandemic in Greece: the discovery, upon their return, that many Greek pilgrims to Jerusalem had contracted COVID-19.

The extract starts with the Bishop setting up a contrast: on the one side resides the (disavowed) view that faith and the church work magically, shielding the faithful from the virus; on the other, the doctrinal position that in 'faith' and 'church' what occurs is 'free communions of God with Man'. This argument, effectively, counters the much circulating, at the time, ironic commentary within social media, that underscored the connection between the spread of the virus and religious practice. For the Bishop, the irrationality of magical thinking is contrasted (lines 3–6) with the scientifically sounding rhetoric of indeterminacy (see list construction, lines 3–6) as regards to the exact conditions of the pilgrims' infection. Complementing this rationally discerned, indeterminacy of causes of viral transmission, comes the argument emphasizing the civic mindedness and rationality of the Holy Synod: churchgoers should take reasonable individual precautions.

The 'rational identity' work performed here is evidently tuned into managing the CoG's accountability. One remarkable feature of the Bishop's account is his trading on a currency of liberal values. We argue that he capitalizes, rhetorically, on classic liberalism when stressing (line 2) the 'free' nature of the 'communion' of 'God with Man'. This 'freedom' argument matches well with the individual responsibility advocated by the CoG as a general guideline for COVID 19. Indeed, it matches well, also, with the more general policy directions adopted by the neoliberal right-wing government in Greece for addressing the contingencies of the pandemic (Alexopoulou & Pavli, 2021; Markantonatou, 2021). This mixing of contrasting ideological resources in the Bishop's rhetoric entails also ideologically hybrid positioning work: he comes across both as a rational, scientifically and liberally minded civic leader as well as a religious leader with unwavering doctrinal faith.

Let us now draw attention to the concluding part of the extract where the Bishop sets up a contrast between the physical aspects of 'assembly' and the metaphysical dimensions of the 'unsullied rites'. His 'we' formulation (line 12) indexicalizes, ostensibly, the collective subject of generalized TV audience watching the broadcast. We suggest that we witness here an attempt of an influential, prototypical member of the religious community to set up some form of ground rules, of acceptable ways of thinking and talking about the rite in line with particular identity norms. Moreover, we argue that this 'we' formulation also encompasses unmistaken *national* hues. Not only is the channel hosting the interview one of a national range, but of a national scope is also the didactic cum social influence enterprise undertaken, involved as it is in a struggle for hegemony at a nation-state level.

a. Managing accountability for participation through invocations of personal-as-spiritual responsibility

So far, we exemplified ways in which the theme of individual and civic responsibility was mobilized to do accountability work in clerics' discourse. A similar rhetorical trajectory was evidenced in the talk preceding the following extract. However, on this occasion, the deployment of the 'individual responsibility' theme led to a novel argumentative twist: one that takes a spiritual turn.

Extract 5

1	B.Ph.S.	Paul the Apostle: 'But let a man examine himself and then let him eat of that
2		bread and drink of that cup'. Everybody, he says, ought to examine themselves
3		and then to proceed to the common chalice and to receive communion the body
4		and blood of Christ. 'For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and
5		drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause
6		there are many weak and sickly among you, and many sleep'. For our church
7		the problem is <u>how</u> one receives communion. Not what they receive - what they
8		receive is Christ. Both for the worthy and the unworthy. Even Judas at Last
9		Super he received Christ. But he betrayed (.) our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore,
10		whoever worthily receives communion, has nothing to be afraid of. Whoever
11		receives communion with a clear consciousness and under the conditions
12		prescribed by the church. ((But)) whoever receives communion having inside
13		them malice, filth, ((bad)) thoughts, hate, vices, stabbing their brother, whoever
14		comes to communion without humiliation, without a sense of unworthiness,
15		without a sense that I am not worthy to receive the Body and the Blood of Christ,
16		they, even if there was no coron- how you s- coronavirus, even if there are no
17		viruses and epidemics, they pose themselves in danger of illness and disease.
18		This is my response.

(*Bishop of Phthiotis Symeon, 07/03/2020, LamiaNow.gr*)

Bishop Symeon's argumentation presented here is hardly typical within our corpus of data.[6] However, we prefer to treat this non-typicality as an empirical, discursive finding rather than attribute it to idiosyncrasies of the Bishop's personal, intellectual or theological constitution or to in principle un-chartable conversational contingencies. Let us follow his reasoning.

The extract starts with the Bishop keeping the conversational floor for an extension of his turn, through a 'recitation' from 'Paul the Apostle'. The invocation of perhaps the most authoritative figure in Christian iconography and literature (Dunn, 2003) works here as a *prolepsis* (Billig, 1991) managing potential obnoxious inferences that could be drawn from his forthcoming talk. Indeed, managing his and the CoG's rhetorical stake through such an authoritative and luminous distant footing (Potter, 1996) alerts us, analytically, as to the heightened accountability of what is to follow. What follows is indeed a potentially highly contestable position within the specific, at the time, context of the public and media debates in Greece. Practically, the Bishop complements the well-rehearsed emphasis on personal-as-*civic* responsibility of the churchgoers, with an emphasis on its *spiritual* dimension. The message he relays, drawing on Paul the Apostle, is that *the* sine qua non condition for the safety of people participating in Eucharist is their spiritual 'worthiness'. 'They pose themselves in danger of illness and disease' not because of their physical exposure to the hazards of 'what' they receive, because 'what they receive is Christ'. Therefore, were the participants to the rite of Eucharist to find themselves infected, even after having practiced all prescribed 'personal-as-civic-responsibility' precautions, they should look no further than their own spiritual constitution for establishing a cause to their plight. It would be their spiritual unworthiness that rendered them doctrinally culpable and therefore amenable to divine punishment. In a certain way, the logic underpinning this argument resembles the 'truth-will-out device' (TWOD) identified by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) as characteristic of scientists' accounts on the operation of science. According to these researchers, when the empiricist and contingent repertoire were deployed in close proximity by scientists within their talk, the TWOD was mobilized to re-affirm the *dominance* of the empiricist repertoire and assert the status of Science. Similarly, perhaps, the 'spiritual worthiness' device in

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[6]Within our corpus, we have identified two more occasions, much more subtle and nuanced, in which a similar argumentation was played out.

Bishop Symeon's talk comes to affirm the rhetorical and ideological dominance of a 'transcendence/metaphysics' mode of accounting over a 'civic or worldly' one in the clerics' discourse. However, the Catch-22 (Heller, 1961) quality of this reasoning is evident, one would allege, not only to us, as overhearing analysts, but also to the ratified addressees (Goffman, 1979) of the Bishop (i.e. the generalized audience of mainstream media in Greece). Perhaps, this is the reason why, despite the fact that it constitutes an obvious *literary* resource for well-versed in Biblical literature, high-ranking clerics of the CoG, it does not transpire as a frequently oriented to *argumentative* resource in our data set. The broader, at the time, controversy over the CoG's position *vis-à-vis* the continuation of Eucharist posed a serious and rather uncommon challenge to its ideologically domineering position within Greek society. At such a political 'conjuncture' (Grossberg, 2019), securing hegemony entailed for the CoG rhetoric the stressing of a 'national in-group outlook' that would appease the civic-minded, worried and moderately religious part of the public. We suggest that such hegemonic needs relegated, within our data, the 'spiritual worthiness' argument to silence or to the realm of the unsaid (Murray & Durrheim, 2019).

DISCUSSION

This article examined rhetorical processes implicated in ways in which leaders mobilize followers to engage in risky behaviours and extends the existing literature on leadership and risk in important ways.

First, few studies, to the best of our knowledge, examine the intersection between leadership and mobilization in potentially harmful behaviours. Second, it is the first study that does so through a discursive perspective. A methodological limitation of existing approaches to risk and leadership is their predominant focus on cognitive dimensions of social influence, exploring cognitive/behavioural consequences of salient social identities (Cruwys et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2020). Their useful insights notwithstanding, those studies' methodological predilections do not allow them to explore mediating communication processes and how diverse social identities are rendered rhetorically relevant by group members to perform the discursive functions of justifying and legitimizing the uptake of particular behaviours. Similarly, the rhetorical perspective on leadership, despite being attuned to language use (Reicher & Haslam, 2017), does not examine leaders' personal and institutional accountability concerns and how they manage situated and distal ideological dilemmas when encouraging followers' engagement in potentially harmful behaviours. Through its methodological attunement, our analysis addresses precisely that gap: we showed that religious leaders only rarely directly called for their followers to participate in the potentially risky ritual. Rather, usually they invoked a range of non-religious identities and positionings for themselves as representatives of a powerful institution in performing such calls.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on how spiritual leaders harness their credibility and influential capacities motivating community members to engage in health behaviours that mostly reduce risk (Adedini et al., 2018; Duff & Buckingham, 2015; Greyling et al., 2016). The findings reported across such studies are in line with and can be explained through recourse to social identity-based mechanisms of social influence (Cruwys et al., 2021; Hopkins & Reicher, 2021), regardless of the nature of the actions (risk-reducing or risk-enhancing). However, we report an analysis of a largely deviant case as it is risk-enhancing behaviours (from a public health perspective) that leaders of the CoG are promoting. However, from an emic perspective, leaders and followers of the CoG look as partaking in a ritual that is risk-reducing rather than risk-enhancing, despite scientific advice to avoid both congregations and spoon-sharing. A closer look at the leaders' discourse though shows that science-abiding and similar rhetorical tropes were mobilized precisely to legitimize the appropriateness of calls to participation and at a more distal level to reproduce religious dogma. Additionally, calls to participation as well as people's eagerness to partake in Eucharist are not unexpected when within the wider context of the power and influence that the CoG has historically enjoyed within Greek society over matters of social and political concern (Roudometof & Makrides, 2013). Previous studies have mostly focused on *political* leadership

(e.g. Haslam et al., 2022; Reicher & Haslam, 2017; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Considering, though, the centrality of religion and religious identities for large parts of the global population, our analysis demonstrates the diversity of rhetorical modalities and resources that *spiritual* leaders employ, which are not captured by previous analyses. It also demonstrates the need to situate such analyses within wider historical and sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

The wider point raised by our analysis relates to the complex nature of social life and individual and group-based (political) communication. Due to their methodological predilections, existing approaches offer a smoothed-out picture of how risk is communicated and how risky behaviours are mobilized. Moreover, leadership research, despite its interest in the *strategic* use of categories in language, disregards how leaders orient to local dilemmas of stake and wider ideological dilemmas inherent in particular cultures, and how they manage such dilemmas. Our analysis of leaders' rhetoric highlighted that the latter invoked far more than solely religious-based identities to mobilize religious-grounded behaviours from their respective audiences. Thus, what becomes apparent is that risk communication and mobilization cannot be treated simply as functions of salient shared social identities between leaders and followers. Rather, such processes are far more intricate and involve leaders operating as reflexive social actors, capable of mobilizing identity positions and rhetorical/ideological resources beyond those that could be identified as 'salient social identities' from a more traditional social psychological perspective. Regarding the question of the *strategic* dimension of category use through discourse, we adopt a—broadly speaking—post-structuralist discourse analytic perspective (Potter, 1996; Wetherell, 1998). Therefore, while we comment upon strategic elements of the discourse we analyse, we prefer not to endorse a sharp contrast between 'strategic' and 'normative' understandings of the action orientation of talk. Rather, we prefer to treat talk in interaction as discursive occasions instantiating strategies without, necessarily, insinuating the existence of strategists masterminding interactional particularities.

Limitations and future research

Our work presents various limitations. First, data were collected only on a very specific time point and has not explored how CoG leaders' rhetoric might have evolved throughout the course of the pandemic. Second, the data set concerned speeches delivered on media, and thus, we cannot be certain regarding whether similar arguments were brought forward during Sunday congregations. Third, our analysis only focuses on leaders' argumentation and does not consider how such arguments might have been received by audiences. Future research may adopt ethnography, implementing perhaps observational or focus-group sessions and explore how followers react to leaders' calls and whether the rhetoric deployed by leaders is endorsed by followers when they negotiate their participation in such practices.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Evangelos Ntontis: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Nikos Bozatzis:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Vasiliki Kokkini:** Data curation; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Evangelos Ntontis has been an associate editor in the journal since 1 January 2023. However, this article was submitted before his term as associate editor started. Additionally, the review process was entirely handled by a different editor. No other potential conflicts of interest exist with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No primary data were collected for the purposes of the analysis presented in this article. The data set comprises public talk that was available online. The set of transcripts (in Greek) have been uploaded on PsyArxiv and are available at https://osf.io/bnx2f/.

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