News coverage of Christian churches and other religious bodies dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic: An analysis of newspapers in German and English

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses how selected representatives of the German- and English-language opinion-based press have portrayed the role of Christian churches and other religious bodies in dealing with the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic through examining the use of quantitative and qualitative content, framing, and natural and cultural commonplaces. The results show that secular press publications present an image of Christian churches and other religious authorities as institutions collaborating with state authorities in combating the coronavirus pandemic. There is, however, a noted lack of press attention regarding the involvement of religious bodies in combating the pandemic effects through charity, solidarity, and even worship, however, limited or modified. These findings concern issues that are vital for the image analysis of religious bodies, since the results of press analysis can be used to assess the impact of a crisis situation on the image of Christian churches in the media as well as the relationship between political leaders and church leaders.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a number of changes in numerous areas of social and political life, including the religious aspect. David Herszenhorn and Sarah Wheaton, correspondents for The New York Times and Politico Europe noted that:

Europe, in early April (2020), remains the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic – where the outbreak, uncontrolled, morphed into catastrophe. Nearly 50,000 dead. More than 600,000 infected. And the devastation is far from over. (Herszenhorn and Wheaton 2020)

This paper undertakes to answer the question of how the secular media have been presenting actions taken by churches and religious bodies in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is the institutional dimension of religious bodies and their leaders that are analysed here and not the faith experience of individual believers.
The initial weeks of combating the virus were associated with a series of restrictions imposed on churches and consequent restrictions on worship. Health authorities, supported by guidelines provided by epidemiological institutions, pointed out the possible sanitary consequences of large liturgical gatherings and the implications of failing to maintain the necessary physical distance between the service attendees (Castaldo 2020, 177–178). State decisions to close religious temples did not cause the disappearance of religious life. Instead, it migrated into the space of private life (Pleysers 2020, 295–312).

The paper aims to assess how representatives of German- and English-speaking opinion-based press have been presenting the role of the Christian churches in combating the outcome of the coronavirus pandemic. The selected press titles were Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, The Guardian, The New York Times, and South China Morning Post, as these are considered to be among the most influential in forming a public opinion (Pérez 2015, 523–539; Mitnik, Freilich, and Chermak 2020, 161–185). The first weeks of the spread of the virus proved the willingness of ecclesiastical and secular authorities to cooperate. This attitude was expressed in the declarations of the religious leaders, who accepted the restrictions on worship or the complete closure of churches with respect and understanding (Berkmann 2020, 184–188, 198–200; Plüss 2020, 286–296). The clergy undertook many pastoral and charitable actions to assist those affected by the pandemic, such as providing psychological support, financial assistance for the unemployed and homeless, and help for the sick and lonely (Barker and Russell 2020, 867–868; Deguma et al. 2020, 363–374; Arruda 2020; 380–401).

2. Methodology and the field of the study

Titles from the German, British, American and Chinese press, which represent different geographical and political areas, were selected for the study. The selected titles include three that are representative of the opinion-based press from mature democracies, G8 countries (meaning they are among the most influential countries in the world), where freedom of the press and freedom of religion are important civil liberties, and one title that is representative of a country defined as an emerging economy (Pfeifer, Opitz, and Geis 2021, 485–502; Kavlin 2017). In Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, the total percentage of Protestants and Catholics exceeds 50% of the population (Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland 2018; Association of Religion Data Archives 2015a, 2015b).

On the other hand, the choice of a title from the Chinese press is linked to the first cases of coronavirus infection reported in the Middle Kingdom. However, it should be noted that members of Christian churches in China represent a small percentage of the population, only approximately 5%. Religious freedom in the Middle Kingdom is limited, due to the authoritarian political system. The state hinders church activity by forcing citizens to conform to the only acceptable ideology, one that glorifies the Communist Party, and that is in the long-term the biggest threat to Christians (Eleanor 2015). The first cases of the Covid-19 disease were reported in China, on 17 November 2019 (Scher 2020). A highly credible Hong Kong-based Chinese daily newspaper, The South China Morning Post, was selected for the research. The newspaper is critical of the Communist government of China and can be presumed to have performed its
news reporting function very well during the pandemic (Ho 2019; Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2019).

The present paper attempts to answer two main research questions:

1. How did the mainstream press, in the examples analysed here, portray the relationship between church authorities/religious leaders and state authorities in the context of combating the coronavirus?
2. How does the press portray the activities of church/religious bodies during the pandemic (active moral obligation to love one’s neighbour, for example, volunteering, helping the needy and the sick, ministry in hospitals, etc.; the celebration of the Word of God or the Eucharist with live-streaming?)

The article can be considered as filling the gap in the area of empirical research on relations between the state and the churches/religious bodies as well as in the area of mediatization of religion. The study is situated in the field of media studies, as well as political science. In the construction of the categorization key, the author indicated possible relations between the state and churches (cooperation vs. non-cooperation) and the basic areas of church activities (volunteering and charity; liturgy and sacraments) (Cf. Koesel 2014; Koesel 2017; Goldewijk 2007).

The research methodology makes use two key concepts: framing analysis and the concept of common places (topoi). Robert Entman, American political researcher and media expert, understands the ‘framing’ concept as ‘selecting and highlighting some facts of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution’ (Entman 2003, 417; Cf. Entman 1993, 51–58). On the other hand, Jörg Matthes notes that, in the studies of journalism and mass communication, the ‘frame analysis has become a lively and important methodology. In essence, frame analysis examines the selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages’ (Matthes 2009, 349).

Aristotle (1991, 45) defined topós as a ‘location or space in an art where a speaker [or writer] can look for available means of persuasion’. Piotr Studnicki notes that, in the communicological context, topós should be treated as ‘the common place where the author of the text seeks to meet the readers. It concerns the ideas which are taken for granted and on which the author and the readers usually agree; they serve the journalist as a reasoning premise and as a base in argumentation’ (Studnicki 2018, 153). The term topós derives from a geographical metaphor that indicates the location of rhetorical performance, and literally means ‘place’, since the mental image of the event site is intended to facilitate a recollection of the themes appropriate to that site (Cedillo 2011, 2; González Gaitano 2010, 43–46). Topoi can be divided into natural (anthropological) and cultural (ideological). The former are understood as elements which are consciously or unconsciously deeply rooted in common human nature, and, as such, they apply to all people. The latter, on the other hand, examines the way human nature is represented in cultural spaces in different historical epochs (Studnicki 2018, 153–154). In researching the image of churches and religious bodies in their institutional dimension as presented by the media, the framing analysis method and topoi as
a tool for news analysis are used, to a greater or lesser extent, by such authors as Giovanni Tridente (2009), Maciej Szczepaniak (2004), Norberto González Gaitano (2010), Terézia Rončáková (2012, 457–484) and Piotr Studnicki (2016).

Two primary dimensions of analysis are highlighted:

1. The image in the press of relations between church/religious authorities and state authorities in the context of the coronavirus pandemic;
2. The portrayal in the press of the activities undertaken by Christian churches/religious organisations in the context of the pandemic (carrying out the active moral obligation to love one’s neighbour, through, for example, volunteering, helping the needy and the sick, ministry in hospitals, etc.; the celebration of Word of God and the Eucharist with live-streaming).

The paper is descriptive and based on the results of content analysis. The following research hypothesis has been formulated:

Members of the German- and English-speaking opinion press (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, The Guardian, The New York Times, South China Morning Post) presented Christian churches (and, in the case of SCMP, non-Christian religious bodies) as institutions that cooperated with state authorities with a view to combating the pandemic. They respected state authorities’ decisions regarding sanitary restrictions (closing religious temples, no worship, implementing protective measures such as masks, gloves, social distancing). The image of churches and religious bodies in the analysed press titles highlights their involvement in charitable work during the pandemic and in worship while observing the sanitary restrictions imposed. It should also be emphasized that in this work, in place of the formerly used term ‘quality press’, the following were used: ‘opinion-based press’, ‘opinion press’, ‘opinion-forming press’.

The unit of press study analysis in the undertaken research is one press text. Single items (journalistic texts) are news or opinion texts (editorials). The number of coders was limited to the author of the text. In the research undertaken, every methodological effort was made to take into account both internal and external validity according to the theory of Klaus Krippendorff. As the German media expert notes, using Donald Campbell’s research:

Internal validity is best designated by the term “reliability” while external validity may be considered “validity” proper. When assessing the reliability of a method of analysis one assesses the degree to which variations in results reflect true variations in data as opposed to extraneous variations stemming from the circumstances of the analysis. (Krippendorff 1980, 71–72)

The research material consists of articles published on websites belonging to the afore-mentioned opinion-forming newspapers: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, The Guardian, The New York Times and The South China Morning Post. Search engines located on the websites of these papers were used. The online editions of the texts analysed were not identical to the texts published in printed versions of the newspapers. However, an assumption was made that the editorial line of the printed versions of opinion-based press titles coincides with their electronic editions, as far as important issues concerning the public agenda are concerned.
The place of text publication (electronic environment vs. print editions) bears no relevance to the research undertaken in the process of verifying the research hypotheses. The websites of the opinion-forming daily newspapers were more easily accessible and guaranteed the completeness of the research material. The research concentrated on qualitative content analysis. The text selection criterion was the presence in the text of at least one of the following keywords in any grammatical form: ‘pandemic’, ‘coronavirus’, ‘Covid-19’, in conjunction with at least one of the following words/phrases: ‘clergyman’, ‘priest’, ‘pastor’, ‘order’, ‘nun’, ‘bishop’, ‘church’, ‘religion’, ‘religious institution’, ‘religious association’. Therefore, publications classified as research material were those that presented Christian churches in the context of the pandemic (in the case of the SCMP, non-Christian religious bodies were included). The material was scanned for the accidental use of keywords in texts that were not thematically related to the press research conducted, and these texts were discarded from the research sample.

The timeframe of the research spanned 4 months, beginning from the first day on which a case of coronavirus infection was officially reported in the country under analysis. For China it was 17 November 2019; for the United States 22 January 2020; for Germany 27 January 2020; and for the United Kingdom 31 January 2020 (Stokes et al. 2020, 760; Pullano et al. 2020; Coronavirus: Two cases confirmed in UK. 2020). This timeframe was considered sufficiently long to expect the appearance of opinion press publications on the position of churches or religious leaders on the issue of sanitary restrictions imposed by the state, as well as press representations of ecclesiastical institutions/religious organisations undertaking various forms of spiritual and material activities in support of the society.

In total, the research sample comprises 409 press publications, with 82 texts in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 91 texts in The Guardian, 169 texts in The New York Times and 67 texts in the South China Morning Post.

### 3. Analysis of the frames

One dominant frame was identified in each press text. Secondary frames were omitted. Table 1 depicts the mainframes distinguished in the research sample along with the number

| Frames | FAZ | The Guardian | NYT | SCMP | Total |
|--------|-----|--------------|-----|------|-------|
| Sanitary rules imposed by competent state authorities and respected by religious institutions | 29 | 23 | 57 | 13 | 122 (30%) |
| Restrictions on worship and public religious activity | 24 | 16 | 33 | 13 | 86 (21%) |
| Dialogue and joint initiatives run by ecclesiastical and governmental authorities | 6 | 7 | 25 | 8 | 46 (11%) |
| Online sacraments and liturgies | 5 | 10 | 18 | 4 | 37 (9%) |
| Fanaticism (denialism of the pandemic) | 2 | 2 | 7 | 17 | 28 (7%) |
| Conflict between political and religious authorities (clericalism, secularism) | 7 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 25 (6%) |
| Social activities promoted by religions | 4 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 18 (4%) |
| Other | 5 | 19 | 19 | 4 | 47 (12%) |
| Total | 82 | 91 | 169 | 67 | 409 (100%) |

Source: own compilation.
of publications in which they were found. There is also the ‘Other’ category, to which other interpretative frames were assigned that do not match any of the indicated categories, as well as those publications where it is difficult to distinguish the dominant frame.

The majority of frames identified in the press publications projected a positive image of religion and highlighted explicitly the cooperation between church and state authorities. These frames include sanitary rules imposed by competent state authorities and respected by churches and religious institutions; restrictions on worship and public religious activities; dialogue and joint initiatives between ecclesiastical and government authorities; social activities promoted by religions; online liturgies and sacraments (i.e. which reached the recipient through media broadcast). Other frames were also found, ones that project a negative image of religion, for example, fanaticism (denial of the pandemic), the conflict between political and religious authorities. These were in texts that highlighted or distinguished the lack of cooperation between church and state authorities.

The two most frequent frames found in the press material were ‘sanitary rules imposed by competent state authorities and respected by churches and religious institutions’, and ‘dialogue and joint initiatives run by ecclesiastical and governmental authorities’. These frames were dominant in a total of 254 texts, representing more than 62% of the publications analysed. Ecclesiastical institutions were presented in the context of the most important rules in force during the pandemic: social distancing, wearing masks, hand disinfection, unconditional social isolation, as well as practical consequences for places of worship, such as limitations on the number of participants at religious assemblies, or temporary closure of churches.

The frame analysis results are organised in the context of the formulated research hypothesis by a specially arranged categorisation key. The mainframes distinguished in the qualitative analysis, relating to the key categories, were assigned to individual categories of both studied characteristics (see Tables 2 and 3).

3.1. Categorisation key

3.1.1. Examined characteristic: relations between church and state authorities

Definition of the characteristic being examined: how the press portrayed the mutual relations of churches/religious organisations and state authorities while combating the pandemic

Categories within the examined characteristic:

1. Cooperation: cooperation of church and state authorities in the fight against the pandemic (churches and religious bodies respecting sanitary rules imposed by

| Press title/category | Total | Cooperation | No cooperation | Other |
|----------------------|-------|-------------|----------------|-------|
| FAZ                  | 82    | 63 (77%)    | 9 (11%)        | 10 (12%)|
| The Guardian         | 91    | 53 (58%)    | 9 (10%)        | 29 (32%)|
| NYT                  | 169   | 122 (72%)   | 11 (7%)        | 36 (21%)|
| SCMP                 | 67    | 38 (57%)    | 24 (36%)       | 5 (7%) |
| Total                | 409   | 276 (67%)   | 53 (13%)       | 80 (20%)|

Source: own compilation.
Number of publications assigned to individual categories (percentage share in brackets).
competent state authorities, including social isolation, social distancing, wearing masks, disinfecting hands; sanitary restrictions on leading worship and public religious activity, such as accepting limited numbers of attendees in churches or closing temples altogether; online liturgies; dialogue and joint initiatives run by ecclesiastical and governmental authorities to combat the pandemic)

2. Non-cooperation: church authorities do not cooperate with state authorities in the fight against the pandemic (for example, the clergy’s ‘fanaticism/denialism’ demonstrated by questioning the presence of the virus; clergy’s lack of acceptance of limits imposed on the number of the faithful present in churches or closure of churches; conflict between church and state authorities in connection with the imposed restrictions or strategies to combat the pandemic)

3. Other: a text does not refer to the characteristic examined, or it is difficult to assess it (for example, it is only informative in nature, specifies the number of new cases or deaths resulting from virus infection; provides numbers of infected clergymen, etc.).

3.1.2. Examined characteristic: church activity during the pandemic

Definition of the characteristic being examined: the area of involvement of the Church highlighted by the press during the pandemic

Categories within the examined characteristic:

1. Volunteering and acts of charity: direct ministry among the sick, founded on the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour; activities in hospitals, nursing homes, Caritas, etc;

2. Liturgy and sacraments: means of rendering supernatural assistance to communities affected by the coronavirus (preaching; sacraments; spiritual direction; religious education; online and in-person retreats while respecting applicable sanitary safety requirements);

3. None: a text portrays religious leaders who are only concerned with their own personal benefits, highlights financial losses suffered by ecclesiastical institutions due to the lockdown, etc. Thus, churches are presented as institutions indifferent to the needs of others and focused exclusively on themselves;

4. Other: a text does not explicitly refer to the characteristic examined.

The conducted analysis clearly shows that in the framework of the characteristic ‘Relations between church and state authorities’, the average percentage of publications
classified as indicating ‘cooperation’ amounts to 67%, with the highest share in FAZ and NYT (77% and 72%, respectively), and The Guardian (58%), with SCMP (57%) being below average. These seem to be significant percentage differences, although statistical analysis should be conducted in order to verify their significance; however, this is not the subject of interest in the research undertaken by the author. Simultaneously, taking into account the fact that, among the titles analysed, the greatest number (as much as 36%) of the press texts falling into the ‘no cooperation’ category were found in the Chinese periodical, we can clearly see the image of ecclesiastical institutions as lacking empathy and cooperating only to the least extent with the state authorities in the fight against the pandemic. It seems that one of the key reasons for projecting such an image in the South China Morning Post is the extensive coverage of the position of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, one that questions the veracity of the pandemic narrative, refuses to observe the limit of the faithful present in the temples, and also opposes the restrictions and security rules (Chan-Kyong 2020a; Chan-Kyong 2020b; Lau 2020a). This is why the pages of the SCMP include statements by celebrities and representatives of the South Korean reality TV competition series K-pop, who deny any links with the Shincheonji church:

As South Korea battles with the coronavirus, rumours have surfaced that some K-pop stars and celebrities are affiliated with the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a cult linked to a massive surge in infections in the country. Health authorities have confirmed that a large number of Covid-19 infections occurred during Shincheonji services, and many people who came into close contact with those who attended them have also contracted the virus. K-pop stars and actors who have been linked to the cult are now fighting back against the rumours. Singers Ivy and Gummy expressed outrage at allegations that they were Shincheonji members (...). Singer Tei also denied a similar rumour, saying he had to postpone opening his new burger eatery because a group of Shincheonji members had been holding meetings nearby. “My employees and I are unable to choose an opening date because of them. Please don’t make ill use of the coronavirus to spread fake news. It’s not at all funny.” K-pop star Chungha, who has been in self quarantine after returning from Milan Fashion Week last month, said: “I think there’s a misconception that I’m a Shincheonji member. My staff and I don’t have any connection or affiliation with it.” (Yeon-Soo 2020)

In The Guardian, Richard Luscombe reports the example of the attitude of Catholic Church denialism, and even fanaticism, represented in the United States by the group of theologians and clergy dubbed as ‘Easter People’:

An open letter to Catholic bishops calling for public mass and access to the holy sacraments is gaining traction online, pushed by a newly-formed group of theologians and ministers calling itself the Easter People. (Luscombe 2020)

As far as the British and American daily papers are concerned, a low percentage of texts classified as ‘no cooperation’ (10% and 7%, respectively) was found, which consequently results in a much more positive image of churches and their leaders understanding the need to cooperate with political leaders for the common good (dpa 2020a; Deckers and Jansen 2020; McCaulley 2020).

The American newspaper The New York Times sees fruitful cooperation between church and state authorities as resulting from the way religious leaders understand what it means to belong to an ecclesiastical community. The text titled ‘A Sunday
without Church: In Crisis, a Nation Asks, “What is community?” by Elizabeth Dias exemplifies this attitude. The meaning of the existence of Christian communities cannot be narrowed down to just worship, which was suspended or limited during the pandemic. Dias emphasizes the fraternal bonds of the church community at Oberlin Road in Raleigh, supported by the testimony of its members, including the 60-year-old leader of the church council:

Roxie Floyd, 60, chairs the church council and has been making sure the phone tree runs smoothly. “Each elderly person in the church gets a call at least every two days, she said. The tradition of caring for one another goes back to 1865, when free people of color started the congregation. Jim Crow didn’t stop our church, the 60s didn’t stop our church, race riots didn’t stop our church, lynching didn’t stop our church,” she said. “It gives you a strength and hardening of character to weather storms, that we will persevere through the worst times and come out on the other side stronger.” (Dias 2020)

In this community, the author also noted the activity of a church group present on Facebook that remains available to the elderly and ailing:

“Need someone to watch your kids so you can go to work?” it said. “Need someone to pick up groceries, medicine, home supplies, etc.? Need someone to help you find free food? Need something else?”

“We’re young, currently healthy people with relatively flexible schedules,” it said. “Please call, text, or email us.” (Dias 2020)

The question of security rules implemented in German churches is widely commented on by Reinhard Bingener and Tobias Rößmann, in the pages of FAZ. The journalists highlight the prevailing attitude of Catholic Church leaders’ understanding and adaptation to state-imposed restrictions (Bingener 2020b; Rößmann 2020b; Rößmann 2020c). On the other hand, however, the German Church, which basically lives off the church tax, is presented as an institution that is worried about financial losses inflicted by the pandemic:

Die katholischen Bistümer und evangelischen Landeskirchen rechnen wegen der Corona-Krise mit Verlusten an Kirchensteuer und anderen Einnahmen. Der Finanzdirektor des Bistums Mainz, Christof Molitor, befürchtet nach eigenen Worten einen „massiven Rückgang des Kirchensteueraufkommens “und einen zusätzlichen Fehlbetrag zwischen 50 und 60 Millionen Euro.” (Rößmann 2020a)

In turn, while analysing the ‘Church activity during the pandemic’ characteristic, it is worth noting that the issues of volunteering and charitable activities of churches were treated marginally by all analysed press titles. In total, only 18 out of 409 texts addressed this issue. As an example, it is worth mentioning the article titled ‘The Guardian view on closed churches: a necessary sacrifice’ published by the British daily newspaper, presenting the expectations regarding the involvement of churches and religious bodies in social activities during the pandemic:

As churches celebrate the Paschal mysteries behind closed doors, there has been some concern that, in countries such as Britain, coronavirus might finish off the job that decades of western secularisation began. Religious observance is a habit as well as an affirmation of faith; habits, once interrupted, are sometimes hard to resume. Given the work done by people of faith in helping the homeless, running food banks and
channelling vital aid overseas, it is to be hoped that such fears are groundless. There is already evidence to suggest that they are. A study has found that as the pandemic spread last month, Google searches for the word ‘prayer’ boomed across 75 countries, dwarfing anything previously seen in data going back to 2004. In Britain, online streaming of services from churches has generated virtual congregations far bigger than the numbers of those previously attending in person. A similar pattern is being observed in Jewish synagogues. Isolation seems to be breeding the opposite of spiritual apathy. Britain’s churches, mosques and synagogues must continue to play their part in helping the country through this ordeal, as they will do this weekend. The idea of sacrifice lies at the heart of the Christian meaning of Easter. On a gloriously sunny bank holiday weekend, staying at home will be a necessary sacrifice for all of us to make. (Guardian Staff 2020)

Such a press image of churches, which ignores their commitment to the practical implementation of the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour, can be explained, in the author’s opinion, by several factors. Firstly, the press titles analysed do not have a religious profile and, consequently, churches are treated in the same way as other institutions, being perceived through the prism of the criteria of information selection used in media studies. Taking into account the news values (newsworthiness) theory elaborated by Galtung and Ruge and its subsequent modifications, the ordinary, daily church activity of volunteering and charity is ‘unattractive’ for the media (Stijn, Ansgard, and Wöhlert 2016, 5–28). Secondly, the processes of religious content mediatisation in the contemporary online and popular culture mean that various institutions and entities will adapt to the logic of the media, and then their activity will become highlighted or ignored by the media themselves (Knoblauch 2014, 143–158). The assistance offered by churches is selfless, and church institutions are usually not interested in publicising it in the media (Soetevent 2005, 2301–2323). Thirdly, the perception of religion by opinion-forming press titles is significantly influenced by the dominant ideas of postmodern philosophy and post-truth, which shape the contemporary media discourse, including the discourse on ecclesiastical institutions (McIntyre 2018, 63–87; Waisbord 2018, 1866–1878). Fourthly, contemporary processes of secularisation, manifested, among others, by concepts of the privatisation of religion, may result in a media agenda that marginalises the coverage of voluntary and charitable activities undertaken by churches and religious organisations (Luckmann 2003, 275–285).

4. Analysis of the natural common places

The analysis of seven distinguished frames in the context of the relationship between churches and state authorities, as well as the activity of ecclesiastical institutions during the epidemic, made it possible to identify nine natural common places (topoi) related to human nature and reflecting different dimensions and features of behaviour and attitudes of representatives of churches and religious bodies while combating the pandemic. One dominant natural topós was assigned to each newspaper text (See Table 4).

Among the natural topoi highlighted above, those occurring most frequently are (1) responsibility for human life, (2) common good, (3) moral obligation to love one’s neighbour. They constituted the basis of argumentation for a total of 333 texts, that is,
more than 81% of the research sample. Let us attempt to analyse the most frequent common places.

### 4.1. Responsibility for human life

The moral awareness of the duty to protect human life is a natural *topós*. The notion of responsibility, or even liability, refers to the legal language and means ‘to respond to an accusation in court, to defend oneself or someone in court, to justify one’s (or someone else’s) behaviour and actions’ (Krzysztofek 2015, 222). The *topós* of the responsibility for human life is connected with asking oneself the fundamental questions about what is most important for a human, what is less important and what is unimportant. The answers to these questions are what formulates one’s personal being, determining one’s own life decisions and precisely defining the range of issues for which one consciously takes responsibility (Krzysztofek 2015, 222). As Johannes Schwartländner notes, the category of obligation contained two premises: order/law (of the cosmos, of God’s will, of reason) and the freedom of the human will. Thus, this obligation is a human attitude, thanks to which, and only thanks to which, a person lives in this moral-spiritual order and through which he realises his freedom. The *topós* of obligation was defined in various ways, for example, as *officium* in the Roman tradition, as obedience to God’s commands and prohibitions in the Christian tradition, or, in line with the ethos of the Enlightenment, as being bound by the law of reason (Schwartländner 1973, 1577–1588). In the distinguished *topós*, the categories of responsibility and life are treated as closely related to one another. Life is a path traversed by man, struggling with a variety of experiences. The beginning of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, states:

> The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.

The *topós* of responsibility for human life is exemplified in the article titled ‘God doesn’t want us to sacrifice the old’ by Russell Moore, the President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, who explicates several key Christian ideas for understanding human life. Christian churches teach that

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**Table 4.** Number of natural *topoi* for each newspaper title.

| Common places                              | FAZ | Guardian | NYT | SCMP | Total |
|--------------------------------------------|-----|----------|-----|------|-------|
| Responsibility for human life              | 41  | 40       | 108 | 18   | 207   | (50.6%) |
| Common good                                | 15  | 22       | 35  | 8    | 80    | (19.6%) |
| Moral obligation to love one’s neighbour   | 13  | 11       | 9   | 13   | 46    | (11.2%) |
| Death                                      | 5   | 9        | 11  | 8    | 33    | (8.1%)  |
| Religious freedom                          | 3   | 4        | 2   | 10   | 19    | (4.6%)  |
| religious leader’s authority                | 2   | 2        | 1   | 7    | 12    | (2.9%)  |
| Complementary character of faith and judiciousness | 1   | 1        | 1   | 1    | 4     | (1%)    |
| Respect                                    | 1   | 1        | 1   | 1    | 4     | (1%)    |
| Human dignity                              | 1   | 1        | 1   | 1    | 4     | (1%)    |
| **Total**                                  | 82  | 91       | 169 | 67   | 409   | (100%)  |

Source: own compilation.
every human life is precious, even during a pandemic. Moore cites the example of his grandmother’s concern about meeting her basic needs during the Great Depression of the 1930s, which should not, however, distract us from the sanctity of human life:

We already are hearing talk about weighing the value of human life against the health of the nation’s economy and the strength of the stock market. It’s true that a depression would cause untold suffering for people around the world, hitting the poor the hardest. Still, each human life is more significant than a trillion-dollar gross national product. Stocks and bonds are important, yes, but human beings are created in the image of God. (Moore 2020)

In this same piece, he also states that it is necessary, while being responsible, to pay attention to the elderly and ailing, and remember that all life is a God’s gift:

We must also reject suggestions that it makes sense to prioritize the care of those who are young and healthy over those who are elderly or have disabilities. Such considerations turn human lives into checkmarks on a page rather than the sacred mystery they are. When we entertain these ideas, something of our very humanity is lost.

Vulnerability is not a diminishment of the human experience, but is part of that experience. Those of us in the Christian tradition believe that God molded us from dust and breathed into us the breath of life. Moreover, we bear witness that every human life is fragile. We are, all of us, creatures and not gods. We are in need of air and water and one another. (Moore 2020)

The text titled ‘California megachurch linked to spread of more than 70 coronavirus cases’ by Mario Koran identifies the criterion of responsibility for one’s neighbor and society as fundamental in successful combat against a pandemic (Koran 2020). The author describes the case of the Bethany Slavic Missionary Church, where numerous infections occurred, which consequently triggered the secular authorities’ decision to close it and move worship to the Internet. The decision to close the church is presented as belonging to the category of the responsibility of the authorities for society and human life.

The topóς of responsibility was also found in the press texts referring to the financial and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Kalyeena Makortoff explains the position of the Church of England, one which points to the necessity of implementing responsible capitalism in times of coronavirus crisis:

The ethical investment chief at the Church of England’s investment arm has said the sacrifices made to tackle the coronavirus outbreak will renew calls for “responsible capitalism” and force companies to reconsider issues such as excessive executive pay. Edward Mason, the head of responsible investment for the Church Commissioners, said that while the coronavirus was overwhelming the news agenda it was likely to refocus minds on the collective good and how companies need to play their part. "Some of the post-financial crisis themes we’ve seen around corporate tax, not having excessive executive remuneration, treating people fairly, treating staff fairly – I think all these issues are already part of the public discourse on coronavirus. And I think it’s only going to increase the sort of momentum behind responsible capitalism, because everyone’s making sacrifices at the moment,” he told The Guardian. (Makortoff 2020)

4.2. Common good

The concept of the common good has been the subject of numerous philosophical works, including those by Aristotle, Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, J. Locke, and D. Hume,
to name a few (Barbieri 2001, 723–754). Sylvanus Iniobong Udoidem (1987, 101–102), our contemporary Nigerian philosopher, observes that good should be regarded as something that is desired by all people, something that is a common, desired and unquestioned value. The common good means something that is an object of the human will endowed with rationality, simplicity and naturalness in this striving. It is accessible and attainable. Jacques Maritain (1994) argued that the common good is the good life of all, taking into account their diversity, and its most essential element is the free development of individuals in a community, including guarantees of their freedom.

The *topós* of the common good is perfectly depicted in the title of an article in *The New York Times*: ‘How coronavirus made our Church stronger’. Christopher Buskirk, the author, presents a series of questions about the attitude of believers congregated in the Arizona Presbyterian Church community during the pandemic, which express concern for the common good:

With the church’s services and other regular activities suspended – but a powerful need to stay connected – we established a variety of responses to meet the needs that we saw and some others we anticipated. Would the members of the church who are most vulnerable to this virus need anyone to do their shopping? Has anyone been laid off or seen hours reduced? Does anyone need food or money to pay rent or other bills? Who is lonely? Who is scared? We’ve already had one member sick, and many have had family and friends become gravely ill. This creates additional burdens. Who can share those burdens? Who needs prayer? (Buskirk 2020)

### 4.3. Moral obligation to love one’s neighbour

The attitude of striving to fulfil the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour is expressed aptly by Karl Rahner, who argues that the spiritual subjectivity is driven by the mysterious force of *Woraufhin* that stimulates the constant striving ‘towards something’ (McDermott 1986, 87–123). According to the German philosopher, the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour is a deed in which humans respond to God and achieve fulfilment. In the act of loving the human ‘you’, a man simultaneously affirms himself and God, who constitutes man’s spiritual subjectivity. The rationale for the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour is the religious experience – transcendent acquaintance with God (Sarelo 2018, 87–91). The *topós* of the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour has been noticed in those press texts where the image of religious communities as suffering communities has been presented, in which work is rendered voluntary and the human is perceived as a spiritual being.

The *topós* of the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour as the first and foremost duty during the pandemic is precisely defined by Reinhard Bingener in his paper ‘Karfreitag in Corona-Zeiten. Zeit für informierte Nächstenliebe’, in which human behaviour in the pandemic is evaluated in the light of the moral obligation to love one’s neighbour:

Besonders lohnenswert könnte es sein, im Zeichen der Pandemie über die christliche Nächstenliebe nachzudenken. Solange kein Impfstoff und keine erprobten Medikamente zur Verfügung stehen, ist das Verhalten jedes Einzelnen die wichtigste Ressource im Kampf gegen das Coronavirus. Es besteht also Anlass, sich das Konzept Nächstenliebe
The analysis also highlighted the presence of other topoi, although their total share is less than 19%. As an example, we can mention the topós of religious freedom, the restriction of which during the pandemic is perceived in the opinion-based press as an unprecedented event, but one caused by force majeure. It is not connected with any intention of the state authorities to offend the religious feelings of Christians, Jews and Muslims, but results from their concern for citizens’ health and life (Deckers 2020).

5. Analysis of the cultural commonplaces

In addition to natural topoi, seven categories of cultural commonplaces were distinguished in the analysis. Their presence was noted in 141 texts, representing 34.5% of the research sample. Cultural topoi are realised by a given culture, especially the mainstream culture, in which mediatisation processes play a key role (Guzek 2019, 55–81). Ideological topoi are associated with a number of signs, symbols, perceptions of the surrounding reality and historical past, of which the media are important exponents. The media discourse analysis proves that getting to know cultural topoi means understanding stereotypes, the dominant ideology, the circle of specific values and models of cultural identity (Wodak 2008, 54–76). See Table 5 for common cultural places.

It was noted that the most common cultural topoi included state-church relations, mediatisation of religion and abuse of power in relation to religion.

The first topós was used by the authors of the publications analysed to indicate and describe the principles of the operation of churches and religious bodies under the sanitary regime. These press texts essentially described mutually respectful cooperation between religious and political leaders. Churches accepted epidemic restrictions with forbearance (Horowitz 2020). The topós of state-church relations also indicated the areas of mutual cooperation between religious and non-religious institutions, such as assistance to the poor or joint social campaigns. The topós of state-church relations also constituted the basis for addressing the broadly defined questions of the freedom of worship, limits of respect for the law in the context of, on the one hand, religious freedom and, on the other hand, bearing in mind the highest good, that is, human health and life (Yee 2020).

| Common places                              | FAZ | The Guardian | NYT | SCMP | Total |
|--------------------------------------------|-----|--------------|-----|------|-------|
| State-church relations                      | 9   | 9            | 17  | 9    | 44    |
| Mediatisation of religion                  | 8   | 6            | 13  | 4    | 31    |
| Abuse of power in relation to religion     | 7   | 6            | 5   | 6    | 24    |
| Canon and religious law                    | 5   | 4            | 6   | 1    | 16    |
| Church finances                            | 3   | 3            | 4   | 2    | 12    |
| Fake news                                  | 1   | 1            | 1   | 1    | 4     |
| Religious fanaticism                       | 1   | 1            | 1   | 1    | 4     |
| Religious denialism                        |     |              | 1   | 2    | 3     |
| Total                                      | 34  | 30           | 49  | 28   | 141   |

Source: own compilation.
Mediation of religion can be treated as a *topos* that facilitated explaining the press response regarding online liturgy broadcasting, the role of the media in the ministry served by the clergy of churches, and the consequences of the liturgy that became mediatised for the purpose of religious practice (Tsang 2020). Thus, this *topos* has become the basis for presenting alternative forms of participation in the liturgy via traditional and social media.

The *topos* of power abuse against religion served to showcase the unreasonable rules imposed by political leaders on the operation of churches during the pandemic, for example, the order to close temples completely while secular institutions, such as shopping centres, were allowed to remain open (dpa 2020b).

Press analysis also proved the presence of other *topoi*, such as the *topos* of religious fanaticism or religious denialism. Media narratives on church representatives disobeying sanitary recommendations or even disregarding the virus-related hazards were noted (Lau 2020b). The stereotype of obsolete, backward churches, not adapted to modern challenges, is associated with individual publications that use the *pars pro toto* strategy, that is, they selected behaviours or statements of the clergy that do not reflect the official positions of churches. It is worth remembering that negativity is an important criterion of information selection (Parks 2019, 75–91). In the context of the pandemic, the attitude of church representatives who failed to conform to the general social norms of behaviour is an example of negativity and a key that explains the appearance of certain facts on the media agenda (Rüb 2020).

Other *topoi*, such as church finances, were also identified in the analysis and used to address the issue of parish financial losses caused by the absence of the faithful during services (Bingener and Deckers 2020).

6. Conclusions

Quantitative analysis of the number of frames in all the press titles analysed found that representatives of the opinion-forming press presented churches and religious bodies as institutions that cooperated with state authorities in combating the pandemic and also as institutions that respected state decisions on sanitary restrictions (closing of temples, no worship, use of protective measures – masks, gloves, social distancing). 276 press texts project the image of church authorities cooperating with state authorities while combating the pandemic. It is interesting, however, that the voluntary work or charitable activities performed by the religious bodies are not the subjects of interest in the opinion-forming press titles analysed here. The analysis shows that church initiatives in the area of assisting others are somewhat marginalised in the press analysed. The religious leaders’ actions are generally portrayed in the framework of their obedience to sanitary recommendations initiated by the state authorities. What is omitted is that aspect of the image of church leaders that would highlight their charitable actions as *spiritus movens*. In the ‘church activity during the pandemic’ characteristic studied, there were twice as many texts classified as ‘liturgy and sacrament’ (37 publications) versus 18 texts classified as ‘volunteering and acts of charity’. Only 4.4% of texts were classified as ‘volunteering and acts of charity’, and 9% of texts were classified as ‘liturgy and sacraments’. Thus, the assertion that the press – at least that which was
analysed – highlighted activities undertaken by churches and religious bodies as institutions involved in performing charitable work and leading worship during the pandemic, taking into account the sanitary restrictions, does not hold true. This can be explained as follows: while churches, in the voluntary work they undertake, are not obliged to help needy citizens and societies (although this is a consequence of their identity), they are obliged to respect legal norms expressed, among other things, in safety rules, restrictions on worship, or closing churches for sanitary reasons. Therefore, the opinion-forming press is interested in what results from the norms established by lawmakers for institutions. If churches become institutions to which legal norms are applied, then they obviously appear more frequently on the media agenda. Insofar as they are not related to state law, questions regarding church identity (practical moral obligation to love one’s neighbour being an example here) are not of particular interest to the secular opinion-forming press.

The analysis of the presence of topoi demonstrated that the most frequent natural topoi in the research material were: responsibility for human life (50.6% of the research sample); common good (19.6%); and moral obligation to love one’s neighbour (11.2%). These topoi provide the most significant foundation allowing us to understand the sources of the description of the actions undertaken by the state and churches during the pandemic. In turn, the natural topoi of death, religious freedom, religious leader’s authority, faith as judiciousness, respect and human dignity were present in a total of nearly 19% of the research material. Their sparse presence proves the fact that the image of churches as institutions that are not involved in performing charitable work during the pandemic is projected. The highlighted cultural topoi focus the readers’ attention on the state-church relations, mediatisation of religion and abuse of power against religion. In conclusion, media research conducted here reveals a positive image of churches and religious bodies in the secular media.

Notes
1. Due to the low percentage of Christians in China, other churches/religions were also included in the research. The term “church” used by the author in the paper in reference to the SCMP press publications also includes non-Christian religious associations.
2. The links to the search pages used are, for Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: https://www.faz.net/suche/?query; The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/international (going to the Search tab); The New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/search; and South China Morning Post: https://www.scmp.com/search.
3. Transl. The Catholic dioceses and Protestant regional churches are expecting losses in church taxes and other income due to the corona crisis. The finance director of the diocese of Mainz, Christof Molitor, in his own words, fears a “massive decline in church tax revenue” and an additional deficit of between 50 and 60 million euros.
4. Transl. It could be particularly worthwhile to reflect on Christian charity during the pandemic. As long as no vaccine and no proven drugs are available, the behavior of every individual is the most important resource in the fight against the coronavirus. So there is occasions to put the concept of charity clearly and sharply in front of the mind’s eye and to use this opportunity to cleanse it of some errors that have crept in over time.
5. The number of frames in percentage points is expressed in brackets, obtained by dividing the number of individual frames by the total number of texts analysed, and multiplying by 100.
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