

# Religion, Nationalism, And 'Western' Hate: The Covid-19 Crisis Explained In Russian-Speaking And Arab-Islamic Regions

В РОССИИ 11:30, 21 декабря 2020

## В РПЦ отметили опасность разделения общества из-за коронавируса

Москва, 21 декабря. INTERFAX.RU - В Русской православной церкви высказали мнение, что разделение во взглядах людей, возникшее по поводу коронавируса, не менее опасно, чем сама пандемия COVID-19.

### *1 Introduction*

When the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, reactions from religious leaders were inevitable. Christian and Islamic leaders were no exception to that rule, trying to formulate explanations for cause of the pandemic. Some statements breathed the atmosphere of resignation: the pandemic is affecting the world and therefore believers and the faithful must also resist the pandemic based on their beliefs (Kowalczyk, Roszkowski, Montane et al., 2020). Often religious leaders streamlined their statements with national government policies. In such cases they strove to have the rules of conduct for the faithful to deviate as little as possible from the relevant national approaches to the epidemic (Hart & Koenig, 2020). Yet statements were also made in which religious authorities cite reasons why the world was hit by the pandemic, and in particular the role of God in it (Kowalczyk, Roszkowski, Montane et al., 2020). There are religious authorities who explain the calamities that befall the world in terms of God's punishment for the sinful behavior of unbelievers (Moravec & Lacková, 2021). In doing so, they would exonerate themselves. Religions have in common the notion of sacredness and sacredness by definition cannot be 'polluted' by whatever cause (Chryssides & Geaves, 2011). And with this background in mind, leaders were also confronted with the question of what to do now that the pandemic was affecting rituals that are sacred within the communities concerned. Based on these considerations, an interesting question is how religious authorities interpret the Covid-19 pandemic. In our expose, we make a comparison between the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church and various Islamic fundamentalist organizations on the pandemic. We do this because on initial consideration we found that there

seem to be remarkable similarities and differences in the reactions of both.

Thus, this article examines two cases of religious leaders having to formulate answers to questions raised by the pandemic. On the one hand, this concerns the question of how the Russian Orthodox Church reacted to the question of whether believers were still allowed to touch sacred objects such as icons, and on the other hand, the question is how Islamic fundamentalist jihadi movements explain the origin of the pandemic and what they recommend their followers to do to prevent contamination and spread. In short this article aims to answer the following question: 'How did Russian Orthodox and Islamic fundamentalist officials address the Covid-19 crisis and what motivated them to react as they did?'. The choice to research this particular question is also motivated by the dominant value religion has in Russian-speaking and Islamic societies. Statements of religious leaders have a serious impact on the faithful and the general population of these areas.

This article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical background on the basis of which the cases are treated. This is followed by a description of both cases, that of the Russian Orthodox Church first, followed by that of Islamic fundamentalist organizations. The article ends with the formulation and a discussion of the conclusions.

## *2 Theoretical background*

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it hard for the authorities to immediately change and adapt countries' policies to the newly emerging reality of the increasing danger. Governments' slow reactions and delayed quarantine measures have led to a series of issues in which online and offline misinformation became countries' strategies to counter the virus (Alimardnai & Elswahi, 2020). This contributes to the global stream of sharing false information to support political goals. The spread of untruthful facts has become one of the key features of contemporary media due to its rapid distribution via user-generated content and propagandist channels (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Scholarly debates differentiate various definitions of false information depending on its spread and intent to cause harm (Wang et al., 2019; Wardle & Derakhsan, 2017). Misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are politicized terms of what is commonly referred to in the media as 'fake news' (Wang, et al., 2019). Separating different subgroups of deceptive information helps provide a set of

clear-cut characteristics of specific 'fake news' types that can be helpful for scholars and policymakers alike. However, a foreseeable difficulty with defining these concepts is finding the intent of a fake news story spread and putting it in a category solely based on factors not entirely known to the researcher (Wang et al., 2019). The current article sticks to the following definition of misinformation in relation to mass media and politics — “when false information is shared, but no harm is meant” (Wardle & Derakhsan, 2017). However, the paper also uses misinformation as an umbrella term for all the media stories that have a certain degree of deception because scholars cannot always be certain about the intent of news materials reaching the public. This could be a possible limitation of the studies focusing on the false information spread.

The research topic of misinformation remains very relevant, however, with numerous scholars describing the current period as the “era of fake news” (Wang, et al., 2019). What brings misinformation studies under the spotlight is its abuse by political actors in the public sphere. The main issue with the increasing usage of misinformation by political parties is that while they use it to their advantage, at the same time they create a challenge for the society of undermining democracy (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Namely, wrongly informed citizens get emotionally invested given the provocative nature of misinformation and keep sharing false news while being stuck in digital echo chambers (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

What makes it particularly easy for a misleading news story to gain visibility is its topicality in the specific time period. The 'basic law of rumor' is applied here with the amount of circulation varying due to the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned multiplied by the ambiguity of the evidence applied to the topic (Wang, et al., 2019, Allport & Postman, 1947). During the COVID-19 crisis, the two aspects intensified due to the growing individual importance of the news articles regarding the pandemic, and the hoax of evidence and information spread by media outlets. We do not need to undermine the overall vulnerability of individuals and institutions in what homes to misinformation about health (Wang, et al., 2019).

Conspiracy thinking also fuels the spread of false information. The first few months of 2020 have marked a chain of widespread beliefs on Bill Gates, 5G, scientific uncertainties, governments hiding the truth, harms of vaccinations, and the role of China in the virus spread. As the pandemic started approaching more

countries, the issues discussed have become significantly more political (Ball & Maxmen, 2020). Especially in the Middle East, where conspiracy theories are immensely influential (Pipes, 1996). In fact, it is important to understand that throughout history, they made their way into providing a key to the political culture of the region (Pipes, 1996). Scholars claim that to understand Middle Eastern culture, one needs to orient himself in the distorting lens of conspiracy theories and to be able to plan around conspiracism, as well as the unique discourse it builds as the region's most distinctive political feature (Pipes, 1996).

It is interesting to note that, while discussing the theoretical background of fake news more and more website and applications spring up to make the public, in all its diversity, aware of the presence of fake news, how to discover it and how to analyze and deconstruct it. The three authors of this article have also collaborated in an Erasmus+ project financed by the European Union, called *CoMMiTTed* (see [this link](#)), presenting a full program for students and student teachers on fake news in English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. The title of the project is 'Covid, Migrants and Minorities in Teacher Education: A Fake News Observatory to promote Critical Thinking and Digital Literacy in times of Crisis' (Pijpers, de Ruitter & Souza da Silva, 2023). The said program leans strongly on the earlier work of Wardle & Derekhshan (2017).

Russian media are also known to manipulate information, especially when it comes to crisis situations (Serrato & Wallis, 2020). Similarly to the Middle Eastern region, conspiracy thinking prevails in the country and gets fueled by the media reports of the "well-trodden" conspiracy theories on coronavirus origin, measures, and social impact (Serrato & Wallis, 2020). Information on Russian media got continuously manipulated throughout the pandemic.

This article presents, as indicated above, two cases of misinformation coming from two sources that seem to be far away from each other, i.e. the Russian Orthodox Church and Islamic fundamentalist organizations, but it will show that they are quite strongly related to each other, each one defending its unique position vis-à-vis the pandemic, hitting the whole world and causing the whole world to take measures, but not both religious bodies for reasons that will become clear below.

### *3 The Russian Orthodox Church*

To analyze the case of the rhetorical situation where the COVID-19 pandemic is

interpreted as a punishment from God, several cases were analyzed. When it comes to Russia, Orthodox Christianity is the country's largest denomination. There is a lot of value put on religion in the public domain and media. Russian president Vladimir Putin has publicly demonstrated his confirmation to the Russian Orthodox church. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the Russian Orthodox bishop, is also an authoritative figure in the public sphere. He often shares comments on public matters and they get picked up by the domestic and international media.

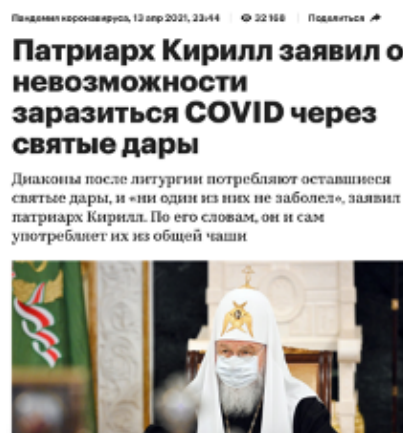


Figure 1: News article reporting Patriarch Kirill's opinion on being infected in churches.

Therefore, news articles featuring patriarch Kirill's opinions on the spread and the origin of coronavirus were analyzed for this paper. The first article was published by the Russian source RBC (РБК) on the 13th of April 2021 (Figure 1). The news piece was viewed over 32 thousand times (20.01.2022). The article headline states 'Patriarch Kirill declared the impossibility of contracting COVID through holy gifts'. The subheader translates as 'The deacons consume the remaining holy gifts after the Liturgy, and "none of them fell ill," said patriarch Kirill. According to him, he himself consumes them from a common bowl' (Polyakova, 2021). The news article reports patriarch Kirill's opinion that holy grails used in the Liturgy are not subject to coronavirus and no one should doubt their healing powers of the holy mysteries of Christ (Polyakova, 2021). The article also reports new measures applied in churches and the coronavirus infection statistics among the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. In the meantime, patriarch Kirill is being quoted: "partaking of the body and blood of

Christ, we partake of the great shrine, which is not subject to any infection, any evil, because it is a saint that is taught to the saints” (Polyakova, 2021). The article also links to a related material published on the absence of single-use spoons in churches during the Liturgy (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: The integrated link with the headline ‘The Russian Orthodox Church did not find grounds for the introduction of disposable spoons during communion’.*

The other article comes from the same source, RBC Russia (Figure 3). The material was published on the 8th of October, 2020 and it was read by over 52 thousand users. Again, it reports patriarch Kirill’s opinion on COVID-19. The headline quotes the bishop ‘Patriarch Kirill called COVID “a signal from the Lord” and “the last call”’. The subheader adds: “According to the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, humanity received a “call, a signal from the Lord himself” in order to learn to think differently and relate to daily duties. On October 8, the patriarch went into quarantine due to contact with the infected”. The article repeatedly quotes the bishop how the pandemic could be the “last call” and ‘an amazing lesson’ for the human kind (Anisimova, 2020). At the same time, patriarch Kirill shared ‘that humanity has reached ‘a certain point’’, and people have the opportunity to ‘see the futility of what the best years of life are given to, all the forces, all the tension of the mind and will’” (Anisimova, 2020). The article states that the bishop interprets the virus as a call from God himself to become more mindful about saving peoples’ souls (Anisimova, 2020).

## Патриарх Кирилл назвал COVID «сигналом от Господа» и «последним звонком»

По словам предстоятеля РПЦ, человечество получило «звонок, сигнал от самого Господа», чтобы научиться иначе мыслить и относиться к ежедневным обязанностям. 8 октября патриарх ушел на карантин из-за контакта с зараженным



*Figure 3: The article reporting patriarch Kirill's opinion on the emergence of COVID-19.*

Another source, Интерфакс (interfax.ru) published a related article on 21st of December 2021, with a header “The Russian Orthodox Church noted the danger of division of society due to coronavirus” (Figure 4). The subheader states that “The Russian Orthodox Church expressed the opinion that the division in the views of people that arose over the coronavirus is no less dangerous than the COVID-19 pandemic itself” (Interfax, 2021). The piece reports the official statement on the pandemic made by Vladimir Legoyda, Head of the Synodal Department for Relations between the Church, Society and the Media.

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*Figure 4: The article found on the source Interfax.ru, reporting the official concern of the Russian Orthodox church for the polarization of society in Russia caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

The article quotes Legoyda: ‘When there was the first wave, and they were forced

to limit visits to churches by the laity, when they introduced sanitary measures in churches (they began to wipe icons, litters after communion, etc.), this confused many. But in the end it highlighted what true loyalty to Christ and the Gospel is “Do you betray Christ when you put on a mask or follow other rules prescribed by experts? Yes, you should not be afraid of death, but should you run towards it, endangering other people? And so on,” (Interfax, 2021). He later adds that it was not easy for the Russian Orthodox church, but in his opinion “the church responds to this challenge [of coronavirus] with dignity” (Interfax, 2021).

The announcement by the prominent public figure of the Russian orthodox church visibly politicizes the issue of the coronavirus pandemic and gets picked up by the local media sources. The phrasing of the statement does not seem to provide definite answers whether it is sinful or not to wear a mask or to follow other coronavirus safety measures. The way the announcement was formulated gives space for interpretation for both, the believers that follow the Covid-19 rules and those who do not.

The strategy of ambiguity is applied in numerous Russian media when reporting coronavirus pandemic and other crises. In this way, the article and the institution, be it the Russian orthodox church or the government directly, gets support from people with different opinions on a whole political spectrum. The unclear wording awakes confirmation bias in the readers of the article. The phrasing is the key in the national narratives spread by the media in Russia. The ambiguous framing makes the message of the expertise of the Russian orthodox church more appealing which increases its shareability among the population.

#### *<4 Covid and Islamic jihadi organizations*

The Arab-Muslim world was also affected by Covid-19, and in that region of the world too, conspiracy theories have emerged, and fingers have been raised to the alleged causes of the pandemic, in particular to people who allegedly caused the disease (Piwko, 2021). The Arab-Islamic world is very diverse and the regimes that rule it vary from theocratic, such as Saudi Arabia, to -somewhat- democratic, such as Tunisia. For most countries, however, freedom of expression and press is limited and, in some countries, the coverage of Covid was under tight state control, such as in Egypt. In addition, the Arab-Islamic world is also not free from prejudices against people who are of non-Arab-Islamic descent (Pipes, 1996).

Another interesting phenomenon is that of fundamentalist movements, in the case



of the Arab-Islamic world a movement like Islamic State (IS), that tend to see any disaster or pandemic as a punishment from God for the people; fundamentalist Christian preachers apply the same line of thinking as well (Käsehage, 2021). At the same time, these movements themselves also face this disease among their ranks.

Figure 5 presents an online flyer with the directives of IS of how to deal with Covid-19.



Figure 5: directives of Islamic State concerning Covid-19

Basically these directives are formulated [as follows](#) (we apply the translation of [Aymen Jawad in his blog on this subject](#)):

- The obligation of faith that illnesses do not strike by themselves but by the command and decree of God;
- The counsel to put trust in God and seek refuge in Him from illnesses;
- The obligation of taking up the causes of protection from illnesses and avoiding them;
- The counsel that the healthy should not enter the land of the epidemic and the afflicted [/infected] should not exit from it;
- The counsel to cover the mouth when yawning and sneezing;
- The counsel to cover the vessels and tie the waterskin;

- The counsel to wash the hands before dipping them into vessels

The directives of Islamic State concerning Covid-19, under bullet points 3 to 7, are remarkably sensible. They are based on what the prophet Mohammed told to do in cases like these, on what Sharia prescribes, and on what Muslim theologians have advised to do or not to do in cases of pandemics. The [website of the Wilson Center](#) further describes how Islamic State explains the pandemic (Hanna, 2020):

‘The Islamic State, a Sunni jihadi movement, blamed Shiites for the first cases of coronavirus in Iraq and called the outbreak a “sign” that Shiites should “abandon polytheism.” As the virus spread to Europe, the Islamic State adjusted its message and [called](#) the disease a “painful torment” for all “Crusader nations” in the West, according to [statements](#) in its al Naba newsletter. The group urged followers not to travel to Europe to commit terrorist attacks during the epidemic to avoid contracting the virus. Instead, the group [urged](#) its followers in Iraq and Syria to free ISIS prisoners being held in camps’.

It does not come as a surprise that Islamic State lays the blame for something negative with its traditional enemies, the Shiites being the first one of them, in many cases followed indeed by ‘Crusader nations’ by which countries like France, the United Kingdom and the United States are meant. In more recent time Islamic State declared not to take sides in the Russian-Ukraine war as it concerns ‘a crusader internal war of Christians’ which is caused by ‘their nature’ and Islamic State just watches them, destroying each other, that being at the advantage of Islamic State in all cases.

In general Islamic countries issued directives comparable to directives in other countries in the world (cf. OECD, 2020). The advice or duty to wear mouth masks, the advice to wash hands regularly, to sneeze in the elbows and the like. Also most countries set up vaccination campaigns but with different measures of success. Well to do countries could such as the United Arab Emirates could easily finance these campaigns while in countries like Egypt people had to pay for their vaccinations and for tests by the way as well.

Still, what is common to all Islamic countries is the traditional distrust concerning medication, any medication for that matter, whether or not vaccines contain products coming from pigs, even if it would concern the slightest quantities. Still, in the end of many days, most Islamic authorities, representing the Islamic

establishment in most Islamic countries, allowed the use of different vaccines (OECD, 2020; Piwko, 2021).

It is not only Islamic State that blames its traditional enemies as being the cause of the pandemic. Al Qaeda, the other and older branch of a fundamentalist jihadi movement expressed itself in similar terms (cf. Hanna, 2021). The group maintained that the virus was a “punishment” from God “for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims” by Western governments (Hanna, 2021). At the same time the group also referred to Qur’anic verses propagating distance and hygiene measures in order to confront the virus.

The Islamic fundamentalist organization Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which rules an enclave in the Northwestern part of Syria promulgated similar rules as ISIS and Al Qaeda to combat the virus, at the same time blaming the unbelievers, in this case the Shiites in particular, for its cause. Its leader Al Qahtani [advised](#) followers to “keep distant from gatherings and avoid hand-shaking” and to “stay in your place” as the epidemic spread (Hanna, 2021).

In a more Islamic mainstream analysis of the causes of the Covid-19 pandemic and how to interpret it from an Islamic perspective, Asif (2020) explains that pandemics are indeed from God, as all that happens on earth is from God, but that God means to test both unbelievers and believers. Here we observe a difference with the fundamentalist organizations treated in this article that recognize the pandemic as coming from God, but explicitly to punish the enemies of Islam, of whom there are many.

Taking the whole Islamic world into consideration we observe what happens in the whole world. Religions face the challenge of tackling the causes and effects of the pandemic and in doing so we see that mainstream religious authorities follow governments in promulgating behavioral guidelines for the believers and that at the same time more fundamentalist movements add specifically to that that the unbelievers, whomever they may be, are the cause of the pandemic.

### *5 Conclusions and discussion*

Even though the Russian Orthodox Church does not explicitly state that the sins of the unbelievers are the cause of the pandemic; it does state that the virus cannot negatively influence the rituals of the church. In this we see a difference with Islamic organizations that, in our opinion, are more realistic noticing that the

virus can influence their rituals (Shabana, 2021), but in turn state much more explicitly that the appearance of the virus is due to the actions and sins of the unbelievers. Similar interpretations were not found with the Russian orthodox church, although this church's tendency to deny the effects of the virus in relation to its rituals can also be understood as a conception of the inviolability, even for a virus, of the church. The tendency to see oneself as pure and holy in a depraved world is what we find in both cases anyway, but its effect differs between the two. The Russian orthodox church protects the rituals but refrains from directly commenting on the cause of the virus, at the same time distributing ambiguous messages about the coronavirus prevention measures; the Islamist movements are more realistic in recognizing the effects of the virus on their rituals but are very explicit in blaming its cause on the actions of the sinners in the world.

The motivation to react as they did is very much inspired by the conviction of both religious institutions to keep their religion and rituals aloof. Recognizing that they bear any responsibility in the cause of the crisis and the spread of the disease are for both a challenge that they prefer to avoid. Instead, they maintain that the disease cannot hamper their sacred rituals, like the Russian Orthodox Church claims, or they blame the cause of the disease completely to the outside world, in case of the Islamic organizations treated here, to the unbelievers and the punishment of God on them.

It was stated above that religions have in common the notion of sacredness and sacredness by definition cannot be 'polluted' by whatever cause (Chryssides & Geaves, 2011). They have to bend over backwards to do justice to the sanctity of their rituals. They are almost forced to lose sight of the harsh reality of a pandemic. After all, a pandemic does not distinguish between believers and unbelievers and does not care about the sacred. In this context it is tempting to accuse church leaders of hypocrisy, but that accusation is unjustified. After all, the intentions of the leaders and believers, whatever their signature, are sincere. But it is perhaps because of this split that theological Islamic texts end with the formula that "God knows best" or, in Arabic: *والله أعلم* (wa-allaahu 'a'lamu).

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