



‘Popular *Ijtihad*’ and Entangled Islamic Discourse on the Covid-19 Pandemic in Russia

SOFYA RAGOZINA 

Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

ABSTRACT In this article, I examine initial reactions of the Russian Muslim community in social networks to the spread of the Coronavirus. My two main questions are: Who reinterprets the category of Islamic piety in the context of the pandemic and how, and to what extent does the online environment transform the Islamic tradition? To answer them, I focus on the following key narratives of Russian Muslims’ online discourse on the pandemic: Covid-19 as a retaliation against China for the persecutions of Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, the search for signs of the coming doomsday, as well as various approaches to the reinterpretation of religious piety. Moreover, I consider how the pandemic sped up an entangled glocalised discourse. In the context of the increased role of the transnational online Muslim community, I suggest the term ‘popular *ijtihad*’ to describe individualised forms of religious engagement that the crisis situation stimulated.

KEYWORDS Islam in Russia, coronavirus pandemic, sociology of Islam, religious authority, *ijtihad*

Introduction

First reactions of Russian Muslims to the news about the Coronavirus reveal several fundamental problems related to various aspects of the Islamic faith. The first of them is the problem of identity. What does it mean to be a devout Muslim in such ambiguous and difficult circumstances? Searching for the answer to this question re-articulated Muslim solidarity and led to the convergence of global and local discourses on Islamic piety within the pandemic. Secondly, the fundamental debate between the proponents of divine predestination and free will has assumed a new dimension. Rooted in the medieval polemics between the *qadarites* (defenders of human free will) and *jabarites* (who advocated predestination), in the pandemic context the question has been formulated as follows: If it is presumed that ‘everything is the will of Allah’, is there a need for additional action to counter the spread of the Coronavirus? Thirdly, there is the question of religious authority. Should an *imam* (a worship leader of a mosque) be obeyed if he fails to cancel collective prayer, thereby endangering the life and

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health of the *ummah* (Islamic community)? Fourthly, the bioethical aspect of the pandemic has also become important. What do the sacred texts say about quarantine and the permissible means of medical treatment? Last but not least, during the lockdown, social networks have become almost the only domain where these matters can be discussed, thus vividly demonstrating their performative role in the transformation of the Islamic tradition. Hence, the question arises what the role of the Internet is for Muslims today, particularly in Russia.

In this paper, I will first discuss traditional patterns of knowledge production in Islam and how these are changed in the context of the mediatisation of religion. I will draw on theoretical approaches by Bryan Turner, Gary Bunt, Olivier Roy and Peter Mandaville in order to operationalize key terms that I use in my research, namely religious authority, ‘new *ulema*¹’, individualisation of Islam, and digital Islam. Then I will briefly describe first reactions of Russian Muslims to the Coronavirus and identify the main narratives of Islamic discourse on pandemics based on textual analysis of publications on social networks. Examining the relationship between global and Russian Muslim discourses on the pandemic, I will discuss the transformation of the institution of religious authority. I will discuss such tendencies as the erosion of traditional authority represented by Muslim agencies close to state authorities, the increasing number of new online *ulema* aimed at the maximized personalisation of their messages, and the phenomenon of ‘popular *ijtihad*’² as a manifestation of individualized strategies of religious search. [2]

Cultivation of Knowledge among Islamic Communities

Ulema have gained special legitimacy in Muslim society: They not only produce *fatwas* (legal statements) but also ensure their implementation because of the authority they build within a Muslim community, whether it is a whole country or a small village. Any crisis situation stimulates the search for religious explanation and therefore increases the importance of *ulema*. Today, the main question with which Muslims turn to their *ulema* is how one can remain a devout Muslim during the rapidly changing situation of the pandemic. This is the question that political elites or secular governments imposing lockdowns and other restrictions are unlikely to answer. Following Max Weber’s (1946) classical typology of legitimacy—traditional, charismatic, and legal—and his idea that none of these three ideal types of legitimacy is self-sufficient, it can be assumed that rational and legal authority associated with bureaucratic institutions is often insufficient for Muslim communities under the pandemic situation. Consequently, the traditional or charismatic legitimacy of the *ulema* can be called upon to ‘translate’ the decisions of secular governments into the ‘language of Muslims’. The need for ‘translation’ depends on the level of secularism in a given state. For example, in Iran or Saudi Arabia the bureaucratic apparatus itself ‘speaks’ the language of Islam. Conversely, in Europe, according to Talal Asad (2018), the Islamic discursive tradition is subject to “secular translation.” In Russia, the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims adopt the state-bureaucratic language in their interaction with the community and become main agents for the project of ‘traditional Islam,’ promoted by the state as a moderate version of Islam that remains loyal to national interests and secular authorities; this system is quite similar to the relation between the Orthodox Church and the Russian state (2020). [3]

Nowadays the problem of legitimacy and the emergence of new *ulema* takes on a new [4]

1 *Ulema* are transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge in Islam.

2 *Ijtihad* means an independent individual statement on Islamic legal questions.

dimension. The appearance of a large number of religious authorities, whose *fatwas* have legitimacy with a fairly large number of Muslims, was a consequence of the ‘opening of the gates’ of *ijtihad*. In the formative period of Muslim doctrine, “*ijtihad* meant the possibility of choosing the most appropriate decision for a given case from among the contradictory specific injunctions of the Sunna and the individual decisions of the Prophet’s companions” (Syukiyaynen 1986)³. In the age of social media, traditional forms of authority are being eroded now as the credibility of a theologian is measured by the number of followers and likes rather than by the traditional legitimacy of the institution of *ulema*. Traditional hierarchies are becoming disrupted while new horizontal and de-hierarchised social ties take their place. The polyphony of voices from the global Muslim community has become available to Muslims anywhere in the world, from Morocco to Indonesia. A Muslim from Moscow can now listen to a translated sermon by a Qatari theologian or read an Al-Azhar *fatwa*, watch a video of an Algerian imam in France or view an Instagram profile of a mosque in the city of Khasavyurt in Dagestan. Does this mean then that the Internet, in particular social networks, is playing a decisive role in the modern formation of the Islamic tradition? Scholars have studied a number of causal connections between Islam and digitalisation.

Bryan Turner argues that global information technology has been a decisive factor in transforming the institution of religious authority in Islam. According to Turner, electronic technologies have greatly expanded Islamic discourse since they “gave voice” to previously invisible social groups. Thus, the balance in the distribution of power resources has changed. For example, in these new conditions *Ismailism* (a branch within Shia Islam) can appear to be as mainstream as other movements in Shiism (Turner 2013, 201–5). Furthermore, the Internet has created a competitive environment where everyone can independently check the sources of information. Turner paints an idealistic picture where the development of “new intellectuals” reflects the spread of higher education in the Islamic world (Turner 2013, 206). However, such an idealistic view forms a dichotomy: The bony, formalist conservative traditional of *ulema* versus the independent, mobile and charismatic “new intellectuals”.

Gary Bunt (2018) supports the idea of the formatting effect of the online environment on religious authority in Islam. According to him, the Internet reduces the distance between the average Muslim who may be seeking answers to religion-related questions and the scholar who is qualified to make a judgment based on sacred texts. This new situation brings about different effects. On the one hand, it is possible to localise Islamic knowledge and even personalise it. Now the key to the success of an individual *ulema*’s YouTube channel is the recognition of the specific identity of its target audience and taking into account not only identification with a particular movement in Islam, but also given political views, age groups, regions, and so on. On the other hand, this massive ‘opening of the gates of *ijtihad*’ raises the question of the authority of the *ulema*. The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet has provided everyone with the opportunity to act as a religious authority, based more on their own convictions than on years of theological training (Bunt 2018, 83).

However, not all researchers share this hyper-attention to information technology. They rather prefer to view these trends in a broader social context. For example, Olivier Roy (2004) wrote at length about the individualisation of Islam. Democratisation, manifested in the increasing use of informational technologies, plays a significant role but does not change the religious message. More precisely, it affects the form, not the dogma. The diversity observed

3 The online version of the book was consulted under the following link: https://www.gumer.info/bogoslov_Buks/Islam/Syk_Pravo/ (last accessed May 17, 2022).

today is not based on any new religious concepts, but on the specific choice of each individual Muslim who has the need to reflect on his or her own religious experience.

Peter Mandaville is critical of the idea of the “progressive democratisation” of knowledge production: “[...] a widening of the public sphere—does not in itself produce more pluralistic (in the sense of being more tolerant or open-ended) knowledge” (Mandaville 2007, 102). Democratisation takes place, but it does not change Islamic discourse. It merely “*reinforces the tendency to decentralise power that has always been present in Islam*” (Mandaville 2007, 102, italics original). Pluralism is an intrinsic feature of the Islamic tradition, so globalisation must be seen in light of the changing scope and intensity of the debates surrounding the meaning and nature of authority in Islam. [8]

These different and seemingly contradictory views actually complement each other as they shed a different light on the question about the extent to which information technology affects Islamic religiosity. When one looks at specific empirical material, such as Russian Muslims’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of “new intellectuals” proposed by Turner dovetails with Mandaville’s thesis on pluralised authority, as well as Roy’s analysis of the individualisation of Islam. The individualisation of Islam, as analysed by Roy, is perfectly traceable in the “digital Islam” of Bunt (2018). Based on this conceptual framework, in the next part of this article, I will discuss the first reactions of Russian Muslim social networks to the spread of the coronavirus in China, Russia, and the rest of the world from February to May 2020. Already during this period, the main lines of discussion among Muslims about the pandemic were defined and remained mostly unchanged until the beginning of 2021. [9]

The data for this research were collected in snowball fashion. In April/May 2020, I monitored social media daily for posts related to the Coronavirus. The examples below do not always represent the most popular or ‘viral’ stories. Rather, I applied a bottom-up approach, as it were: I paid special attention to the posts from average accounts with few followers. Taking into account the news agenda, I monitored themes that average users react to and then identified how these elements became part of a broader discourse of ‘new *ulema*’ and official Muslim representatives. Analysing the various manifestations of Islam in the online environment in this way makes it possible to move towards ‘lived religion’ and see the real dynamics of religiosity. [10]

As for the specific social networks that are the subject of our analysis, I am primarily talking about Vkontakte (InContact) and Instagram and, to a lesser extent, YouTube, Facebook and Telegram. It is difficult to judge the greatest popularity of certain social networks among Russian Muslims, as there are no studies on this topic or any statistics. Based on our observation experience, we can say with a degree of certainty that the top three are Vkontakte, Instagram and Telegram. The first social network is the most popular among the Russian-speaking audience, where you can often find all sorts of commercial projects connected with Islam (online schools, Islamic cosmetics, etc.). Whereas Instagram and Telegram are least controlled by the authorities for the potential distribution of extremist materials, they offer a greater variety of religious and theological materials. On YouTube, lectures and sermons by foreign *ulema* are hugely popular and are translated by numerous Muslim activists. [11]

Reinforcing Muslim Identity and Following ‘Active Piety’ through ‘Popular *Ijtihad*’: The First Reactions of Muslims to the Coronavirus on Russian Social Media

At the time when the first cases of the Coronavirus were discovered in China, there was a surge of xenophobia against the Chinese in Russia, not only among Muslims. However, the negative feelings of Muslims were particularly strong. They were fuelled by the rhetoric of retaliation against China for its oppressive policies toward Uyghur Muslims living in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region⁴. The ‘Islamic sinophobia’ became the first manifestation of a blended glocal discourse. As one user of the Russian social networking service VKontakte put it: [12]

It is possible that this new virus emerged in China due to their policy of oppressing Uyghur Muslims who are being forcefully de-Islamised and made to abandon the Religion of Islam and embrace the Communist heresy (Ideology of Atheism).⁵ [13]

In the early stages of the spread of the Coronavirus, this idea was common to many publications not only by ordinary Muslims, but also by certain leaders of the Russian Muslim community. From 2018 onwards, many Russian Muslims protested against the policies of the Chinese authorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In early 2020, the new type of Coronavirus seemed to be an ‘ordinary’ phenomenon, along with SARS and swine flu, and was perceived exclusively as a Chinese problem. On February 3, the Moscow Spiritual Department of Muslims posted an appeal by Mufti Ildar Alyautdinov in which he wrote about the virus in terms of divine justice and the protective power of God: [14]

For example, the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah mention the Dabbatul-ard, a creature commonly regarded as one of the harbingers of the Day of Judgment. The Arabic word “dabba” describes this animal as “creeping, silent,” which can be compared to a snake. [15]

The rapidly spreading coronavirus (scientists believe its probable source to be snakes or bats) raises the question of the approach of this Day. [16]

We should consider whether these circumstances are not a manifestation of Divine Will, when Allah, through the actions of tyrants, restrains us from sinful, forbidden things, gives us the opportunity to change ourselves, to adjust our beliefs and attitudes. [17]

4 The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is an autonomous region of the People’s Republic of China, where approximately 60% of the population are Muslims. The East Turkestan independence movement was active at the beginning of the twentieth century in this region. Mass state-orchestrated migration of Han Chinese from the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese cultural politics, and severe suppression of separatist movements have contributed to tensions between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government. Nowadays Uyghur extremists are framed by the Chinese government as one of the main threats to national security. At the end of 2015, China’s first anti-terrorism bill was passed. In 2017, several ‘re-education camps’ (according to state terminology) were founded in Xinjiang to promote social integration and to counter extremism. Many countries and international human rights organisations criticise the Chinese government for human rights abuses. According to different expert evaluations, in 2019 an estimated 1.5 million Uyghurs were held in these internment concentration camps (Nebhay 2019).

5 Mirzoeva, M. “Na foto letuchaia mysh’ v supe ili sup iz myshi, kak vam udobno.. [In the photo a bat in soup or soup from a mouse, as you like].” VK.com, January 25, 2020. https://vk.com/km1234321?w=all136290690_2765 (in Russian). All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

- Certainly, we as Muslims should not gloat when any nation suffers misfortune, upheaval or distress, but we must be able to reap the benefit and wisdom from all that is happening (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Moskvyy*, February 3, 2020).⁶ [18]
- In early March, when there were already more than a hundred thousand infected people worldwide,⁷ Chechen Mufti Salah Mezhiyev also turned to the rhetoric of retribution and oppression: [19]
- It is God's wrath that this disease arose in China. Whether it is because of oppressed Muslims or for some other reason. If God was angry at Muslims, the disease would have started in a Muslim country. However, that does not mean it will not reach Muslim countries.⁸ [20]
- Another Russian Muslim expressed this logic of punishment in more emphatic terms, listing all the 'sins' China committed against its Muslim citizens: [21]
- They called Islam a disease and they got the disease. [22]
- They called Qur'an a virus and got a coronavirus. [23]
- They imprisoned Uyghurs for their religion and their cities became prisons. [24]
- They banned the hijab—as a result the whole city is walking around in masks. [25]
- They banned Islam—as a result many countries have banned entry from their country. [26]
- They said—where is your punishment? No one will stop us, but now they realise they can be stopped by the smallest thing on earth (the virus). [27]
- China is a warning to us, just a little warning. Come to your senses!⁹ [28]
- Despite the occasional appeals in the comments sections below these and other publications not to gloat and not to tar all the Chinese with one brush,¹⁰ politically and religiously motivated xenophobia prevailed in the Russian Islamic discourse at the initial stage of the pandemic. Why did it become so popular? Apparently, creating an opposition between 'good' Muslims and 'bad' Chinese was an effective strategy in reinforcing religious identity. It also [29]
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- 6 *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Moskvyy*. "Za poslednii god pritesneniia musul'man v zapadnom Kitae stali odnoi iz samykh obsuzhdaemykh tem' [Over the past year, harassment of Muslims in western China has become one of the most discussed topics]." Facebook, February 3, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/3oo22mnq>. (in Russian)
- 7 "Coronavirus Cases", *Worldometer*. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-cases/>. (last accessed April 12, 2022)
- 8 "Muftii Chechni: koronavirus—bozh'ia kara za ugnetynykh musul'man [Mufti of Chechnya: coronavirus—God's punishment for oppressed Muslims].", *Kavkaz. Reali*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/30472043.html>. (in Russian)
- 9 "2019: Kitai priznal religiiu Islam bolezniu... [2019: China recognized the religion of Islam as a disease]." Facebook, February 10, 2020. <https://web.facebook.com/koran.sunna.media/photos/a.1318462361585246/2593147817450021/?type=3&theater>. (in Russian)
- 10 Nurkai, Azamat. Interview with admin of VK-community "Islam bot," March 19, 2020.

allowed coping with anxiety and growing uncertainty in a crisis period. For example, in February 2020 there was a fairly widespread thesis that eating animals such as snakes and bats (considered the causative agents of the new virus) was unacceptable in Islam, while the Chinese “eat everything that lives and crawls even those creatures that are revolting and dangerous for human health; still they eat them and do not observe any hygiene when cooking food or in their mouths.”¹¹

Beyond the ‘sinophobia’, Islamic piety became the second important element of the discourse. How does one deal with the spread of the disease? How to be a good Muslim in times of pandemic? While in mid-March the recommendations and explanations provided by *ulema* on the internet became more specific (how to behave in quarantine, how to pray when access to mosques is restricted, etc.), the first few publications about the spread of the epidemic were not very detailed. Materials circulating on social networks in late February and early March focused primarily on the fundamental principles of Islamic doctrine: submission to Allah since “all things are in Allah’s hands”, meeting all adversity “with patience and hope for reward”, and remembering that “the biggest trouble is a trouble in religion.”¹² The discussion about these initial publications that offered no precise guidance on how to act in rapidly changing circumstances has given rise to a wave of spontaneous ‘popular *ijtihad*’ among users of social networks. Radical fragmentation of the transmission of Islamic knowledge has shifted the emphasis to individual everyday religious experience and ‘active piety’, as it were, meaning everyday manifestations of belonging to the Islamic tradition. Hence, the idea of obedience to Allah quickly became transformed into the “fear Allah, not the virus.” [30]

Maybe I’m wrong, but how can one not go to Mecca for namaz?! After all, everything is from Allah, why fear an incomprehensible virus that does not exist for me.¹³ [31]

The rhetoric of ‘enhancing’ religious worship satisfies the demand of Muslims for reinforcing their identity. Discussing ways of belonging to *ummah* gives a feeling of stability during the crisis, and the individual contribution to the transmission of knowledge to the *ummah* that we are calling ‘popular *ijtihad*’ turns out to be an effective strategy of articulation of Islamic piety. [32]

Moreover, the ‘popular *ijtihad*’ discussion on religious authority during the pandemic has touched upon the question whether religious methods are enough to protect believers from COVID-19 or not. Some social media users have interpreted the 51st *ayah* of Surah 9 of the Qur’an—“Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector.” And upon Allah let the believers rely. (Quran 9:51)¹⁴—as saying that no other special action against COVID-19 needs to be taken except for prayer, reading the Qur’an, and ablution five [33]

11 Mirzoeva, M. “Na foto letuchaia mysh’ v supe ili sup iz myshi, kak vam udobno.. [In the photo a bat in soup or soup from a mouse, as you like].” VK.com, January 25, 2020. https://vk.com/km1234321?w=w_all136290690_2765. (in Russian)

12 Biblioteka islama ot A do Ia. 2020. “Koronavirus [Coronavirus].” Vk.com, March 4, 2020. https://vk.com/biblioteka.islama?w=wall-42391762_30142. (in Russian)

13 Ram_Zan (@_ram_). “Mozhet ia oshibaius’ no kak mozhno ne khodit’ na namaz v Mekku?! [Maybe I’m wrong, but how can you not go to Mecca for namaz!].” Instagram commentary, March 17, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9163aulXFj/>. (in Russian)

14 References to this ayat can be found, for example, here: Religiia Islam’ دین الإسلام. “Luchshii sovet protiv koronavirusa’ v soobshchestve” Religiia Islam’ دین الإسلام [The best advice against coronavirus].” Vk.com, March 18, 2020. https://vk.com/islamnapominanie?w=wall-83046556_1084846. (in Russian)

times a day. According to such interpretations, the strength of faith is a sufficient protection against the disease, the threat of which had deliberately been exaggerated.¹⁵

Thus far, I have predominantly been talking about the early reactions of Muslims to developments in the Coronavirus situation. Although initially xenophobia against the Chinese formed a large part of their discourse, a little later the main demand for a re-articulation of the category of Islamic piety and normativity was formed. As a result of the need many Muslims felt to find answers to their concerns, Islamic theologians became actively involved in the Coronavirus debate with the aim to provide more exact explanations of how to remain a devout Muslim during the pandemic. In the next section, I will consider how, from the middle of March 2020, the Russian Muslim discourse on the pandemic was converging with the global discourse and what issues became the main crosspoints in this period.

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How the Global *Ummah* was Deconstructed in Muslim Everyday Communication: Building an Entangled Islamic Discourse During the Pandemic

The numerous translations of video addresses by foreign *ulema* dominate the content of the Russian-speaking Muslim segment of YouTube. Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the search for theological answers to questions of everyday life was fuelling the demand among the Muslim community for such materials. The radical personalisation of strategies for transmitting and receiving knowledge, in terms set forth by Bunt (2018), has led to a permanent shortage of information and opinions that would satisfy the entire spectrum of individual needs. This lacuna has been filled, at least partially, by translations of foreign ‘new *ulema*’. This way, the Russian Muslim community has become part of a global online Muslim society with its transnational market of Islamic knowledge. During the pandemic, different techniques of piety and devotion have become particularly sought after on this market. Editors and content creators of Muslim websites and forums have immediately responded to this demand. This has become most evident in the numerous materials offering *dua* (prayers) against the Coronavirus.¹⁶ Such a commodification of religious piety in no way diminishes the importance of Islamic values. On the contrary, it promotes their importance in the individual strategy of religious commitment.

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The other reason for the popularity of such translations is the underrepresentation of official local *ulema* in the online space. Turner draws a distinction between the not so mobile “official” *ulema* and the “advanced” Internet *ulema* focused on ordinary Muslims (Turner 2013, 206) that is relevant to the Russian case. Actually, official *ulema* put the Coronavirus in the framework of searching for religious piety as well, as we have already seen in the first reactions among ordinary Muslims. For example, the official appeal by the Ulema Council in connection with the spread of the Coronavirus localised the official requirements (to wash hands more often, to try not to touch one’s face, and so on) in the Islamic context. Citations from *hadiths* (stories about Muhammed’s life) became the main instrument for Islamizing technical

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15 Svet Imana (@svet.imana) “Strakh i panika opasnee koronavirusa’ na stranitse [Fear and panic are more dangerous than the coronavirus].” Instagram video, March 16, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9zabKLhMcG/>. (in Russian)

16 Islam today (@islam_today_tv). “O Allah, Eta bolezn vsego lish odin iz tvoikh voinov [O Allah, this is only one of your fighters].” Instagram video, March 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B94GVSEFWLg/>. (in Russian)

recommendations on behaviour in the time of pandemic. For example, the need to cover nose and mouth with tissues when coughing or sneezing was explained by the following *hadith*: “The Prophet said: ‘If one of you sneezes, let him cover his face with both hands’.”¹⁷ Another document explained the permissibility of quarantine as an “invention of Islamic civilisation” and emphasized the unity of the Islamic world in fighting against epidemics. It describes Ibn Sina (Avicenna) as a person who, at the turn of the second millennium, introduced quarantine as an efficient method to stop the spread of diseases.¹⁸ After this historical overview, the document discusses the measures against the pandemic taken nowadays in different Muslim countries. Making the Saudi, Turkish, Egyptian, and Iranian affairs part of the Russian agenda stimulates representing Russia as an organic part of global *ummah* discourse.¹⁹ Despite attempts to engage in the global discourse, as in online discussions, the foreign *ulema* nevertheless dominate in the Russian Muslim online space. The traditional institution of religious authority is eroding and ordinary Muslims using ‘popular *ijtihad*’ and videos of online *ulema* are appropriating the global Muslim agenda into their thematic repertoire at the level of everyday communication.

By the middle of March 2020, social networks of Russian-speaking Muslim communities were filled with translations of appeals by foreign Muslim theologians describing proper Muslim behaviour during the epidemic. In their speeches and texts, they addressed many themes that were already mentioned in earlier ‘grassroots’ discussions among Muslims: justification of quarantine with a reference to the *hadith*, searching for signs of the coming doomsday (*qiyamat*), as well as accusations against the Chinese in the situation. However, as soon as the pandemic covered more Muslims countries, the religious agenda changed and some new narratives appeared. Egalitarianism and an awareness of the illusory stability of the material world have come to the fore. The material entitled “Coronavirus from the Islamic Perspective” is very revealing from this point of view.²⁰ It was published on a popular Russian Shiite channel and also resonated with Sunni Muslims, showing the possibility of smoothing the contradictions between Sunnis and Shiites:

What exactly is the specificity of the current situation with the coronavirus? This disease has shown the absurdity and unnaturalness of the artificial world system in which we live. Within this system huge funds are spent on completely unnecessary goals and projects, such as flights to Mars, space exploration, the creation of the latest weapons and murder weapons, support for sexual perverts, but when real trouble came, it turned out that people all over the planet simply lacked masks.²¹

This anti-globalisation message is coupled with the discourse of shared Muslim solidarity. One of the most poignant moments has been the panic over the empty Kaaba that engulfed

17 “The Appeal of the Ulema Council in connection with the spread of the coronavirus COVID-2019.” *Muslim of Russia*, March 10, 2020. <http://dumrf.ru/islam/sermon/16801>. (in Russian)

18 His figure is widely recognised, not only in the Muslim world, as an outstanding physician and thinker and one of the symbols of the Islamic Golden Age. “Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world].” *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. <http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860>. (in Russian)

19 “Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world].” *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. <http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860>. (in Russian)

20 “Koronavirus s tochki zreniia Islama [Coronavirus from the Islamic Perspective].” Youtube, April 22, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/3h778rtc>. (in Russian)

21 Ibid.

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the Muslim world. On February 27, 2020, the Saudi authorities temporarily closed entry to Mecca and Medina to pilgrims. On March 4, the *umrah* (minor pilgrimage) was restricted, and on March 5 the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina were closed for the first time in forty years. This was interpreted by many believers both as a sign of the imminent coming of the Day of Judgment and as interference in divine predestination, and hence an action violating the fundamentals of Islamic doctrine.

Underestimating the significance of the virus was the other manifestation of an entangled discourse on pandemics. The ‘corona dissidence’ movement emerged in some Islamic circles right from the start of the pandemic. For example, religious authorities in Iran downplayed the threat of the virus in order to oppose access restrictions to Shiite shrines in Qom. In their opinion, the recommendation of the health authorities to limit pilgrimages was evidence of the “hidden hands of the enemy: ...defeating Qom is the dream of treacherous Trump and his pet mercenaries, but that dream will not be realised even in their grave... he wants to make the coronavirus an occasion for a cultural blow to Qom’s prestige” (Khalaji 2020). The Internet Russian Muslim community turned to conspiracy narratives in a similar vein: [40]

The number 19 in this name [COVID-19] is for a reason: it is the original number of the God. God who sent down the Qur’an and promised to guard it until the day of judgment. The next three years will be even more intense... as I wrote earlier, soon we won’t recognise some states 1444 the year on hijra will be a multiple of 19... and simultaneously the number of sura 76 “People”and it is not an accident that the virus appeared at the time when China has ventured to change the Qur’an²² [41]

At the end of March, the DUM²³ of the Russian Federation seemed to enter into a polemic with those who underestimate the significance of the virus by appealing to the principle of predestination. [42]

The considerations of our co-religionists regarding the ethical inadmissibility of closing mosques and their appeal to one of the basic pillars of Iman—predestination—are understandable. However, the suspension of prayer grounds and spiritual offices in Moscow and other Russian regions should not be perceived as contradicting the principles of Islam.²⁴ [43]

COVID-19 has made the question of corporality an essential part of Muslim discourse around the world. According to the Islamic tradition, the body belongs to Allah, and physical health is a gift from Him which the faithful should take care of and protect from contamination. The concept of *taharah* (ritual purity) obliges every Muslim to maintain purity of body and soul. The extraordinary situation of the pandemic has made these religious requirements entangled with political and medical responses to the Coronavirus (Ragozina 2020). For example, political-medical-religious entanglement was manifested in building a positive image of [44]

22 Mullagalina, S. “COVID-19. eta tema nyne vezde... [COVID-19. this topic is everywhere nowadays...].” Vk.com, March 10, 2020. https://vk.com/is.yabalak?w=wall376700610_511. (in Russian)

23 Russian acronym of Spiritual Administration of Muslims, the main unit of the institutional structure of the Muslim community in Russia. DUM of the Russian Federation claims to be the central organization of Russian Muslims. It is headed by Ravil Gainutdin and Damir Mukhetdinov is his first deputy.

24 “Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world].” *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. <http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860>. (in Russian)

Islam. Many Western journalists have remarked upon the ‘advantage’ of Muslim countries in counteracting the pandemic due to the high level of hygiene thanks to the religious tradition of fivefold ablutions and importance of ritual purity.²⁵

The normative functioning of the body no longer remained a part of individual religious experience, but became an obligation for the whole political (not just religious) community. The Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance launched a wide program of *sharia* investigation on COVID-19 where *taharah* is studied as a subject of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) documents (Taqdīmu albuḥūṭi 2020). Popular Egyptian *ulema* Ahmed Al-Muhammadi Al-Maghawri connects ritual purity with strengthening immunity: [45]

Just as we take care of our bodies, we must also take care of our hearts. The heart and the body are inseparable; purity of soul leads to strong immunity. Therefore, we must cultivate a high soul and disseminate peace of mind among people.²⁶ [46]

The same ideas can be found in the rhetoric of the Russian official *ulema*. They have to ‘translate’ not only medical terminology into Islamic discourse, but also the rhetoric of the state authorities, legitimising their actions in religious ways. Damir Mukhetdinov claimed that to “care for the body is a fundamental vocation of Islam, the body is a spiritual issue” and that “the body is not something bad in the essence—it can become ill because of its unworthy treatment.”²⁷ Moreover, he puts body in the discourse of disciplinary power: [47]

[...]Effective measures are needed that take into account the requirements of the present moment. In this dark and disturbing period, bodies at all levels (individuals, social groups, state, society as a whole) must be subjected to discipline. To a discipline that will protect our lives and our freedom.²⁸ [48]

Thus, bodily practices turn out to be not only part of individual religiosity but an important marker for belonging/not-belonging to the Russian political community. Corporality became an organic part of discussions on identity, especially in societies with Muslim minorities, such as Russia. During the pandemic, the issue of wearing hijab gained a new, medical, dimension. Social networks have been full of posts similar to this one: “They banned the hijab—now the whole town is wearing masks.”²⁹ In public debates in many countries, including Russia, the hijab used to be the red line for distinguishing between secular and religious identities. The Coronavirus pandemic offered an unexpected opportunity to challenge this division: equating masks and hijabs underlines the artificiality of religious-versus-secular dichotomy while allowing for a significant expansion of the religious sphere at the expense of the secular. [49]

Finally, the pandemic not only provided a common agenda for Russian Muslim communities and the global *ummah* but also leveled out geographical distances in Muslim world. The epidemic changed many modes of temporality and gave maximum acceleration to the trends [50]

25 Aslan, Rose. 2020. “What Islamic hygienic practices can teach when coronavirus is spreading.” *The Conversation*, March 16, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y6nk3smu>.

26 Al-Maghawri, Ahmed Al-Muhammadi. “Risālihi kūrūnā linā wa lil‘ālimi (in allahu yuḥibbu al-tawābayna) [Corona’s message to us and to the world (God loves those who repent and loves those who are purified)]”, *Al-Mesryoon*, March 30, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yfqpz3c2>. (in Arabic)

27 Mukhetdinov, Damir. Facebook, March 16, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/qwc32nn6>. (in Russian)

28 Ibid.

29 Koran.Sunna. “2019: Kitai priznal religiiu Islam bolezni’iu... [2019: China recognized the religion of Islam as a disease].” Facebook, February 10, 2020. <https://web.facebook.com/koran.sunna.media/photos/a.1318462361585246/2593147817450021/?type=3&theater>. (in Russian)

of digitalisation, forcing the rapid development of online religion. A local community, which previously seemed central for a multitude of religious practices, was suddenly weakened under the condition of lockdowns and bans on gathering. Restrictions on travelling and closure of religious sites caused great anxiety, as exemplified by reactions throughout the Islamic world to the sight of the empty Kaaba. The crucial question emerged: How does one maintain a sense of *ummah* in the virtual domain?

The most common response was to move religious practices online while keeping them as ‘real’ as possible. However, what does it take to digitalise ritual in an effective manner? Carmen Becker, studying Salafist online communities in the Netherlands and Germany, has identified three criteria for successful virtual religious rituals. They must: 1) protect the sacred from the profane; 2) be the result of community efforts in which a large part of the community participates and/or recognises them as legitimate; 3) support and reproduce the core values of religion. The success of transferring ritual to a new environment depends on the availability of appropriate technology that meets the requirements of this ritual (Becker 2011, 1186).

Digitising Islamic practice started with collective Friday prayers. As the Russian DUM announced: “March 20, 2020. — 25 Rajab 1441 Hijra will go down in Russian Muslim history as the day when Russian Muslims performed Friday prayers online from the Moscow Cathedral Mosque for the first time.”³⁰ Almost immediately after, the organisation declared this event a success based precisely on the criteria proposed above. The legitimacy of the decision to switch to online prayer was explained by the high number of people who watched the broadcast: “compared to the total capacity of our three mosques not exceeding 25 thousand people, today’s broadcast was watched by more than 94 thousand.”³¹ Moreover, it was legitimated by the interests of the *ummah*, to which all actions are aimed, and the general humanistic message of Islam: “Therefore there is good and edification in the situation of the coronavirus for the sincere believer as well”. Finally, the greatest emphasis, in my view, was precisely on rearticulating the realm of the sacred, not only in the face of the new threat of the spread of the virus, but also in the context of the “old” warnings about the Muslim community as a whole:

We have heard many times that the huge crowds of Muslims outside the mosque are caused not by religious necessity, but by a desire to demonstrate strength and show off muscles. Today’s event proved the complete invalidity of those hypotheses. On the contrary, we have taken the decision to rule out prayer gatherings on principle for the duration of the pandemic, without any guidance from outside, guided exclusively by Islamic moral principles and the desire to protect society from danger.³²

Conclusions

Are social media changing the character of Islamic piety during the pandemic crisis? Before the pandemic started, participation in collective prayer was deemed extremely important, but today “the Ulema Council has confirmed not only the permissibility, but also the desirability

30 Mukhetdinov, Damir. “Razmyshleniia Damira Mukhetdinova ob itogakh pervogo v istorii Moskvy dzhuma-onlain [Reflections of Damir Mukhetdinov on results of the first-ever Moscow Juma-online].” *Council of Muftis of Russia*, March 21, 2020. <https://muslim.ru/articles/277/26753/>. (in Russian)

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

of not allowing believers into mosques.”³³ As a consequence of the pandemic, several fundamental issues of the Islamic tradition have come to the fore: the legitimisation of religious authority; the problem of the transmission of Islamic knowledge; and the interpretation of piety. As the example of Russian Muslims shows, the rapid spread of the Coronavirus made many adherents of Islam rethink and articulate anew their identity. The repertoire of their discursive strategies proved to be quite broad. The first of them was the dichotomy between good and evil, the latter of which was China, responsible for the oppression of Muslims, and the former a righteous Muslim (the main remedy for the Coronavirus being personal faith in Allah). Secondly, the crisis situation, interpreted by some Muslims as a presage of the Day of Judgement, has led to increased manifestations of piety and stimulated the demand for information and instruction about Islamic normativity. At the same time, the commodification of religious piety ultimately led to the individualisation of religious experience. Finally, the pandemic led to religious and medical discourses becoming closely interrelated.

The pandemic has also stimulated changes in the system of knowledge production among Muslims in Russia. The traditional institution of religious authority—represented by official Muslim agencies—is eroding because of underestimations regarding using online space. At the same time, ‘new *ulema*’ and ‘popular *ijtihad*’ are coming to the fore. Within the scarcity of religious information, each Muslim (actively engaged in the search for piety) turns into an interpreter and social media becomes a space of theological discussion and individual interpretations that I called ‘popular *ijtihad*’. It may seem that it is a kind of break from the rich Islamic hermeneutical tradition now reduced to a relatively insignificant discussion of narrow questions by non-specialists in Islamic theology. However, from my point of view it is much more productive to consider this phenomenon as an organic part of the discursive Islamic tradition which is rapidly transforming nowadays. ‘Popular *ijtihad*’ is nothing else than searching for the original interpretation of the topical religious problems accommodated within new media and the new social reality. The pandemic has intensified the production of a new sets of religious meanings, dramatically making ‘popular *ijtihad*’ one of the crucial methods of this production.

Entangled glocalised discourse is one of such newly articulated sets of meanings: Translated foreign *ulema* became an authoritative and mobile source of information on the virus and religion and, therefore, of various individual interpretations that I called ‘popular *ijtihad*’. Ordinary Russian Muslims are incorporating elements of the global Muslim agenda into their thematic repertoire at the level of everyday communication, so online religion turns out to be lived religion (Helland 2005). Throughout this article, I identified several elements of this entangled discourse, namely egalitarianism, anti-global statements, Muslim solidarity, the underestimation of the significance of the virus, corporality, and biopolitics. Actually, there is nothing new in such a list—each of these narratives was in high demand in Muslim public space for a long time. However, the pandemic reconfigured this space, shifting the focus from the socio-political issues of Muslim representations to religious ones.

As with the example of hijabs and face masks, the ‘political’ agenda against Muslims has been refuted by strengthening religious rhetoric. The narrative of opposing Islamophobia present at almost all levels of Islamic discourse—from the official statements by DUM of the Russian Federation to individual posts in VKontakte and other social media—has resulted in a

33 “Musul'mane Rossii s ponimaniem otnosiatsia k meram po predotvrashcheniiu rasprostraneniia koronavirusa [Muslims of Russia are sympathetic to measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus].” *Council of Muftis of Russia*, March 24, 2020. <https://muslim.ru/articles/759/26761/>. (in Russian)

completely different resonance. Within the pandemic, the socio-political component has been sidelined as issues of discrimination and the unfair distribution of symbolic resources have been overshadowed by existential questions of life and death.

The construction of these discursive strategies would be impossible without a virtual environment characterised by a polyarchic community of online *ulema* and the digitalisation of religious practices. The online environment became an organic part of the transforming Islamic tradition. We have listed three criteria for the success of moving rituals online—but the real effect will probably be seen much later, after the pandemic is over. Will believers want to go back offline then? Will ritual practice remain unchanged after the experience gained under such extreme conditions? If the answer to these questions is negative, then perhaps ‘cyber-religion’ will become much closer to the now so popular concept of “lived religion.”

[58]

Funding

This article was funded by RFBR, project number 19-39-60010 “Being a Muslim in Russia: Politicization of Identity and Citizenship Models of Russian Muslims (Case-Study of Muslim Civil Activists).”

[59]

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