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Reviewer Report

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Article for Review: | Between the “furious crowd” and the “Christianization” of the COVID-19 pandemic |
| Research Network: | Religion in Society |

Instructions

* Provide a response and score for each of the five sections.
* Kindly use concrete examples when offering criticism and feedback.
* Please do not offer advice or criticism regarding styles or formatting.
* This file contains the manuscript for review. When returning reports, the manuscript must remain attached to verify the report appropriately matches the correct manuscript.
* Each category is scored on a range of 0 to 5 points.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| Very Poor | Poor | Below Average | Above Average | Good | Very Good |

Scoring Summary

After providing a written response for each the five evaluation criteria, please total your scores below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| EVALUATION CRITERIA | SCORE |
| 1. Empirical Grounding | 2 of 5 |
| 2. Conceptual Modeling | 2 of 5 |
| 3. Explanatory Logic | 3 of 5 |
| 4. Implications and Applications | 3 of 5 |
| 5. Quality of Communication | 4 of 5 |
| TOTAL SCORE | 14 of 25 |

1. Thematic Focus and Empirical Grounding

When considering the Thematic Focus and Empirical Grounding, please use the following prompts to guide your overall response and evaluation.

* Is this a topic that needs addressing?
* Is the area investigated by the article: significant? timely? important? in need of addressing because it has been neglected? intrinsically interesting? filling a gap in current knowledge?
* Are data collection processes, textual analyses, or exegeses of practice sufficient and adequate to answer the research questions?
* Does the article adequately document, acknowledge, and reference the existing findings, research, practices, and literature in its field?
* Does the article relate in a coherent and cogent way with issues of real-world significance?

RESPONSE:

* The aim of article 78561 is to simplify a complex understanding of the affinity that religious believers have towards public policy that centers on secular, scientific, rational, and technological considerations instead of religious considerations. The authors base their generalizations on different narratives created during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown in Russia and explain it as one of the measures generated to meet the challenges of the first wave of Covid-19. The authors compare what they call the "secular” narrative (the general public discourse and image) with the "inner-church” narrative (the believers’ perception of the situation). In their description, the authors point to the oversimplification of the secular narrative, which represents the religious individual and community. In principle, this narrative is unable to cooperate with the rational demands of the authorities. The inner-church narrative, on the other hand, presents a more complex picture of the religious world and its attitude towards the general policy.
* The article's description of the inner-church narrative is interesting and points out three distinctions. The first is the " 'Christianization' of lockdown" (p. 14). The second is the "neutral-temporal" (p. 15), which distinguishes between believers that cooperate with the general policy and believers that do not. The third is the “protest” narrative (p. 16), which characterizes its criticism of the general policy; its critique, however, is not based on the essence of the measures but on the unequal way the government enforced them. In my opinion, this third distinction is the most important contribution of the article.
* I am not sure if there is a need to address the issue of religious believers as a monolithic group that opposes general humanistic, scientific, and rational considerations. The authors provide the following justifications for raising this topic: First, to reduce "social conflicts" (abstract p. 8); second, "to address the void in the scholarship on the perception of lockdown from the angle of religious life" (abstract p. 8); third, to correct "the [wrongful] image of the “furious crowd” of believers who allegedly, due to their religiosity, were in principle not able to obey rational requirements" (p. 17); and fourth, to show "the divergence of positions within religious social groups" (p. 19). However, I believe there is not enough evidence to make these points for the following four reasons: (1) Distorted, shallow images are a burden that almost any subgroup suffers from; (2) Worldwide, many radical nonreligious subgroups who opposed government anti-pandemic measures were criticized in a direct and simple way in the general public discourse; (3) To find complex and delicate images of subgroups within the general public discourse is typically difficult if not impossible. The same shallowness can be found regarding national minorities, the LGBTQ communities, or even in occupations such as farmers, academic philosophers, or cosmeticians; and (4) There is no real need to show that religious groups and individuals are less rational than the general population or that religion and rationality necessarily contradict and exclude one another. For these reasons, I have doubts regarding the importance of the article’s overall topic. It deals with a widespread problem—the amount of truth and correctness in the general public discourse—and therefore deserves more outreach, more discussion, and a larger number of versatile cases to be tested. In addition, the article offers a narrow angle that ignores a more fundamental problem—whether one may gauge the amount of truthfulness, or lack thereof, that occurs in public discourse.

SCORE:

* (Two 2)

2. Conceptual Model

When considering the Conceptual Model, please use the following prompts to guide your overall response and evaluation.

* Are the main concepts or categories appropriate to the investigation?
* Should other concepts or categories have been considered?
* Are key concepts adequately defined? Are they used consistently?
* Does the article make necessary or appropriate connections with existing theory?
* Does the article develop, apply, and test a coherent and cogent theoretical position or conceptual model?

RESPONSE:

* As discussed above, the triple distinction between at least three different narratives within the inner-church narrative is interesting.
* However, those distinctions did not soften the difficulty I had reading the article's treatment of the term "secular." It uses secular to name what could be better titled as the “general-public” narrative, which points at the discussion of the different medias. While the authors called for a more delicate representation of religious groups, I believe they ascribe a limited narrative to secularism, as if secular groups are the only ones responsible for the superficial general public discourse. A careful understanding of secularism is needed as well as a more complex perspective in depicting the general public discourse in the media.
* The literature review section provides the abstract and initial concept of religion first presented in the article. Unfortunately, there is little use of the review throughout the discussion. Because the authors do not utilize the review in their article, it seems unconnected to the actual cases they deal with and therefore unconnected to the article.

SCORE:

* (Two 2)

3. Explanatory Logic

When considering the Explanatory Logic, please use the following prompts to guide your overall response and evaluation.

* How effectively does the article reason from its empirical reference points?
* Are the conclusions drawn from the data, texts, sources, or represented objects clear and insightful? Do they effectively advance the themes that the article sets out to address?
* Does the article demonstrate a critical awareness of alternative or competing perspectives, approaches, and paradigms?
* Is the author conscious of his or her own premises and perhaps the limitations of his or her perspectives and knowledge-making processes?

RESPONSE:

* I am not sure the article demonstrates awareness of competing perspectives or presents a substantial consciousness of its own premises. For example, although the authors declare at the introduction that they "do not support or refute anyone's point of view regarding emerging social conflict" (p. 9), they conclude by arguing that "in the case of the 'secular' narrative, emotions are often used in the process of constructing the image of religious group's representatives as a fundamentally different individuals, whose attributive features did not allow them to survive the period of lockdown as secular authorities required"(p. 18). In other words, the authors undermine the validity of the secular narrative while declaring in the introduction their intention to be nonjudgmental. Expectations dictate that the authors either assert their intention to criticize the secular narrative or remain, as far as possible, in a descriptive nonjudgmental perspective.

SCORE:

* (Three 3)

4. Implications and Applications

When considering the Implications and Applications, please use the following prompts to guide your overall response and evaluation.

* Does the article demonstrate the direct or indirect applicability, relevance, or effectiveness of the practice or object it analyzes?
* Are its implications practicable?
* Are its recommendations realistic?
* Does the article make an original contribution to knowledge?
* To what extent does it break new intellectual ground?
* Does it suggest innovative applications?
* What are its prospects for broader applicability or appreciation?
* How might its vision for the world be realized more widely?

RESPONSE:

* While the article does raise some interesting points, it does not break new intellectual ground. Please see my response for section 1.

SCORE:

* (Three 3)

5. Quality of Communication

When considering the Quality of Communication, please use the following prompts to guide your overall response and evaluation.

* Is the focus of the article clearly stated (for instance, the problem, issue, or object under investigation; the research question; or the theoretical problem)?
* Does the article clearly express its case, measured against the standards of the technical language of its field and the reading capacities of audiences academic, tertiary student, and professional?
* What is the standard of the writing, including spelling and grammar?
* If necessary, please make specific suggestions or annotate errors in the text.

RESPONSE:

* In general, the article is clearly written and would appeal to a wide range of readers.
* Proofing is needed in some places, for example in the second paragraph on page 18.

SCORE:

* (Four 4)

RECOMMENDATION:

How is the quality of communication as it relates to English language proficiency?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| [ ] | Publishable as is (Language problems are few to none) |
| [ X ] | Minor Proofing Required (Content should be proofread by a colleague or critical friend of the author) |
| [ ] | Professional Editing Required (English language errors are significant and detract from the overall quality of the article) |

*Our publishing model is intended to ensure that authors speaking English as a second language are given the equal opportunity to receive feedback from a peer-review process to critique and improve the conceptual material of their article. Some articles can be well researched and formulated but may require assistance with certain nuances of the English language.*

**Between the “furious crowd” and the “Christianization” of the COVID-19 pandemic: the Russian public image of Orthodox Christian communities during the 2020 lockdown**

**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the global lockdown have been important challenges for the society worldwide. Rapid changes in daily life have caused many social conflicts. Religious communities have had to find a compromise between the need to obey lockdown measures and to continue to take part in worship and other collective rituals. In circumstances of permanent fear, religious communities and their attitudes toward lockdown have become serious matters for the rest of society. Individuals, groups, and media have accused religious communities of creating danger for society by not following anti-epidemic measures. The present study is designed to address the void in the scholarship on perceptions of lockdown from the angle of religious life. In the context of Russian Orthodox Christian communities, we investigated the perception of the believers` attitude toward the lockdown (1) in the secular milieu, and (2) in the Orthodox-Christian milieu. We conducted the study from March to May of 2020, the first two months of lockdown in Russia. As for the lockdown, which caused all kinds of communication to move online, we analyzed (1) Russian-speaking media-resources about the believers` attitude during the spring 2020 lockdown; (2) comments posted in social media groups; and (3) interviews with clergymen. In all of these sources we searched for information about how believers/secular representatives evaluated the danger of COVID-19, their attitudes toward lockdown, and how they described the actions of other believers/secular authorities. The results of the study consist in the distinguishing two main narratives. The first is “secular”, and represents the believers as one homogenous group. The second is the “inner-church”, which has three different forms: (1) the “Christianization” of the lockdown; (2) temporary loyalty to lockdown measures; and (3) protesting against the lockdown in religious institutions. In the circumstances of social alarm provoked by the COVID-19 lockdown, members of religious communities have created different social strategies regarding how they should perceive lockdown and the situation around COVID-19. The present study shows diversity and a certain degree of flexible adaptation in these groups: in the media context they should not be represented as a homogeneous entity.

**Keywords**: COVID-19, lockdown, Russian Orthodox Christian communities, text analytics, security, secularization.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in the first half of 2020 has had an unprecedented impact on all spheres of economic, social, political and spiritual life in modern society. One danger of the pandemic is that authorities and medical professionals have often had to act blindly, taking measures that were not guaranteed to be effective at the time. Often, this either exacerbated previously existing social conflicts or provoked new ones.

The focus of this manuscript is the impact of anti-epidemic measures on the situation around a specific aspect of social and spiritual life, namely, the lives and activities of members of Orthodox Christian communities.

The situation of Orthodox Christian communities is an illustrative example; the circumstances are global in nature and cannot be reduced solely to the potentially problematic behavior of parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Throughout the entire period of isolation, religious communities and church life have repeatedly found themselves in the limelight; there have been regular news reports that a particular community`s members systematically violated the rules of anti-epidemic safety (Pertsev 2020; Soldatov 2020), that some activists of pro-religious movements intended to protest against the temporary closure of religious institutions (Karpov 2020), and that a group of so-called “COVID dissidents” was spontaneously organized; for religious reasons, they not only deliberately went against recommended security measures, but also posted videos of their actions on social networks in order to “inspire” like-minded people (to demonstrate their lack of fear before objects of sacred worship) (*Irantsy oblizyvaiut sviatyni dlia zascchity ot koronavirusa* 2020).

From approximately the end of April 2020, various media began to state that anti-epidemic measures in Orthodox churches could not be implemented due to the actions of the “furious crowd” (Pertsev 2020) and that “Orthodox citizens express dissatisfaction with the decision of the authorities” (Karpov 2020). Simultaneously, some clergymen asserted that public worship should not be equated with unnecessary leisure halted, such as with the closures of shopping centers or fairs (Kordochkin 2020).

In the beginning of March 2020, religious institutions and their representatives turned into the central protagonists of the new socio-political discourse as a direct outcome of the pandemic and the measures taken against it. Simultaneously, such a discourse would not have arisen if no corresponding prerequisites had been formed in society many decades before the height of the pandemic.

In this paper, we do not support or refute anyone’s point of view regarding emerging social conflict. We have tried to provide a broad overview of the various narratives and perspectives that have appeared in the religious and near-religious environment in the context of COVID-19, as well as to compare and analyze the characteristics of these narratives.

Problematic points should be highlighted:

First, we considered the peculiarities of interpretations of the situation, characteristic of both religious and non-religious narratives.

Second, we identified fundamental differences between these narratives, and sought to determine the extent of the homogeneity of religious groups’ stances in relation to anti-epidemic measures.

Third, we gauged the degree of emotionality of these narratives, because the importance of emotions cannot be underestimated in regard to reactions to events that are generally significant for all of society.

Fourth, we trace the process of how, during the pandemic, a narrative was constructed that “legitimizes” the fundamental differences between representatives of religious communities and non-religious society.

**Literature Review**

It was necessary to decide what exactly, in the context of this paper, would be meant by “religion,” “religious,” and “religiosity.” The answer determined the study’s focus: whether we would pay more attention to the external manifestations of religiosity, or to what is usually called the inner world of an individual’s (or group’s) religious experiences (Höhn 2007).

According to the definition of the French sociologist and philosopher E. Durkheim, religion is a system of beliefs and practices united under a moral community called the Church, including all those who are committed to them (Durkheim 2018). Additionally, any religious beliefs reflect “collective realities,” while religious rites occur only when groups come together and seek to induce common mental states for all members of the group (Durkheim 2018). Durkheim defined religion as a “predominantly social phenomenon,” reinforcing his position by the fact that each religious practice is based on a certain set of categories on which there is complete consensus among a group’s members (Durkheim 2018).

American sociologist C. Smith defined religion as a set of culturally determined practices, rooted in the idea of supernatural forces. These practices contribute to communication between adherents and named forces, making it possible to gain access to prosperity or, in contrast, to avoid evil (Smith 2017). However, regardless of the forms of these practices, they must always be sanctioned by cultural traditions. Smith stressed that the key role in the performance of religious practices is always found in group’s nature, because the actions of a single individual do not have religious significance, remaining only the single action of a specific person (Smith 2017). Thus, in the sociological interpretation of religion, we can highlight two key points. First, religion is always associated with communication processes, which include interactions with other adepts and with supernatural forces. Second, the special nature of religious practices requires their collective performance; otherwise, the practices lose their sacred meaning.

Thus, measures to combat COVID-19, largely consisting of artificially reducing the level of physical contact among people, developed into a real problem for religious groups’ members.

Several articles highlighted the ambiguous situation around the measures against the COVID-19 and restriction of the social interactions (Nikolova 2021) as well as the growing social mistrust of governments or health authorities (Houdek, Koblovský, Vranka 2021).

This problem is also reflected in a number of sociological works devoted to conflicts on religious grounds during the lockdown. Researchers have drawn attention to the growing need for religion during the pandemic (largely due to the various rituals around the phenomenon of death and the manifestation of grief), which directly led to conflicts in connection with bans on the performance of rituals (O’Baker 2020). The very nature of performing religious practices has become dangerous due to the impossibility of maintaining the requirements social distancing (Vermeer 2020). There are studies that emphasize the special role of a sacred space created by religious groups, which can be violated due to the interference of secular authorities (DeFranza 2020).

Several articles note that restrictive measures have been perceived by believers as a direct encroachment by governments on their religious freedom (DeFranza 2020; Hashmi 2020; Vermeer 2020).

A separate group of articles analyzes the social functions of religion and religious life—its protective role or the sense of security it creates for the individual (insecurity theory) (Immerzeel 2013; Norris 2011; Pargament 1997; Lim 2010; Vail 2010). These functions are very important for the religious socialization of the individual. During times of crisis, people begin to want a religious feeling of security; before, they may identify as members of a certain religious group. The need for this kind of protection has not been found in non-religious people (Ladini 2020). Other papers have shown a direct dependence between insecurity and religious miraculous experiences (Eschler 2020).

Since we deal with the peculiarities of the narratives’ formation – which are associated with religious and near-religious feelings - it is worth highlighting one study that explored how religious identities (or the lack thereof) affect intergroup bias in the form of identity-specific topic preferences and topic-sentiment polarization (Grigoropoulou 2020); the issue was examined using the example of interreligious debates on YouTube between Christian and Muslim as well as between Christian and atheist speakers.

We therefore focused on the specifics of Russia’s religious and near-religious landscapes; hence, it is impossible to ignore the degree of scientific coverage of this problem given by Russian researchers. Because the relationship between religious institutions and society during a pandemic is a very new topic, we have seen a limited number of publications on the matter. Thus far, the topic has been addressed in political science articles, where attention is primarily given to the problematic interactions between the ROC and state institutions (Lunkin 2020; Pochta 2020; Trushina and Trushin 2020). These studies stress the immediate strategies undertaken by Orthodox religious institutions during the pandemic. These studies also analyze the potential consequences for society, secular power and religious institutions. Although the abovementioned authors mentioned the existence of conflicting positions about lockdown measures, they emphasized orders on lockdown measures, the degree of interference of state institutions in the process of observance, and the reactions of clergy.

We grouped studies where authors have tried to identify trends toward qualitative transformations in the ROC’s religious practices during lockdown into separate groups (Sirotkin 2020; Trushina and Trushin 2020).

The closest issue to this paper’s topic is covered in a work of Rodionova and Bayer on the image of the ROC in secular media (Rodionova and Bayer 2020). Having examined several authoritative Russian publications from spring and summer 2020, the authors concluded that the image of the ROC in these media "is reproduced rather in a negative way”. However, the authors of this paper have examined secular publications, whose attitude toward ROC’s actions was initially critical.

The existence and functioning of religious communities and the rest of society during the first wave of COVID-19 is a worldwide issue. As such, it is necessary to compare the trends outlined in the works of various researchers with similar phenomena in the Russian reality.

The study of narratives around the behavioral strategies of believers and church institutions during lockdown in 2020 indicates a gap in publications on the topic. Hence, the presented work is aimed to fill this gap.

**Materials and methods**

Two factors made the study complicated. On the one hand, the social and spiritual consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been little researched to date. The causes include, first, the relatively short time that has passed since the first lockdown, and second, the fact that the story continues to develop, leading to increasingly more and more consequences. Our issue bases on the hypothesis that the first lockdown in Russia (spring 2020) was the key event challenged the society’s attitude toward the religiosity and religious community. In the unpredictable and stressful circumstances we got the opportunity to highlight a number of problems of Russian orthodox religiosity, because the emotional reaction of different participants show the main points of religiosity narrative.

On the other hand, in the course of the research, certain difficulties arose with obtaining direct materials that show the relationship between the participants in the relevant social conflict. Therefore, certain challenges emerged regarding the methodological aspect. The specificity of the field materials determines the method for research. The investigated time period (the first wave of COVID-19) refers to the time of rigid lockdown. The sources were limited to open Internet portals and resources, including news blogs, columns, videos and pages on social networks. Analyzing the secular and religious media from the spring 2020 we note how these media-sources observed and evaluated the behavior of Orthodox Christian communities during the 2020 lockdown.

**Results**

In analyzing Internet publications released at the end of March and the beginning of May 2020, with a certain degree of conventionality, we identified two key narratives that describe the situation of Orthodox Christian communities when the lockdown`s began. The first one, we call it “inner-church,” is focused on the changed external conditions that made taking part in church rituals more difficult. The second narrative we call “secular”, it views religious communities as specific social groups that stand out from the rest of society in numerous ways, including administrative authorities.

The beginning of the lockdown coincided with preparations for celebration of a key holiday in the Christian tradition: Easter (which in 2020 took place on April 19th). This fact contributed greatly to the unfolding of the two abovementioned narratives. One starting point for the development of the conflict was a message (Larionova 2020) that appeared on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, where, due to the epidemiological situation in each region, the clergy were advised to “tell parishioners to pray at home until the restrictions imposed by the authorities are lifted” (*V eparkhii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi* *Tserkvi*…2020). This order also applied to the worship of Bright Week, and to the celebration of Easter. Those who had to carry out this order were diocesan bishops, whose decisions are supposed to be dependent on the epidemiological circumstances of a given region.

Soon after this message was released, a number of media reported that believers were violating the rules of lockdown (Afinogenova 2020; Salimov 2020). In different posts and publications, descriptions ranged from minor to massive violations. The emotional level of the different publications about these violations also varied. For example, one source stated that “Orthodox citizens massively express dissatisfaction with the decision of the authorities” (Karpov 2020). Another news source, citing the words of a clergyman, said that some monasteries could not be shut down due to the actions of the “furious crowd,” and that a novice, after being diagnosed with coronavirus, committed an act of self-immolation (Pertsev 2020). Other news sources were more reserved, reporting only that believers in need of “spiritual support” continued “to go to mosques and churches” (Salimov 2020) and that on Easter Eve, some believers, “in spite of the lockdown, did not stay at home” (Narushaiut li veruiushchie rezhim samoizoliatsii 2020). In reference to an argument of the religious opponents of lockdown, the source mentioned that “Orthodox Christians, including those who are seriously ill, have been receiving communion from the same cup since time immemorial” (Salimov 2020). The source stated the special mission of the clergymen, who “explained” to the parishioners the need to refrain from physically attending services (Danichev 2020; *RPTs prizvala* 2020).

The peculiarity of the “secular” narrative is that, while describing the church community as a group isolated from the rest of society, different sources referred to “isolation” with varying degrees of criticality. If some sources just referred to the “difficulty” of the situation for believers and clergy, a number of other sources interpreted the situation in an extremely negative way. For example, some sources broadcast information about some people’s refusal to comply with anti-epidemic measures because of conspiracy theories (Pertsev 2020; Karpov 2020). Messages about the “furious crowd” and “mass discontent” had a widespread effect, stressing the fundamental differences between adherents of the faith from the rest of society.

Thus, in the “secular” narrative, we can note the following indicative features. Believers are seen as a separate group for whom the fulfillment of the requirements of secular authorities is fraught with difficulties uncharacteristic of non-believers. Among these difficulties are the inability to exist outside the traditions of religious support, and a high degree of needing the authority of a clergyman. Depending on the level of “anti-churchness” of a particular news portal, the description of the “specialness” of believers as a social group varied from total “barbarization” of them to their “tolerant” attitude toward lockdown measures.

The “inner-church” narrative was reflected primarily in pro-religious Internet portals, the reporters’ interviews with clergymen, and relevant groups on social networks. By comparing the sources available to us, we can assert the existence of many positions within this narrative. We use the phrase “inner-church” narrative exclusively as a concept that encompasses the view of the situation “from the inside.” With a certain degree of conventionality, we can distinguish three forms that were present in the “inner-church” narrative between the end of March and the beginning of May 2020.

The first form is the “Christianization” of lockdown. A number of Internet portals cited the words of clergymen who have tended to perceive lockdown as a phenomenon inherent in the Christian faith. «For a believer, this [violation of lockdown] will be especially criminal, because no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13)… limit yourself - thereby you will save yourself and help others», said the clergyman in an interview posted on the Orthodox site (Larionova 2020). An interview with another cleric revealed the following: “It [lockdown] is essentially a Christian concept. It contains the idea of ​​self-restraint, [and the] rejection of selfish motives” (Filimonov 2020). Additionally, these posts were published on Orthodox portals, which argued that a benefit of lockdown was spiritual self-improvement (Grinkova 2020).

The noteworthiness of this form lies not only in loyalty to the measures taken by secular authorities, but also in the fact that observance is equated with a Christian duty or a divine test for an individual in the absence of choice. The existence of this narrative`s form contradicts the assumption that the traditional specificity of a particular religion - which consists in the importance of collective gatherings - will inevitably come into conflict with the isolationist nature of anti-epidemic measures (see, for example, O’Baker 2020).

We designated the second form as “neutral-temporal”. A main source was social networking services (we considered groups on the popular social networking site VKontakte, or VK). The primary translators are not priests, but ordinary parishioners. Of interest were publications related to the topics of lockdown, refraining from attending church services, and opportunities to compensate for the lack of direct communication with one’s confessor (for example, using modern communication technology). We especially paid attention to group members’ reactions to such posts. There were three types of comments to the posts on these topics: (1) negative (doubts, disagreement, emotional hostility); (2) neutral (as a rule, these were comments asking to clarify an aspect of a problem); and (3) positive (expressions of approval for the post). For example, under a message about the intention of the ROC’s official leadership to bring priests who violated the rules of lockdown to the church court, we observed all three kinds of reactions. In the case of this post, there were approximately equal numbers of negative and positive responses. Users who left negative comments included both those who appealed to literal observance of the ritual side, and those who expressed disagreement with the policies of church leadership. At the same time, this message had more than 200 “likes” (posts in this VK group usually gain nearly 50 “likes”), which, most likely, indicates a positive attitude among the users of this post. Additionally, under messages containing recommendations for observing lockdown during Easter week, there were mostly positive reactions (Mozhno li…2020). In general, there was no oppositional attitude toward lockdown. At the same time, lockdown was not perceived as a test of religious feelings (as is the case with the position of “Christianizing” isolation); believers tended to view lockdown as a temporary restriction on religious mobility. Individuals who identify themselves as adherents of the religious community view church life as part of their own social reality, and do not divide their community from the rest of society.

Another important source, which we attribute to the “neutral-temporal” narrative, is the “Open letter to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia” (April 25, 2020) (*Sviashchenniki okazalis*… 2020). The authors of the letter were parishioners who found it important to address the internal affairs of relevant religious organizations. They noted: “….there is no unity in the Church in relation to what is happening …Various kinds of conspiracy and pseudo theological ideas are not only popular among some Orthodox Christians, but are also actively disseminated by well-known confessors and TV preachers.” In this part of the letter, there is a direct intersection with the “secular” narrative, especially with sources that emphasize the uncontrollable “mass character” of the lockdown’s opponents. However, the key difference is that the authors of the letter, sharing a negative position in relation to supporters of conspiracy theories and COVID dissidents, underscored that just “part of the Orthodox” were like that. They stated that there were simply some bishops who “compelled the priests to serve in the empty temples.” Among the comments of those who signed the letter (including specialists of various professions and social groups), there were strong critics of the religious COVID dissidents’ position, claiming that “mythological and superstitious consciousness…still exists,” and that “instead of aggression, the time of a pandemic [should] become a time of care and participation,” “the abbot of [our] temple … does not carry out anti-epidemical measures,” and “it is necessary ... to confirm with a priest’s words: it is possible to get infected in the temple.” Thus, in the “inner-church” narrative, there is a heterogeneity of positions when one group of believers openly criticizes the behavior of another group of believers.

The third form of the “inner-church” narrative is “protest.” Supporters of this narrative have a negative attitude toward lockdown measures. Groups consisting of such persons have become the objects of close attention (and sometimes harsh criticism) from the representatives of the “secular” narrative. However, the situation is ambiguous. While analyzing the available resources, we deliberately gave priority to the official ROC representatives’ statements, and not to the unofficial social movements’ leaders, positioned in the media as radical; for example, the words of such a leader were quoted a publication related to the “secular” narrative (Karpov 2020). If the position of such radical groups throughout the entire lockdown period is distinguished by a high degree of protest and intransigence, then in the media narrative created by the church’s official representatives, there is no homogeneous unity. The protest against lockdown measures for religious institutions has manifested in diverse forms. We distinguish two: one is radical, and the other is compromise-protest. The first of these was mentioned when we were considering the “secular” narrative’s features. The “secular” narrative developed through dialectical contradictions with the radical form of the “protest” form of the “inner-church” narrative. This form was interpreted as a single for representatives of the ROC. However, looking at the “protest” stance as a homogeneous is completely inconsistent if we turn to its “compromise” form.

Its representatives, who generally have a negative attitude of lockdown and the ban on visiting churches, nevertheless positively assessed a number of anti-epidemic measures. One quote from an interview expressed the following: “We were ready to go as far as possible to fulfill all the requirements of the sanitary doctors, to put our parishioners at a social distance - not like the crowd in the Moscow subway” (Karpov 2020). Notably, in this quote, the reason for criticism is not anti-epidemic measures. The readiness of religious institutions to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection is directly opposed to the unpreparedness of secular infrastructure organizations. We found a similar point of critique in the statement of another clergyman: “… our parishioners live nearby. Is it truly impossible to hold Mass liturgy several times a day, limiting the number of worshipers to, say, ten? Is it truly more dangerous than going to the store?” (Kordochkin 2020).

The fundamental feature of the compromise-protest narrative is, on the one hand, a positive attitude toward anti-epidemic precautions and a declared readiness for their implementation, and, on the other hand, a sharp criticism of the activities of the secular administration, which has been blamed for the inability to take adequate anti-epidemic actions and unmotivated isolationist discrimination against religious institutions.

**Discussion**

Our results are important for various reasons, including (1) social changes and conflicts provoked by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and; (2) the analysis of the socio-spiritual situation that has arisen around Orthodox Christian groups in periods when lockdown measures have been introduced. In this paper, we have considered the development and features of diverse narratives that have formed in connection with religious and ceremonial social conflicts. For ease of classification, we designated these narratives as “secular” and “inner-church,” which itself has three forms: (1) the “Christianization” of lockdown; (2) “neutral-temporal;” and (3) “protest.”

The significance of these results extends not only to the spheres of public life of Orthodox Christian communities. During the first wave of COVID-19, information that some people were intentionally violating anti-epidemic measures caused emotional reactions in all sectors of the population. A mainly negative image of the violator was formed; the public discourse endowed this image with a number of “inalienable” features, which depended on the reasons why an individual (or a group of individuals) violated the lockdown. Thus, in the Russian media, the image of a “furious crowd” of believers emerged, who, allegedly due to their religiosity, in principle were not able to obey rational requirements. This observation echoes the findings of other works, which have noted a high level of protest by religious communities against lockdown measures (DeFranza 2020; O’Baker 2020; Vermeer 2020). In this regard, an opinion arose about the special role of clergyman in matters believers’ compliance with anti-epidemic measures (Hashmi 2020).

The findings obtained from the example of Orthodox Christian communities in Russia demonstrate that the situation contains a far more complex set of social problems than previously thought. The large role of collective rituals side in the lives of believers, as well as the chronological coincidence of the lockdown and Easter, turned these social groups into objects of attention in the public eye.

One of the central problems that remains to be highlighted in the research literature is a frequent tendency to generalize in regard to religious groups. A religious group is portrayed like a homogeneous unity, consisting of individuals who share the same values. In the example of a “secular” narrative, we can observe how radical actions committed by one person or a certain group are almost automatically extrapolated to religious groups as a whole.

This representation turns out to be greatly simplified if we compare it with the narrative, which unfolded parallel in the Orthodox Christian environment. Believers’ attitudes toward lockdown vary depending on a number of factors, including the individual interpretation of religious postulates, one’s degree of involvement in church life, and individual views of the level of infectious danger.

Admittedly, while conducting the study, we encountered limitations in the f source materials; we assume that in the near future, it will be possible to analyze the features of the “inner-church” narrative in greater detail. Also, it will be important to study the features of narratives that arise within the framework of other (not only Orthodox Christian) religious movements. In addition, we cannot deny that the specificity of narratives in other countries’ Orthodox Christian have their own distinctive features in comparison with the Russian situation.

**Conclusion**

Our conclusions are the following.

First, when the representatives of different social groups were interpreting the situation, they paid attention to the followings:

- the features of rituals as an attribute of Orthodox Christians’ life,

- the religious dogmas and postulates that believers follow under any circumstances.

Second, if both the “secular” and “inner-church” narratives paid attention to these aspects, then the very interpretation of these aspects would be different. In the “secular” narrative, these aspects are seen as an insurmountable sticking point, which did not allow us to reduce the socio-spiritual distance of misunderstanding between religious groups and the sanitation policy of secular authorities. Within the “inner-church” narrative, these aspects have become controversial, because different groups of believers came up with different strategies to reconcile the religious tenets with following the authorities’ instructions. These strategies ranged from completely denying the existence of a contradiction (a Christian meaning was given to the lockdown) to the protest, which consisted of the demand to allow worship, under the conditions of following hygienic measures.

Third, a high degree of emotionality not only evoked “inner-church” narrative, but also “secular” narrative. If, in the case of the “inner-church” narrative, the presence of religious emotions is an expected element, then in the case of the “secular” narrative, emotions are often used in the process of constructing the image of a religious group’s representatives as a fundamentally different individuals, whose attributive features did not allow them to survive the period of lockdown as secular authorities required.

Fourth, from the “secular” narrative’s point of view, constructed differences are inherent features of the religious communities, making the fundamental differences between community’s representatives and non-representatives. However, the situation around the “inner-church” narrative, even around its “protest” position, gave us no reason to see any self-opposition to the rest of society.

In conclusion, the situation provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown is indicative of the reactions of secular groups, as well as the response within religious communities. An analysis of these events shows that Orthodox Christians are not a homogeneous group that can be described through the actions of single representatives.

The novelty of the results lies, first, in the showing the divergence of positions within religious social groups, and second, in the analysis of the conflicting narratives regarding the religious groups’ behavior during the lockdown period.

The results can be used to further consider the following problems:

- changes in the ritual life of religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic;

- the specific features of internal and external church narratives, the peculiarities of their formation and the conflicts arising when they collide.

Additionally, these outcomes can be productively applied when holding a dialogue with members of any religious community, since the heterogeneity within communities will be taken into account.

**Conflict of interest statement**

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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