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**FIDES VS RATIO: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARCHITECTURE
OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE ON MEDICAL PUBLICATIONS
IN RUSSIAN MEDIA**

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This paper examines the epistemological tension between theological argumentation and rational medical discourse in Russian religious media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on documentary analysis of 115 religious media articles and 91 official religious documents from Russia and Belarus between 2020-2023, the study identifies a structural paradox: official religious communications exhibit systematic dominance of theological language, yet address societies with low theological literacy, producing a significant communicative gap. Religious media outlets, Orthodox platforms “Pravmir”, “Foma” and “Pravoslavie.ru” in particular, functioned as interpretive intermediaries, selectively incorporating scientific discourse while maintaining theological primacy. The paper argues that the fides – ratio relationship in this context was characterized not by genuine epistemological dialogue but by instrumental appropriation: science was invoked to confirm decisions already taken on theological and political grounds. This dynamic reveals how religious institutions in post-Soviet contexts navigate competing epistemic authorities under conditions where science retains high symbolic capital yet operates within politically constrained public spheres.

Keywords: theological argumentation, medical discourse, religious media, COVID-19, Russia, Belarus, fides et ratio, communicative gap.

**FIDES VS RATIO: ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ СТРУКТУРА
РЕЛИГИОЗНОГО ДИСКУРСА О МЕДИЦИНСКИХ ПУБЛИКАЦИЯХ
В РОССИЙСКИХ СМИ**

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В статье рассматривается эпистемологическое противоречие между теологической аргументацией и рациональным медицинским дискурсом в

российских религиозных СМИ во время пандемии COVID-19. Опираясь на анализ 115 статей в религиозных СМИ и 91 официального религиозного документа из России и Беларуси за период 2020-2023 гг., исследование выявляет структурный парадокс: официальные религиозные коммуникации демонстрируют систематическое доминирование теологического языка, однако обращаются к обществу с низким уровнем теологической грамотности, что приводит к значительному коммуникативному разрыву. Религиозные СМИ, в частности, православные платформы «Правмир», «Фома» и «Православие.ру», выступали в роли интерпретационных посредников, выборочно включая научный дискурс при сохранении приоритета теологии. В статье утверждается, что отношения *fides – ratio* в данном контексте характеризовались не подлинным эпистемологическим диалогом, а инструментальным присвоением: наука привлекалась для подтверждения решений, уже принятых на теологической и политической основе. Эта динамика показывает, как религиозные институты в постсоветских условиях лавируют между конкурирующими эпистемическими авторитетами в ситуации, когда наука сохраняет высокий символический капитал, но при этом действует в рамках публичной сферы, подверженной политическим ограничениям.

Ключевые слова: теологическая аргументация, медицинский дискурс, религиозные СМИ, COVID-19, Россия, Беларусь, *fides et ratio*, коммуникативный разрыв.

Introduction: the paradox of theological discourse in post-atheist societies

This paper concludes and analytically summarizes the author's series of articles on the media rhetoric of religious organizations in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic [7; 8]. The pandemic compelled religious institutions worldwide to articulate responses to a public health crisis, forcing engagement with scientific expertise, epidemiological data, and public health imperatives. In Russia and Belarus this engagement acquired distinctive features shaped by two intersecting conditions: *first*, the Soviet legacy of scientific positivism, which endowed “science” with high

symbolic capital in public consciousness [q.v.: 9]; *second*, the post-Soviet religious revival characterized by high nominal affiliation but low theological literacy and low regular practice [1].

This configuration produced a central paradox: official religious documents issued during the pandemic exhibited systematic dominance of theological argumentation – biblical citations, patristic motifs, providential interpretations – yet addressed populations with limited capacity to comprehend such discourse. For most believers, religion functions primarily as cultural identity, national belonging, or symbolic tradition [q.v.: 2].

Religious media occupied a crucial mediating position between institutional hierarchies and lay audiences. Unlike official documents, which remained predominantly prescriptive and hierarchical, religious media developed more flexible discursive strategies, incorporating expert interviews, statistical data, and explanatory journalism. This paper analyzes how religious media negotiated the relationship between theological and rational medical discourses, examining the extent to which scientific reasoning was incorporated, the purposes it served, and the limits placed upon its authority.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: how did religious media in Russia and Belarus negotiate the relationship between theological argumentation and rational medical discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what does this reveal about the communicative strategies of religious institutions in post-Soviet authoritarian contexts?

Epistemological tensions in religious discourse: fides, ratio and mediatization

The relationship between faith (*fides*) and reason (*ratio*) constitutes a foundational problematic in religious epistemology. In the Christian tradition, Tertullian's provocative question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" – established a discourse of tension between revealed truth and philosophical inquiry. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* proposed that reason could serve faith, while Thomas Aquinas's scholastic project sought to demonstrate compatibility between

Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrine. In the Orthodox tradition, patristic sources exhibit nuanced approaches. The Cappadocian Fathers engaged critically with Hellenistic philosophy, while the hesychast tradition emphasized experiential knowledge of God (*theoria*) over discursive reasoning. Contemporary Orthodox theology often maintains cautious distance from scientific rationality, emphasizing the limits of reason in matters of faith. Contemporary Catholic doctrine on the relationship between faith and reason is reflected in the Encyclical letter “*Fides et Ratio*” of the Pope John Paul II to the bishops [5].

During the COVID-19 pandemic these epistemological tensions acquired practical urgency. Religious institutions faced decisions requiring engagement with scientific expertise: whether to suspend communal worship, how to modify sacramental practices, and whether to endorse vaccination. How religious authorities navigated the *fides – ratio* relationship in their public communications reveals underlying assumptions about epistemic authority and institutional legitimacy.

Recent scholarship on religion and science has moved beyond conflict models to examine how religious communities engage with scientific knowledge in specific social and political contexts. The researchers distinguish between epistemological and institutional dimensions, noting that religious groups may accept scientific findings while rejecting scientific authority over moral and existential questions [q.v.: 4].

In post-Soviet contexts this relationship carries distinctive features. Soviet state atheism promoted scientific materialism as the official worldview, systematically marginalizing religious discourse. Following the collapse of the USSR, religious institutions re-emerged in an environment where “science” retained high symbolic capital but operated within new political configurations. This creates conditions where religious authorities must navigate between claiming epistemic authority and acknowledging the public legitimacy of scientific expertise.

The concept of mediatisation is the process by which religious institutions adapt to media logic, provides a framework for analyzing religious media discourse [6]. Mediatization theory suggests that religious communication increasingly

conforms to media genres, formats and expectations, potentially transforming religious authority.

During COVID-19, digitalization accelerated this process [3]. Religious institutions rapidly adopted online platforms for worship, pastoral care, and communication. However, mediatization does not necessarily produce structural transformation; digital tools can reinforce existing hierarchies and communicative patterns [6].

This study examines whether religious media during the pandemic functioned as sites of genuine epistemological negotiation between theological and scientific discourse or whether they served primarily to reinforce institutional authority through selective appropriation of scientific language.

The instrumental logic of epistemic engagement

This study employs qualitative mixed-methods design combining discourse analysis, thematic coding, and comparative institutional analysis within the framework of the RECOV-19 project. Two main corpora were analyzed:

A. Official Religious Documents (n=91) produced by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, Muslim religious authorities in Russia, and Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia. Documents included synodal statements, pastoral letters, official homilies, press releases, and pandemic guidelines.

B. Religious Media Articles (n=115) from Orthodox outlets *Pravmir*, *Foma*, and *Pravoslavie.ru*; Islamic outlet *Islam.ru*; and Buddhist outlet *Sangharussia.ru*. These were selected for high audience reach, institutional legitimacy, and agenda-setting capacity.

All documents were coded using MAXQDA software with a multi-level coding scheme including discourses on health and illness, theological versus scientific argumentation, obedience and authority, vaccination attitudes, digital practices and church-state relations. Frequency analysis identified dominant and marginal argumentative registers across corpora.

MAXQDA frequency analysis reveals systematic dominance of theological codes over scientific, ethical, or pragmatic reasoning in official religious documents. Theological arguments predominantly rely on:

- Biblical citations (Romans 13:1-2; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20);
- Patristic motifs (obedience, humility, repentance);
- Providential interpretations of suffering.

COVID-19 is framed as a metaphysical event: a “test”, “trial”, or “call to repentance” – rather than a biological or social phenomenon. The virus functions symbolically as a manifestation of divine pedagogy rather than an object of epidemiological inquiry.

This theological framing serves institutional purposes: preserving doctrinal coherence, avoiding epistemic competition with scientific expertise, and reinforcing hierarchical authority structures. However, it produces a significant communicative mismatch: dense theological discourse directed at audiences with low theological literacy.

Scientific discourse occupies *an instrumental rather than dialogical role* in official religious texts. Medical expertise is cited almost exclusively to:

1. Confirm decisions already taken.
2. Legitimize obedience to state policy.
3. Support vaccination campaigns.

Scientific uncertainty, debate or pluralism are absent. The authority of science is invoked selectively and strategically, never as an independent epistemic domain. This is particularly striking given the Soviet legacy of scientific positivism, which continues to shape public expectations. In a society where “science” retains high symbolic capital, the limited and controlled use of scientific discourse by religious authorities undermines persuasive effectiveness.

Orthodox media outlets demonstrated a more developed journalistic culture compared to Islamic and Buddhist media. Key features include:

1. Greater use of interviews, narrative storytelling, and expert commentary.
2. Explanatory journalism interpreting patriarchal and synodal decisions

3. Contextualization through pastoral explanations and historical precedents.

Scientific arguments appeared significantly more often in Orthodox media than in official church documents. Journalists quoted epidemiologists, referenced infection statistics, and interviewed clergy with medical training. This practice reflects implicit acknowledgment that scientific rationality retains persuasive power among audiences shaped by Soviet and post-Soviet epistemic norms.

However, science was never allowed to challenge theological authority. Instead, it functioned as a supportive layer, reinforcing conclusions already endorsed by religious leaders. The *fides – ratio* relationship in Orthodox media can thus be characterized as *theological primacy with selective scientific incorporation*.

Islamic media in Russia displayed a markedly different pattern: minimal commentary, almost exclusive transmission of official decisions, and absence of debate or interpretative journalism. Islamic authorities' decisions regarding mosque closures, suspension of Friday prayers, and modifications of funeral rites were reported as final and unquestionable.

Scientific and theological justifications were rarely elaborated. Legitimacy derived from the authority of muftis, references to Islamic legal tradition and appeals to communal discipline. This communicative style reflects both the centralized structure of Islamic authority in Russia and the heightened political sensitivity of Muslim communities in a securitized environment.

Buddhist media discourse was heavily shaped by the authority of the Dalai Lama XIV, whose statements were translated and reproduced as definitive moral guidance. COVID-19 was framed as a karmic consequence, a universal human challenge, and an opportunity for moral cultivation. Scientific discourse was virtually absent; epistemic authority derived entirely from Buddhist moral teaching and the Dalai Lama's spiritual authority.

The communicative gap as a structural problem

The paradoxical situation – theological argumentation directed at audiences with low theological literacy – reveals a structural weakness in religious communication in post-Soviet contexts. Religious authorities employ argumentative

registers appropriate for internal theological discourse while failing to develop accessible translations for broader audiences.

Religious media partially address this gap through interpretive mediation, explanatory journalism, and selective incorporation of scientific discourse. However, this mediation operates within strict boundaries: theological authority is never questioned, and scientific discourse serves as supportive rather than critical. The result is a narrowing of communicative reach: official religious messaging fails to persuade beyond already committed believers, while the broader population, acculturated to scientific rationality through Soviet education, remains unreached or unconvinced.

The theological dominance observed is inseparable from a broader political theology of obedience. Biblical references to submission to authority, notably Romans 13, are repeatedly used to frame compliance with public health measures as religious duty. In this framework questioning state policy becomes spiritually suspect, dissent is framed as pride or disobedience, and compliance is sacralized.

This theological logic aligns with authoritarian governance, where loyalty and discipline are paramount values. The instrumental incorporation of scientific discourse serves this same function: science is invoked not as independent authority but as confirmation of decisions already made on theological and political grounds.

Digital technologies represented the most visible innovation during the pandemic. Online services, streamed rituals, and digital pastoral care expanded rapidly. However, digitalization should be understood as functional adaptation rather than structural transformation: it preserved existing hierarchies, replicated monological communication, and did not significantly broaden participation or debate.

Online sermons remained monological; streamed liturgies replicated hierarchical structures. While digitalization provided technical solutions, it did not resolve the deeper problem of semantic accessibility or fundamentally alter the relationship between theological and rational discourse.

Conclusion: the unresolved tension

This analysis of theological reflection on rational medical discourse in Russian religious media reveals a constrained and instrumental relationship between *fides* and *ratio*. Official religious documents exhibit systematic dominance of theological argumentation, creating a communicative gap in societies with low theological literacy. Religious media function as interpretive intermediaries, selectively incorporating scientific discourse while maintaining theological primacy.

The relationship between faith and reason in this context is characterized not by genuine epistemological dialogue but by instrumental appropriation. Science is invoked to confirm decisions already taken on theological and political grounds; theology serves to sacralize obedience to state authority; both operate within political constraints that limit possibilities for independent ethical reflection.

Several implications emerge:

1. *The communicative gap* between theological discourse and audience competence significantly reduces persuasive effectiveness of religious institutions.
2. Religious media can *partially compensate* through interpretive mediation but remain constrained by institutional loyalties.
3. Digitalization expands reach but *does not fundamentally transform epistemic hierarchies* or communicative patterns.
4. The pandemic revealed rather than transformed existing institutional logics, *confirming the place of religious institutions* within broader systems of power and authority.

The changing role of religion in Russia and Belarus during COVID-19 was characterized less by innovation than by consolidation. Religion functioned as mediator of obedience, moral language of discipline, and symbolic resource for political stability. The *fides – ratio* relationship reflected this broader function: both were deployed in service of institutional survival and political alignment, rather than genuine epistemic engagement or public deliberation.

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