Islamic Biopolitics during Pandemics in Russia

Intertextuality of Religious, Medical and Political Discourses

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ABSTRACT: In this article I discuss how the pandemic state of emergency has formed a subject field in Islamic biopolitics. By analysing the *fatwas* and official statements issued by Russian Muslim leaders between March and May 2020, I identify their discursive strategy of 'interpreting' the language of bureaucracy and medical terminology into the language of Islam, and of providing theological justification for certain governmental decisions. I consider several cases which illustrate the intervention of political and medical discourses of corporality into religious discourse. These include the politicisation of the regulatory functioning of the body, the sacralisation of quarantine as a special time for spiritual activities, the formatting of funerary ritual according to medico-administrative regulations and the comparing of victory in the Great Patriotic War to the victory over COVID-19.

KEYWORDS: bureaucracy, biopolitics, COVID-19, discourse analysis, Islam, Muslim studies, Russia

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has affected many areas of life, religious life included. Collective prayers, 'contact' rituals – everything that until just a few months ago had seemed unchanged – had to be quickly adapted to the new conditions of life in global quarantine. The category of the body, or rather the need for its hasty reinterpretation, has come to the fore. The body appeared not only in the sphere of religious regulations, but above all now became a subject of medical and state control. Religious discourse had to adapt in order to explain the pandemic. In this article I consider the 'translation' of medical and political discourses into the language of Islam in Russia during the spread of COVID-19. I analyse speeches, *fatwas*, and official statements by representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia published between March and May 2020.

I shall start by defining the term 'biopolitics', a term rarely used together with the term 'Islamic'. In

this article I turn to the concept of Michel Foucault's disciplinary power, one manifestation of which is biopower. Biopolitics is a derivative of biopower, and nowadays is often used in an expressive manner to show how 'evil' the modern form of power is. I use this term here in the most de-ideologised way possible to mean above all the political regulation of corporality. In the area of Islamic biopolitics, this term is mostly situational and therefore discussable. It itself points to the fusion of religious, political and medical discourses. Islamic tradition pays great attention to the body by defining various practices of control over it. For example, it regulates body movement during prayer, the wearing of the hijab, fasting, the purification of body and so on. The subject field of Islamic biopolitics emerged when the body became the subject of special regulation in the light of emergency circumstances – in this case, the coronavirus pandemic. There emerged the urgent need to

‘translate’ the requirements of the health authorities into the ‘language of Islam’ and to provide them with a theological justification.

This concept is dealt with quite clearly in Talal Asad’s (2018) concept of ‘secular translations’ wherein he places particular importance upon the translations of religious ideas into non-religious ones. In this way, official Muslim leaders have become ‘translators’ for Muslim communities, explaining restrictive governmental measures by providing theological justification for quarantine and mosque closures, among other things. To a large extent, this function of a communicator between the government and the Muslim community is explained by the political positioning of official Muslim institutions in the broader context of Russian political culture.

The main unit of the Muslim community’s institutional structure is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (which goes by the Russian acronym DUM). These organisations perform administrative functions, manage Muslim educational institutions and carry out charitable and educational work. One of the most influential DUMs claiming to represent the interests of all Russian Muslims is the DUM of the Russian Federation (DUM RF) under Ravil Gainutdin. He has recently been increasingly referred to as the ‘spiritual leader of Russian Muslims’.

The political agenda of this organisation is focussed on demonstrating loyalty to the authorities and promoting the concept of so-called ‘traditional Islam’ in opposition to ‘radical Islam’. The extent to which such official structures enjoy authority amongst ordinary Muslims, especially in the epoch of the digitalisation of Islam, is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, this structure has positioned itself as a reference group for all Russian Muslims. Here, I will discuss only this ‘official Muslim’ discourse, which is concentrated around several constructs. First, almost all Muslim leaders consider the idea of unity of the Muslim community. The most popular of these is Gainutdin’s idea of the unity of Muslims and Russians based on the notion of a Eurasian community. Second, spirituality and traditionalism are presented as particularly significant political values. Finally, Muslim leaders often refer to patriotism in their rhetoric as an idea that connects and unites all citizens. I have elaborated on the specifics of official Muslim discourse because the key categories of spirituality, unity and patriotism are now being reinterpreted and becoming part of the new pandemic rhetoric.

COVID-19 has returned corporality to Muslim rhetoric. According to Islamic tradition, the body belongs to *Allah*, and physical health is a gift from *Allah*

which the person living in the body is obliged to support. Following that logic, any means of maintaining health in that body is also permissible. That is also confirmed by a number of *Hadith*, for example: ‘No matter what disease *Allah* sends, he must also send a cure for it (Al-Bukhari 5678). COVID-19 has reinterpreted Islamic biopolitics. It has touched upon the category of purity. *Taharah* in Islam implies not only ritual and physical purity, but is also an element of legal discourse. Every Muslim is obliged to maintain the purity of both body and soul. With the present epidemic, the category of purity has ceased to be just a religious category. It has become an organic part of medical discourse and in turn an organic part of everyday life not only for Muslims but for others as well. For example, many Western journalists have remarked upon the ‘advantage’ of Muslim countries in counteracting the epidemic due to the high level of hygiene that has resulted from the five-fold ablutions (Aslan 2020).

Following the *taharah*, the hijab also moved into medical discourse, except that the reactions were much more emotional. ‘They banned the hijab – now the whole town is wearing masks’ was a popular post on social networks. The hijab used to be the red line for distinguishing between secular and religious identities. The equalisation of masks and hijabs in Islamic discourse is intended to show the ‘artificiality’ of red lines while allowing for a significant expansion of the religious sphere at the expense of the secular.

COVID-19 has seemed to make the body solely the object of medical discourse, ‘attuning’ religious rhetoric to itself. However, the body has never ceased to be an object of state biopolitics. Thus, certain Islamic actors have ‘translated’ not only medical terminology into Islamic discourse, but also the rhetoric of the official authorities, legitimising their actions in religious ways. One of the first attempts to reinterpret corporality within the context of the pandemic was by Damir Mukhetdinov in a Facebook post. He is first amongst Gainutdin’s deputies and has great authority amongst Russian Muslims. He claims that ‘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 its essence – it can become bad because of its unworthy treatment’ (Mukhetdinov 2020a). At the same time, he fits the body into the discourse of liberation and disciplinary power, literally using Foucault’s terminology but without direct reference to the French philosopher:

Effective measures are needed that take into account the requirements of the present moment. In this dark and disturbing period, bodies at all levels (individu-

als, social groups, state, society as a whole) must be subjected to discipline, to a discipline that will protect our lives and our freedom, a free discipline that a person has not been deprived of in the first place. (Mukhetdinov 2020a)

By expanding corporality to the state level, he thus ensures the interpenetration of power and religious discourses. The regulatory functioning of the body is no longer only part of the individual religious experience, it is now the responsibility of the community. Freedom here is illusory: it is as if the individual has been leveled off, bringing total 'free' discipline to the fore. In fact, it is through this expansive interpretation of the body that the state of emergency is justified, an interpretation which is almost in the spirit of Carl Schmitt and his definition of political.

From the very beginning of the quarantine, DUM RF recognised the priority of the state in establishing rules for managing COVID-19 and adopted a position of absolute compromise. In March, certain leaders in their speeches emphasised that the mosques were closed earlier than the Orthodox churches and without much friction. During a wave of social media discussions, many critical of the restrictive quarantine measures were given theological justifications for the clear compliance with the instructions of the authorities. Munir-Khazrat Beyusov, the head of DUM of the Nizhny Novgorod region, even appealed to legal categories, stressing that 'mosques are legal organisations of which the chairmen, i.e., imams, are legal entities. If an organisation or a legal entity violates the quarantine, and people are infected due to the actions of officials, they will face huge fines, including even criminal responsibility' (Beyusov 2020). In March, DUM RF clearly stated its position as a 'translator of the demands of medical and government agencies into the language of Islam'.

On 31 March, the day after the official announcement of the quarantine, an appeal by Mukhetdinov (2020b) about self-isolation was issued. It was interpreted as a time for spiritual searching. On the one hand, it was seen again as an issue of purification – 'moral, intellectual and physical'. However, physical corporality gave way to spiritual mobilisation, since spiritual health is an indispensable condition for meeting the requirements of self-isolation. On the other hand, the special temporality of the quarantine also became relevant. This period of time was seemingly removed from the ordinary course of time: a time when ordinary affairs acquire a very special religious status. 'Our jihad now is steadfastness and consistency in the fight against a deadly virus. Our zikr

is the frequent calling upon elderly parents' (Mukhetdinov 2020b). Gerhard Böwering (1997) describes the vertical and horizontal concept of time in Islam, both of which are based on the idea of atomism. The vertical dimension of the individual is characterised by a series of flashes of existence with instantaneous breakthroughs to eternity, while the horizontal dimension describes the whole community of believers as a myriad of atoms, all of them forming a common temporal basis through individual strategies. Muslim leaders suggest that quarantine should be seen as such an outbreak – not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity for each person to find the way to *Allah*. The sacralisation of quarantine is a discursive strategy to build a temporal basis for Muslims existence:

It is a pause that pulls each of us out of the usual system of coordinates of worldly vanity and places us in the system of coordinates of eternal values. Being in this meta-space, in which the usual way of life, money, fame and power cease to mean anything, in our own apartment we now have the opportunity to rethink our very existence, following the example of our Prophet, who went to the Cave of Hira and there in solitude to search for answers to the eternal questions of the universe. (Mukhetdinov 2020b)

Imposing the holy month of Ramadan on the period of quarantine only increased the sacredness of this time.¹ On 3 April, an explanation of Ramadan in the 'regime of non-working days' was issued, where the main emphasis was placed on the justification of the impossibility of collective prayers, *Tarawih namaz* (and that 'online prayers following the imam counts as participation in collective prayer'). Another explanation was given in mitigation of the regime of fasting, since this practice 'is associated with a decreased immunity' (Mukhetdinov 2020c). The *Ummah* during quarantine became more comparable with an imaginary community in terms of the definition of Benedict Anderson (1991), whose existence is provided not by any material forms of being, but by common values. Existential questions give priority to the physical body. However, the survival of the individual only makes sense when he or she continues to be part of the *Ummah*. The fragility of the virtual world makes words about the unity of the Muslim community even more meaningful. The 'collectivisation of corporality' takes place: the individual is responsible for maintaining physical health, while spiritual health is only possible in the *Ummah*.

Another example of the discursive transfer from the political to the religious sphere can be found in a radical change in funerary rituals (DUM RF 2020).

Many Sharia norms classified as *fard kifaia* (i.e., mandatory) – for example, washing the dead body, burial without a coffin, and a ban on opening the dead body – have now simply been annulled or modified to their diametric opposite. With reference to a reliable *Hadith*, it was said that those who died of COVID-19 were recognised as *shahids* ('martyrs'). While positioned as a *fatwa*, it still resembles a bureaucratic document where huge quotations from government decrees and medico-administrative regulations are interspersed with quotations from the *Hadith* and comments on them. In order to attain a balance and add religious legitimacy, each decision is 'synchronised' with other Muslim centers issuing *fatwas* – that is, by stating that a decision corresponds to a *fatwa* already issued by, for example, the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate or the Egyptian House of Fatwa.

Finally, the quintessence of the intertextuality of political, medical and Islamic discourse was the address by Muslim leaders on the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, the celebration of which occupies a special place in the modern historical policy of the Russian state. How are COVID-19, Islam and Victory Day related? References to the Victory Day theme are some of the most vivid markers used to demonstrate inclusion in the political mainstream and loyalty to the current political regime. This year, COVID-19 was issue number one on the agenda at the beginning of May. As a result, official Muslim leaders had to apply original rhetoric to combine these topics in an organic way. For example, they drew parallels between the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the victory over COVID-19, representing both as 'victories of spirit'. Individual efforts again make sense only in the community. Here the community means not the *Ummah* but the Motherland – and religious duties overlap political obligations, while patriotic discourse is integrated into the religious one. The metaphor of plague was used to show the victory over 'the brown plague of national and racial superiority, which our ancestors won in that war' (Zaripov 2020) and to indicate that there was 'a new plague at our doorstep – an infectious one' (Mukhetdinov 2020a). War heroes were compared with doctors, who perform a heroic service 'to bring victory over the pandemic closer'. The payment of the special alms (*sadakat al-fitr*) gathered at the end of Ramadan was compared to the donations of ordinary people during the war, when 'despite their own extreme need they spared nothing to help the front raise money to build an entire tank column' (Zaripov

2020). Gainutdin emphasised that there were war veterans who received special assistance during self-isolation (Gainutdin 2020).

The rapid spread of the disease has formed the subject field of Islamic biopolitics. The body has returned to Islamic public rhetoric as an object of political regulation. Muslim leaders found themselves faced with a double challenge: on the one hand, they were forced to adapt Islamic practices to quarantine and, on the other hand, to continue demonstrating their loyalty to the current political regime. The uniqueness of the Russian case from this point of view lies in the fact that the official representatives of the Muslim community were able to combine these tasks effectively while taking on the functions of 'translators'. They translated from the bureaucratic language of the requirements of various regulations and medical terminology into the language of Islam, thus providing theological justification for certain decisions. It was the body that became the main category of these interpretations. The normative functioning of the body was no longer just a part of individual religious experience, but an obligation for the whole political (not just religious) community. Quarantine overlapped with Ramadan to acquire a special sacral status, and was thus described as a time of special spiritual searching. It was also placed within the context of governmental demands to observe the regime of self-isolation. The adoption of medical and political discourse into religious discourse ensured the effectiveness of the strategy chosen by Muslim leaders during the pandemic.

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Note

1. This year, Ramadan took place from 23 April to 23 May.

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