

# “The Church Is Not Against Science”: Russian Orthodox Framing of IVF in Online Media

Caroline Hill \*

Department of Theology, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

\*Corresponding author: Caroline Hill, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Box 514, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden. Email: caroline.hill@ires.uu.se

## Abstract

Use of in vitro fertilization (IVF) in Russia has increased in the country’s public and private healthcare sectors since the fall of the Soviet Union and is now funded by the Russian state in an effort to boost population growth. At the same time, clerics in the Russian Orthodox Church have raised questions about the utilization of IVF via pronouncements in both Church-affiliated and mainstream news sources online. This article examines the framing of IVF by Russian Orthodox clerics in Orthodox news portals and Russian newspaper websites. In doing so, this study shows that frames highlighting problems such as medical and economic issues surrounding IVF outpaced arguments based in religion or calls for state action, and that the technological complexity of IVF has led to more nuanced discussions of the extent to which the procedure is permissible by the Church than in debates of other morality policy issues such as abortion.

In post-Soviet Russia, clerics serving in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) have participated actively in public debates on morality policy issues, including reproductive health matters. The question of in vitro fertilization (IVF) presents a special challenge to ROC clerics due to the Russian government’s endorsement of IVF as part of demographic initiatives, the technological complexity of the procedure, the Russian population’s relative lack of knowledge concerning IVF, and debates within the Church regarding whether IVF is permissible—and if yes, under what conditions.

This article will examine morality framing of IVF by clerics in the Russian Orthodox Church in two forms of online media: news portals affiliated with the Church and mainstream newspaper websites. The data set ranges from 2000, the year that the ROC first published institutional guidelines on IVF, through 2020, the year when changes to the Russian Constitution signified the start of a new era of church-state cooperation in Russia.<sup>1</sup> Church clerics’ framing is analyzed according to typologies for morality framing adapted to the Russian case, as well as framing of church-state relations.<sup>2</sup> In the process, this article intends to answer the following research

<sup>1</sup> Gosudarstvennaia Duma, “Novyi tekst konstitutsii RF s popravkami 2020,” July 3, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/>; all translations from Russian to English by Caroline Hill; Kristina Stoeckl, “Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2020): 1–75.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Mucciaroni, “Are Debates about ‘Morality Policy’ Really about Morality? Framing Opposition to Gay and Lesbian Rights,” *Policy Studies Journal* 39 (2011): 187–216; Caroline Hill, “Framing ‘Gay Propaganda’: The Orthodox Church and Morality Policy in Russia” (master’s thesis, Uppsala University, 2017), <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1069954/FULLTEXT01.pdf>; Kristina Stoeckl, “Tri modeli tserkovno-gosudarstvennykh otnoshenii v sovremennoi Rossii,” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov’* 36 (2018): 219–46; Caroline Hill, “Framing of Abortion and Church-State Relations in Russian Orthodox Online Portals,” *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 1084, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121084>; Caroline Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing of Abortion in Online Journalism on Religion,” *Social Compass* 70, no. 3 (2023): 446–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686231198783>.

question: What frames are used by Russian Orthodox clerics in debates over IVF in media forms aimed at Orthodox Christian believers, and those geared toward a more mainstream audience?

By doing so, this research seeks to increase understanding of approaches employed by ROC clerics when debating technically intricate morality policy issues, such as IVF, before different audiences. In conclusion, this article raises questions about the willingness of those in the Church who are opposed to IVF to speak out against the Russian government's support of IVF as a benefit for military personnel enlisted in the war in Ukraine, as well as the applicability of the church-state relations typology used here to morality policy debates on IVF in the West.

## IVF in Russia

The first live birth of a child conceived through IVF in the Soviet Union took place in 1986, 8 years after the world's "first 'test tube baby,'" Louise Brown, was born in the UK.<sup>3</sup> Legislation governing IVF was first introduced in Russia in 1993, with a declaration that, "Every adult woman of reproductive age has the right to artificial insemination and embryo implantation."<sup>4</sup> This law was amended in 2011 to include new provisions giving married and unmarried heterosexual couples and single women the right to access "methods of treating infertility...including the use of donor and/or cryopreserved germ cells."<sup>5</sup> In 2012, the Ministry of Health set forth detailed guidelines for assisted reproductive technologies, including IVF.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian state's monetary support of IVF has increased over time as part of efforts to increase population growth. Funding of IVF treatments through the federal budget was launched in 2013, and IVF was included in medical services offered under the state mandatory medical insurance program (OMS) starting in 2016.<sup>7</sup> By 2017, 65.4 percent of IVF cycles in Russia were covered by the OMS.<sup>8</sup> In 2018, the Russian government launched the Demography National Project, a program that included plans to provide 450,000 cost-free IVF procedures to infertile couples from 2019 through 2024.<sup>9</sup>

Although "relations between the State and reproductive medicine in Russia can be considered settled" in favor of IVF treatment, there are issues within the country's healthcare system that hinder the delivery of services.<sup>10</sup> Dispensation of IVF treatment at the expense of the OMS is implemented via a quota system, but some population groups who are eligible for IVF by law, such as single women experiencing "social infertility," are ineligible to participate in the quota scheme.<sup>11</sup> Those eligible to apply are saddled with extensive paperwork that must be re-filed for each subsequent IVF cycle, placed on regional waiting lists, "which might exceed a year," and must pay for services and medications not covered by the OMS.<sup>12</sup> As a result, access to IVF through state programs "is in reality very restricted due to the high cost of treatments compared to average salaries," leaving prospective patients faced with the options of delving into personal savings or taking out loans in order to undergo treatment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Maria Kirpichenko, "Russian Legislative Practices and Debates on the Restriction of Wide Access to ARTs," in *Assisted Reproduction across Borders: Feminist Perspectives on Normalizations, Disruptions, and Transmissions*, ed. Merete Lie and Nina Lykke (Routledge, 2016), 233; Nina E. Rusanova, "Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Russia: Medical Breakthroughs and Social Problems," *Population and Economics* 4, no. 4 (2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3897/popeco.4.e58271>.

<sup>4</sup> Osnovy zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22.07.1993 g. No. 5487-1, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/3980>.

<sup>5</sup> Federal'nyi zakon ot 21.11.2011 g., No. 323-F3, Ob osnovakh okhrany zdorovia grazhdan v Rossiiskoi Federatsii, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/34333>.

<sup>6</sup> Ministerstvo zdoravookhraneniia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Prikaz o poriadke ispol'zovaniia vspomogatel'nykh reproduktivnykh tekhnologii, protivopokazaniakh i ogranicheniakh k ikh primeneniuiu, August 30, 2012, No. 107n, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://minzdrav.gov.ru/documents/8023-prikaz-o-poryadke-ispolzovaniya-vspomogatelnykh-reproduktivnykh-tehnologiy-protivopokazaniyah-i-ogranicheniyah-k-ih-primeneniuyu>.

<sup>7</sup> Tat'iana Beskaravainia, "EKO-Dengi," *Medvestnik*, April 20, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://medvestnik.ru/content/articles/EKO-dengi.html>; Alexandra A. Moskaleva, "Effect of Inclusion of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in the State Health Insurance Programme in Russia," *Population and Economics* 4, no. 4 (2020): 20, <https://doi.org/10.3897/popeco.4.e59062>; the state mandatory medical insurance program will hereinafter be referred to by its Russian acronym, "OMS."

<sup>8</sup> Beskaravainia, "EKO-Dengi."

<sup>9</sup> "Natsional'nye proekty: tselevye pokazateli i osnovnye rezul'taty," (2019): 24, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://static.government.ru/media/files/p7nn2CS0pVhvQ98OOwAt2dzCIAietQih.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Rusanova, "Assisted Reproductive Technologies," 16.

<sup>11</sup> Kirpichenko, "Russian Legislative Practices," 236.

<sup>12</sup> Kirpichenko, "Russian Legislative Practices," 236; Beskaravainia, "EKO-Dengi."

<sup>13</sup> Kirpichenko, "Russian Legislative Practices," 234.

For those with sufficient funds, private fertility clinics are an enticing alternative to state-run medical facilities due to more efficient treatment plans. In order to attract clients intimidated by high costs, private clinics offer incentives such as payment plans, “discount programs for those who already completed several IVF attempts without results,” and “discounts on donor bio-materials.”<sup>14</sup> State demography programs also outsource OMS-funded patients to the private sector. According to the SOGAZ-Med insurance company, 45 percent of clients who underwent IVF treatment at the expense of the OMS between 2017 and 2019 were treated in private clinics.<sup>15</sup>

### Russian IVF in Numbers

Between 2000 and 2020, the period studied in this article, there was a marked increase in the number of IVF treatments reported, rising from 4,155 in 2000 to 14,239 in 2010 and 35,645 in 2019, the last year that IVF figures for Russia were reported to the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology.<sup>16</sup> The uptick in procedures has been credited in part to the inclusion of IVF in the list of services covered by the OMS.<sup>17</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic drove numbers down, as “most IVF programs were suspended and some reproductive centers were temporarily reorganized into COVID hospitals.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the closure of borders prevented private clinics’ overseas clientele from accessing treatment; as a result, the first nine months of 2020 saw only 86 percent of procedures carried out compared to the previous year.<sup>19</sup>

That said, statistics regarding IVF in Russia are the subject of considerable debate. As Nina E. Rusanova notes, “participation in the Russian register of [assisted reproductive technology procedures] is not mandatory for clinics, so the final country indicators are generally underestimated.”<sup>20</sup> In 2000, 21 of the 30 clinics known to perform IVF reported their treatment statistics; in 2010, this figure was 72 out of 116 clinics, and in 2019, 219 of 299 clinics.<sup>21</sup> Refusal by clinics to release treatment numbers and a lack of top-down monitoring by the state has led to an “absence of an established approach to accounting for qualitative indicators, such as health of newborns, individual cost of treatment, [and] social response to reproductive care,” making it impossible to assess the full scale of the industry—and potential problems therein.<sup>22</sup>

Bureaucratic hurdles and opaque statistics notwithstanding, the majority of the Russian population views IVF favorably. In a survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), 84 percent of the sample stated that they found IVF to be “acceptable,” while only 7 percent declared it “unacceptable.”<sup>23</sup> The primary concern regarding IVF is the price tag. T.K. Rostovskaya and O.V. Kuchmaeva found that “the most significant obstacle to the use of ARTs is their high cost” for 57.2 percent of those they surveyed.<sup>24</sup> This response can be attributed to general ignorance about IVF and state support thereof, as only 33 percent of those polled by the

<sup>14</sup> Beskaravainia, “EKO-Dengi.”

<sup>15</sup> Beskaravainia, “EKO-Dengi.”

<sup>16</sup> The European IVF-Monitoring Programme (EIM) for the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology in Europe, 2000: Results Generated from European Registers by ESHRE,” *Human Reproduction* 19, no. 3 (2004): 492, <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deh129>; M.S. Kupka et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology in Europe, 2010: Results Generated from European Registers by ESHRE,” *Human Reproduction* 29, no. 10 (2014): 2101, <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deu175>; The European IVF Monitoring Consortium (EIM) for the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) et al., “ART in Europe, 2019: Results Generated from European Registries by ESHRE,” *Human Reproduction* 38, no. 12 (2023): 2323, <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dead197>.

<sup>17</sup> Rusanova, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 8.

<sup>18</sup> Rusanova, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 15.

<sup>19</sup> Tat’iana Beskaravainia, “Shchetnaia palata zaiavila o neprozrachnosti mekhanizma raspredeleniia obemov EKO,” *Medvestnik*, March 17, 2021, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://medvestnik.ru/content/news/Schetnaya-palata-zayavila-o-neprozrachnosti-mekhanizma-raspredeleniya-obemov-EKO.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Rusanova, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 7.

<sup>21</sup> The European IVF-Monitoring Programme (EIM) for the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology,” 492; M.S. Kupka et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology,” 2101; The European IVF Monitoring Consortium (EIM) for the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) et al., “ART in Europe,” 2323.

<sup>22</sup> Rusanova, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 6.

<sup>23</sup> VCIOM, “Otnoshenie naseleniia k probleme sokhraneniia reproduktivnogo zdorovia i vospriiatie EKO,” July 15, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://wciom.ru/fileadmin/file/reports\\_conferences/2020/2020-07-15\\_Reproduktivnoe\\_zdorove.pdf](https://wciom.ru/fileadmin/file/reports_conferences/2020/2020-07-15_Reproduktivnoe_zdorove.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> ARTs are assisted reproductive technologies; T.K. Rostovskaya and O.V. Kuchmaeva, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies through the Eyes of Russians,” *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 91 (2021): 583, <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331621050063>.

VCIOM were aware that funding through the OMS was available, years after IVF was included in the list of procedures covered.<sup>25</sup>

### The Russian Orthodox Church and IVF

The Russian Orthodox Church's first attempt to address in vitro fertilization at the institutional level started in 1994, when the need for a document that would set forth the Church's position was voiced at a meeting of the ROC Bishops' Council.<sup>26</sup> This spurred the development of the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, a document published in 2000.<sup>27</sup> While the *Social Concept* sought to establish guidelines regarding the use of IVF and other fertility treatments, Orthodox priest and professor Roman Tarabrin has noted that "the document as a whole remains unclear."<sup>28</sup> On one hand, the text advises that "If a husband or a wife is sterile and the therapeutic and surgical methods of infertility treatment do not help the spouses, they should humbly accept childlessness as a special calling in life" or consider adoption.<sup>29</sup> However, it goes on to state that "all kinds of extracorporeal fertilization involving the production, conservation, and purposeful destruction of 'spare' embryos" are "morally inadmissible."<sup>30</sup> In Tarabrin's opinion, the latter clause listing treatment protocols to be avoided left the door open to IVF treatments that did not involve said protocols.<sup>31</sup>

This contradiction sparked debates within Russian Orthodox circles in which "a one-sided interpretation of [the *Social Concept*] by fundamentalist-minded groups has come into conflict with the wishes of infertile Orthodox Christian couples to have their own children and not fall into sin in doing so."<sup>32</sup> These disputes continued through the 2010s, prompting the Commission on Theology of the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church to convene sessions regarding IVF in 2017. This led to a "tense discussion" over whether the Church's position on the procedure should be more flexible in order to accommodate believers who preferred IVF to childlessness or alternative routes to parenthood.<sup>33</sup>

In a further attempt to clarify the Church's stance on IVF, the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church developed and released the *Draft Document on Ethical Problems Connected with the Method of In Vitro Fertilization* for public discussion and feedback.<sup>34</sup> The *Draft Document* encouraged couples facing infertility to adopt, but took technological advancements in IVF treatment into account and stated that the Church would permit IVF as long as production of large numbers of embryos, cryoconservation, reduction of excess embryos, gamete donation, and pre-implantation diagnostics were excluded from the treatment protocol; furthermore, the text cautioned that children could only be born within marriage.<sup>35</sup> The guidelines also placed heavy emphasis on the importance of pastoral care, stating, "In each specific case, the decision to use IVF can be left to the discretion of the father confessor who knows the spiritual strength of the married couple, [and] the ability of the spouses to continue to bear the cross of childlessness."<sup>36</sup>

While the Russian Orthodox Church has faced internal debates regarding IVF, those clerics making public pronouncements also grapple with ambivalence toward religious strictures on the part of the Russian people. While the majority of the population identify as Orthodox Christians, decades after the fall of Communism, "practicing Orthodox Christians" who regularly attend church and take Communion only comprise around 3 percent of the population.<sup>37</sup> As

<sup>25</sup> VCIOM, "Otnosheniie naseleniia."

<sup>26</sup> Roman Tarabrin, "Bioeticheskie problemy Ekstrakorporal'nogo oplodotvoreniiia v Rossiiskoi pravoslavnoi diskussii," *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 39, no. 4 (2021): 145.

<sup>27</sup> Russian Orthodox Church, "Osnovy sotsial'noi kontseptsii Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi," June 8, 2008, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html>; hereinafter referred to as the "*Social Concept*."

<sup>28</sup> Roman Tarabrin, "Orthodox Perspectives on *In Vitro* Fertilization in Russia," *Christian Bioethics* 26, no. 2 (2020): 179.

<sup>29</sup> Russian Orthodox Church, "Osnovy sotsial'noi kontseptsii."

<sup>30</sup> Russian Orthodox Church, "Osnovy sotsial'noi kontseptsii."

<sup>31</sup> Tarabrin, "Orthodox Perspectives," 179.

<sup>32</sup> Tarabrin, "Bioeticheskie problemy," 163.

<sup>33</sup> Tarabrin, "Bioeticheskie problemy," 149.

<sup>34</sup> Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov': Ofitsial'nyi sait Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, "Proekt dokumenta 'Eticheskiye problemy, sviazannye s metodom Ekstrakorporal'nogo oplodotvoreniiia,'" February 5, 2021, accessed January 1, 2025, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5768019.html>; hereinafter referred to as the "*Draft Document*."

<sup>35</sup> Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov': Ofitsial'nyi sait Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, "Proekt dokumenta."

<sup>36</sup> Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov': Ofitsial'nyi sait Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, "Proekt dokumenta."

<sup>37</sup> N.N. Emelyanov, "Religiosity Paradox: Where Do Believers Come From?," *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes* 2 (2018): 35, 44.

with other reproductive health issues, such as abortion, self-identification as Orthodox Christian “believers” does not preclude the use of assisted reproductive technologies in Russia.<sup>38</sup> According to Rostovskaya and Kuchmaeva, the percentage of those who had problems affecting fertility and expressed a desire to “use ART is 14.2 percent among believers and 14.8 percent among those who do not consider themselves to be believers.”<sup>39</sup> Among those who self-identified as “truly churching people (those who pray often),” those willing to try fertility treatments comprised 11.7 percent.<sup>40</sup> Those clerics who oppose IVF or certain treatment protocols must negotiate outreach to a wider population whose grasp of the tenets of Orthodox Christianity is weak and whose outlook on fertility treatments is largely positive.

## Morality Framing and the Church

One approach to studying debates on IVF is situated in morality policy, defined by Gary Mucciaroni as “a strategic approach to framing public policy issues.”<sup>41</sup> Part of this strategic framing is “alignment,” where a group links “their own understandings of an issue with those of target groups in order to build support beyond their most reliable adherents.”<sup>42</sup> Under this paradigm, researchers focus on defining “distinct subtypes of morality frames” that public speakers employ, depending on the audience, in keeping with Robert Entman’s concept of salience, “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences.”<sup>43</sup> Mucciaroni split morality frames into three umbrella categories: “morality talk” that references “moral and religious arguments,” “rational-instrumental” framing that points to “consequences for society, or some important part of it,” and “procedural” framing that indicates “how policymakers should make decisions, which level of government or institution should properly make them, and whose preferences should be weighed the most heavily.”<sup>44</sup>

These framing strategies are crucial for religious groups aiming to maintain relevance in public debates. In a study of Christian conservative groups in the UK, Steven Kettell observed that these actors have shifted from “theological assertions” to “collective action frames based on overtly secular norms and values.”<sup>45</sup> These tactics have become particularly relevant to clerics in the Russian Orthodox Church in recent decades, as they have tailored their argumentation styles to the priorities of a society emerging from the legacy of Soviet atheism. Previous studies of ROC clerics and institutions have noted a preference for arguments rooted in rational areas of society, such as medicine, demographics, and human rights, in an approach that draws upon “public relations strategies rather than from the Scripture.”<sup>46</sup>

IVF presents special challenges to those participating in morality policy debates due to the complicated and varied technologies involved in the creation and transfer of embryos, and the difficulty of conveying these details to the public. Isabelle Engeli and Frédéric Varone differentiate between “morality issues with or without a technological and medical component,” with ARTs typically falling under the former, and topics such as LGBT rights falling under the latter category.<sup>47</sup> The intricacies of IVF mean that those who might be inclined to argue more stridently against the procedure instead take a laissez-faire approach. As Heather Silber Mohamed notes, “It is possible that some respondents indicating IVF is not a moral issue are unfamiliar

<sup>38</sup> Vyacheslav Karpov and Kimmo Kääriäinen, “‘Abortion Culture’ in Russia: Its Origins, Scope, and Challenge to Social Development,” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 22 (2005): 13–33.

<sup>39</sup> Rostovskaya and Kuchmaeva, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 582.

<sup>40</sup> Rostovskaya and Kuchmaeva, “Assisted Reproductive Technologies,” 582.

<sup>41</sup> Mucciaroni, “Are Debates About,” 211.

<sup>42</sup> David A. Snow et al., “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 464; Gary Mucciaroni et al., “Framing Morality Policy Issues: State Legislative Debates on Abortion Restrictions,” *Policy Sciences* 52 (2019): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-9336-2>.

<sup>43</sup> Mucciaroni, “Are Debates About,” 188; Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 53.

<sup>44</sup> Mucciaroni, “Are Debates About,” 211.

<sup>45</sup> Steven Kettell, “The Collective Action Framing of Conservative Christian Groups in Britain,” *Politics and Religion* 10 (2017): 288, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048316000766>.

<sup>46</sup> Hill, “Framing ‘Gay Propaganda’”; Hill, “Framing of Abortion”; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing”; Carol Mason, “Opposing Abortion to Protect Women: Transnational Strategy Since the 1990s,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 3 (2019): 665–92; Stoeckl, “Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism”; Hanna Staehle, “Seeking New Language: Patriarch Kirill’s Media Strategy,” *Religion, State and Society* 46, no. 4 (2018): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1510213>.

<sup>47</sup> Isabelle Engeli and Frédéric Varone, “Governing Morality Issues through Procedural Policies,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 17, no. 3 (2011): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1662-6370.2011.02025.x>.

with the specifics of the procedure and that embryos may be destroyed in the process.”<sup>48</sup> In the case of Russian Orthodox clerics’ framing of IVF, the complexity of treatment protocols means that pronouncements must convey one’s position on the issue in a way that is easily comprehensible to an audience without medical training.

Another aspect of morality policy research focusing on the ROC concerns the framing of church-state relations in post-Soviet Russia. One analytical tool is the church-state relations typology that was first developed by Kristina Stoeckl to capture the stances of cohorts within the Church toward the Russian government, from most amicable to most hostile: “state church,” “cooperation,” and “disestablishment.”<sup>49</sup> This typology was later amalgamated with Mucciaroni’s procedural framing category in order to study pronouncements by those serving in the ROC regarding the behavior of the state and employees thereof, using a spectrum of categories that range from positive to negative assessments: “symphony,” “affinity,” “disillusionment,” and “disestablishment,” respectively.<sup>50</sup> These frames are particularly relevant to this study in light of the Russian state’s funding and promotion of IVF treatments that may run counter both to the beliefs of clerics opposed to IVF in any form, and (in the case of protocols including procedures such as reduction of embryos) the guidelines set forth by clerics who believe that IVF can be performed only under certain circumstances.

## Materials and Methods

To determine whether the framing of IVF by ROC clerics varied when making pronouncements before different audiences, I compiled a dataset of articles written by or quoting clerics in the Russian Orthodox Church in two different media forms, as per Stig Hjarvard’s typology.<sup>51</sup> These were religious media, which in this study consisted of Russian Orthodox media portals, and journalism on religion, including Russian newspaper websites. Media form is of particular relevance to morality framing and the concept of alignment with one’s audience, particularly in the case of journalism on religion, which “reduces the ability of organized religious organizations and individuals to define and frame religious issues in the public sphere.”<sup>52</sup>

While religious media may be easier for clerics to navigate, as it is defined as “primarily controlled and performed by religious actors,” Hjarvard notes that these outlets “must also accommodate the logic of the media in a variety of ways,” including adjusting “the form and content of communication.”<sup>53</sup> In Russia, low levels of religious practice among the general population, combined with the fact that a large share of Orthodox portal users consists of nominal Orthodox Christians, mean that communication strategies between the two forms of media may differ less than in countries that did not undergo the secularization of the Soviet era.<sup>54</sup> In the context of debates over IVF, pronouncements by Orthodox clerics via religious media portals must perform three tasks: guide active Orthodox believers who might consider fertility treatments, persuade visitors to the site whose relationship with the Church is peripheral, and signal their position on IVF to fellow clerics and others serving in ROC institutions.

The Orthodox media portals used in this study were Pravoslavie.Ru (pravoslavie.ru), Foma (foma.ru), Pravmir (pravmir.ru), and Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia (ruskline.ru), all utilized in previous studies of Russian Orthodox online media.<sup>55</sup> The newspaper websites surveyed were

<sup>48</sup> Heather Silber Mohamed, “Embryonic Politics: Attitudes about Abortion, Stem Cell Research, and IVF,” *Politics and Religion*, 11 (2018): 481, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175504831800010X>.

<sup>49</sup> Stoeckl, “Tri modeli tserkovno-gosudarstvennykh otoshenii,” 197, 198.

<sup>50</sup> Mucciaroni, “Are Debates About,” 211; Hill, “Framing of Abortion,” 6–7; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing.”

<sup>51</sup> Stig Hjarvard, “Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion,” in *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, ed. S. Hjarvard and M. Lövheim (Nordicom, 2012), 21–44.

<sup>52</sup> Hjarvard, “Three Forms of Mediatized Religion,” 33.

<sup>53</sup> Hjarvard, “Three Forms of Mediatized Religion,” 28, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Emelyanov, “Religiosity Paradox”; Olga Bogdanova, “Mediatization of Pastoral Care in the Russian Orthodox Church: Reasons Behind ‘Ask the Priest’ Websites,” *Gosudarstvo, religii, tserkov’ v Rossii i za rubezhom* 38 (2020): 216, <https://doi.org/10.22394/2073-7203-2020-38-2-207-234>.

<sup>55</sup> Bogdanova, “Mediatization of Pastoral Care”; Olga A. Bogdanova and A.S. Sokolov, “Religious Mass Media Sources in a Convergence Situation: Instruments of Media Analysis and Forming a Strategy for ‘Foma’ Orthodox Media in Social Networks,” *Vestnik VGU. Serii: Filologiya. Zhurnalistika*, no. 4 (2020): 78–83; Ekaterina Grishaeva, “‘Making Europe Great Again’: Anti-Western Criticism from Orthodox Conservative Actors Online,” in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, ed. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (Brill, 2020), 234–56; E.I. Grishaeva and V.A. Shumkova, “Traditionalist Orthodox Christian Media: Discourse Structure and Peculiarities of the Functioning,” *Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes* 2 (2018): 291–308; Hill, “Framing of Abortion”; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing”; Ksenia Luchenko, “Orthodox Online Media on

*Argumenty i Fakty* (aif.ru), *Izvestiia* (iz.ru), *Kommersant* (kommersant.ru), *Komsomolskaia Pravda* (kp.ru), *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (mk.ru), *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (ng.ru), *Novaia Gazeta* (novayagazeta.ru), and *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* (rg.ru), selected according to their placement in popularity rankings compiled by the Medialogiia Informational-Analytical System.<sup>56</sup>

The date range for gathering data started in 2000, the year that the *Social Concept* was published, and ended in 2020, a year when amendments were made to the Russian Constitution, including text referring to God, heterosexual marriage, and “traditional family values.”<sup>57</sup> These reforms followed successful lobbying by Patriarch Kirill and other clerics and laymen serving in the Church and affiliated institutions.<sup>58</sup> The 2020 amendments were thus described by Stoeckl as an “end-point” of “the tension-ridden, ambivalent and ultimately *open* era of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy and the re-definition—and closure—of the Russian Orthodox Church as a national church.”<sup>59</sup>

A total of seventy-three articles were gathered, with fifty-two belonging to religious media and twenty-one to journalism on religion.<sup>60</sup> The number of articles within religious media peaked in 2010, 2013, and 2020, while the most articles in journalism on religion were found in 2010 and 2020 (see [figure 1](#)). These peaks coincided with debates on and amendments to legislation governing the provision of IVF in Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the months leading up to the ROC’s release of the new *Draft Document* on IVF in early 2021. The total number of clerics quoted in or authoring articles found was thirty-six.

While the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, was a key figure in previous studies of the ROC in the media, he did not comment on IVF in any of the articles analyzed here.<sup>61</sup> Clerics quoted in this study were either subject matter experts in the field of bioethics, including Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin) and Priest Roman Tarabrin, or Church department heads engaged in reproductive health debates, including Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov and Priest Fedor Luk’ianov.<sup>62</sup> This narrow pool of speakers was likely due to the medical intricacies of IVF.

Dataset articles were subjected to a thematic analysis based on the morality framing typology developed by Mucciaroni and further adapted by Caroline Hill to analyze Russian materials, encompassing religious, rational-instrumental, and procedural frames.<sup>63</sup> Texts where procedural frames were found underwent a second round of analysis, using the church-state relations typology based on the models set forth by Stoeckl and adjusted into framing types by Hill: symphony, affinity, disillusionment, and disestablishment.<sup>64</sup> The morality policy and church-state relations frames used the most in each article were coded as the dominant frame for that article, and the results were analyzed for all articles together and cross-analyzed by media form. In addition, sub-themes within the morality framing categories identified in both media forms were coded and will be presented here.

Runet: History of Development and Current State of Affairs,” *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, no. 14 (2015): 123–32; Alexander Ponomariov, “The Body of Christ Online: The Russian Orthodox Church and (Non-)Liturgical Interactivity on the Internet,” *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, no. 14 (2015): 145–63; Staehle, “Seeking New Language.”

<sup>56</sup> Medialogiia, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/>.

<sup>57</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, “The End of Post-Soviet Religion: Russian Orthodoxy as a National Church,” *Public Orthodoxy*, July 20, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/07/20/the-end-of-post-soviet-religion/>.

<sup>58</sup> Stoeckl, “The End of Post-Soviet Religion”; Mikhail Antonov, “Russian *Symphonia* vs. Rule of Law?,” *Brigham Young University Law Review* 46, no. 5 (2021): 1200.

<sup>59</sup> Stoeckl, “Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism,” 9; Stoeckl, “The End of Post-Soviet Religion,” emphasis in original.

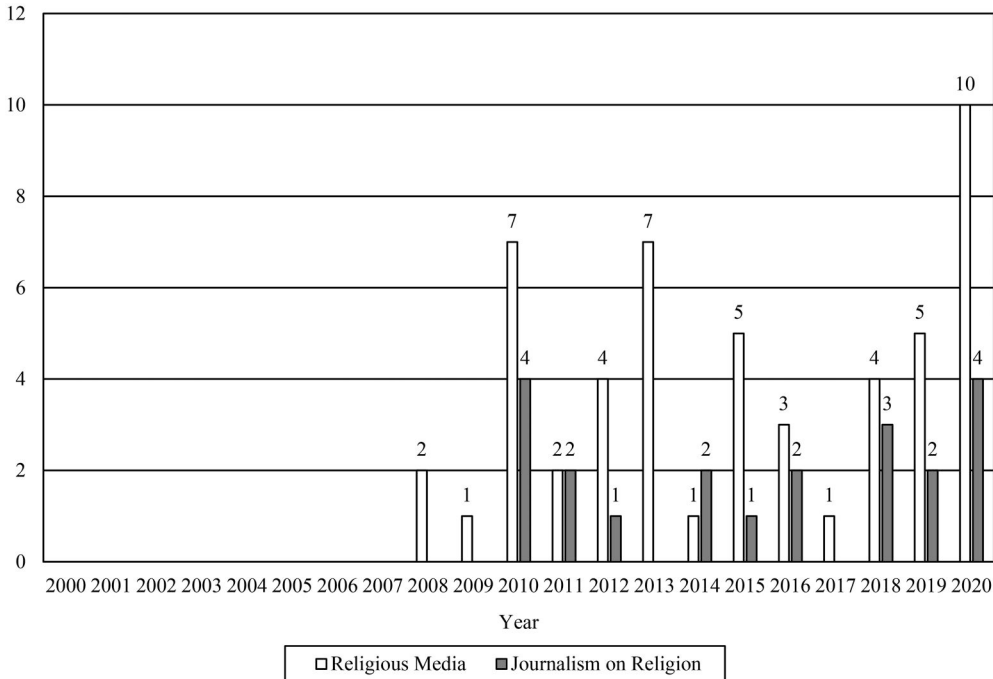
<sup>60</sup> In comparison, the data sets in prior studies of framing of abortion comprised 471 articles from religious media sources containing pronouncements by 158 speakers, and 150 articles from journalism on religion sources containing pronouncements by 50 speakers, respectively (Hill, “Framing of Abortion,” 8; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing,” 451).

<sup>61</sup> Grishaeva, “Making Europe Great”; Staehle, “Seeking New Language”; Hill, “Framing of Abortion”; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing.”

<sup>62</sup> The surnames of members of monastic orders are in parentheses, in accordance with Orthodox naming conventions.

<sup>63</sup> Mucciaroni, “Are Debates About”; Hill, “Framing ‘Gay Propaganda.’”

<sup>64</sup> Stoeckl, “Tri modeli tserkovno-gosudarstvennykh otnoshenii”; Hill, “Framing of Abortion”; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing.”



**Figure 1.** Articles written by or quoting ROC clerics commenting on IVF, number of articles by year and media form.

## Results

The following section presents the findings, first for morality policy frames and their sub-themes, and then for church-state relations frames.

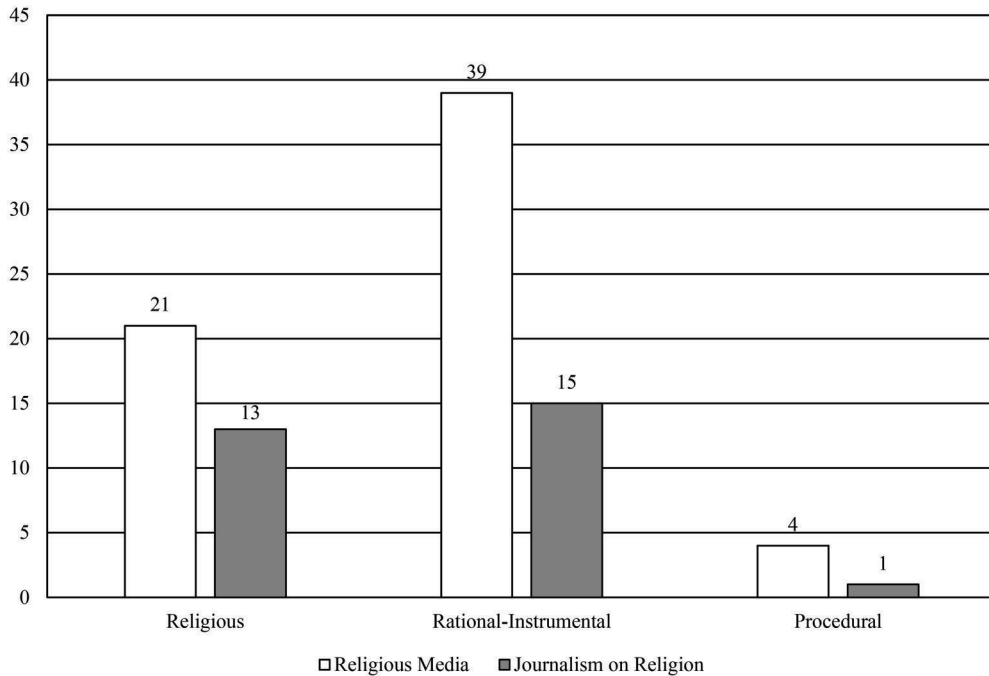
### Morality Framing

Of the articles surveyed, fifty-four had dominant rational-instrumental frames, thirty-four had religious dominant frames, and only five had dominant procedural frames. When the findings were compared by media form, a larger share of religious media articles had rational-instrumental dominant frames (thirty-nine articles, followed by religious dominant frames with twenty-one articles, and procedural frames with four articles), while for the journalism on religion articles, rational-instrumental frames and religious frames were almost tied (fifteen articles and thirteen articles, respectively, with procedural dominant frames in third place with one article) (see figure 2). The results for religious and rational-instrumental frames will be discussed below. Procedural frames were classified further and will be discussed in the “Church-State Relations Frames” section immediately following.

### Religious Frames

Within the religious framing category, the most commonly employed arguments concerned the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in Russian society, references to God, morality rooted in religion, marriage, and the idea that embryos possess a soul (and are therefore human beings in need of protection). Discussions of the ROC’s place in society in the context of debates on IVF led to introspection about the position of the Church vis-à-vis medical science, with Priest and Head of the Nizhegorodskaya Archdiocese Department for Cooperation with Medical Institutions Mikhail Zazvonov arguing that the Church was only engaged in matters “where there are principled disagreements between modern medicine and Church teachings.”<sup>65</sup> Priest Roman Tarabrin showed a similar stance when he opined that, “The Church is not against science,”

<sup>65</sup> Sergei Chesnokov, “Privivki: ‘Za’ i ‘Protiv.’ Beseda so sviashchennikom Mikhailom Zazvonovym,” *Pravoslavie.Ru*, November 19, 2008, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/28339.html>.



**Figure 2.** Dominant morality frames, number of articles where found by media form.

characterizing the ROC's role in debates over IVF as "rather an attempt to identify what is and is not in agreement with God's Commandments."<sup>66</sup>

Framing that referenced God was employed by clerics opposed to IVF in any form and pitted the desires of prospective patients against God's will. Bishop Panteleimon (Shatov) urged would-be parents experiencing infertility to "accept the cross that God gives us," admonishing those who "try to take control of every part of their life and subjugate it to their egotistical wishes."<sup>67</sup> Hegumen Nektarii (Morozov) warned, "We should not judge those people who resort to IVF," but cautioned those who wished to undergo IVF that they would "receive the life that they choose, not the life that the Lord has prepared for them. And this...is the most frightening [thing] in the life of a believer."<sup>68</sup>

Argumentation that invoked marriage was used in pronouncements against the use of sperm and egg donors as part of IVF. In a discussion of the circumstances under which IVF might be permitted by the Church, Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin) called use of donor gametes "absolutely unacceptable" on the grounds that "Marriage is a sacrament of two [people] in which there is no place for a 'third party.'"<sup>69</sup>

The Church's position that life and the existence of an individual's soul both begin at conception was employed to argue that embryos were people, and thus, preparation and cryopreservation of embryos for future use was unacceptable. Bishop Panteleimon (Shatov) worried that "so many children, who have a soul, are located in refrigerators in some condition. And it's unknown what will happen to them next...this technology is frightening and inhuman."<sup>70</sup> Archpriest Pavel Gumerov criticized the practice of reduction through abortion following implantation of

<sup>66</sup> Dar'ia Roshchenia and Priest Roman Tarabrin, "Tserkov' otkryta k dialogu po povodu EKO. No pochemu nedopustimo surrogatnoe materinstvo?," *Pravmir*, December 11, 2019, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/cerkov-otkryta-k-dialogu-po-povodu-eko-no-pochemu-nedopustimo-surrogatnoe-materinstvo/>.

<sup>67</sup> "Episkop Panteleimon (Shatov) ob EKO: Liudi popiraiut Bozhii Promysl," *Pravoslavie.Ru*, September 28, 2013, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/64448.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Hegumen Nektarii (Morozov), "V rukakh Bozhiikh ili rassuzhdeniakh chelovecheskikh?," *Pravoslavie.Ru*, October 4, 2018, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/116216.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Hieromonk Dimitrii Pershin, "Rebenok iz probirki," *Foma*, July 8, 2012, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://foma.ru/rebenok-iz-probirki.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Pravmir Editorial Service, "Pochemu tserkov' protiv surrogatnogo materinstva?," *Pravmir*, October 8, 2013, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/pochemu-cerkov-protiv-surrogatnogo-materinstva/>.

multiple embryos, noting, “fertilized embryos that are already infants with a soul are destroyed during IVF. . . a person going for IVF goes for abortions.”<sup>71</sup>

Unlike previous studies of framing of abortion in which ROC clerics presented a unified front in both religious media and journalism on religion when declaring that abortion was unacceptable, framing of IVF by clerics in this study reflected the spectrum of opinions within the Church regarding the extent to which IVF could be permissible, depending on the treatment protocol employed.<sup>72</sup> In only one article from the data set did a cleric state that IVF was acceptable, without conditions. In this instance, Metropolitan of Krasnoarsk and Achinsk Panteleimon (Kutovoi) opined, “I believe that people who resort to this procedure with a deep desire [for children] must be given a blessing [to do so]. . . Although there are many spiritual issues with this method, this is the birth of life. And life is a blessing.”<sup>73</sup>

In nineteen articles, clerics deemed IVF as acceptable under certain conditions, with Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev reasoning that “In *The Bases of the Social Concept* it is fairly clearly stated regarding IVF [that] it is allowed under the condition that it is performed with the [sperm] of the husband, and not a donor, and that [reduction] of embryos and preparation of embryos for future use are not performed.”<sup>74</sup> In twenty articles in the data set, clerics maintained that IVF was not permitted, with Archpriest Sergii Filimonov warning that “methods [for] IVF are being developed, but in the view of the Church, it is not legal.”<sup>75</sup>

When divided by media form, within religious media, fifteen of the articles contained statements that IVF was unacceptable, while thirteen contained claims that IVF could be acceptable under certain conditions. Within the form of journalism on religion, five of the articles contained declarations of IVF as unacceptable, six articles contained statements by clerics deeming IVF to be permissible under certain conditions, and one article quoted a cleric as approving of IVF with no conditions applied.

In addition to disagreement over whether IVF was permissible, there was considerable divergence among the clerics studied regarding whether the section of the *Social Concept* concerning IVF was sufficiently clear to both clerics and laypeople. Of the seventeen articles where the *Social Concept* was discussed, clerics declared it sufficient in nine articles, while eight of the articles included calls for the *Social Concept* to be amended to reflect the technological complexity of IVF. When compared by media form, in the twelve articles within religious media that included framing of the *Social Concept*, seven declared it satisfactory as is, while five called for revision. Of the five articles within journalism on religion where clerics made pronouncements regarding the *Social Concept*, two declared it to be sufficiently clear, and three articles called for revision. Archpriest Aleksandr Abramov referred to the *Social Concept* when expressing opposition to IVF, while acknowledging the continuing rancor within the Church: “Although the position of the Russian Orthodox Church set forth in [the *Social Concept*] does not allow for permission of IVF, in reality there are priests who hold the viewpoint that such a practice is acceptable.”<sup>76</sup>

### Rational-Instrumental Frames

Although religious framing in this study was exceptional in terms of the debates that emerged over the permissibility of IVF and adequacy of the *Social Concept*, it is worth emphasizing that the majority of dominant frames found in this study were still rational-instrumental. Rational-instrumental argumentation regarding IVF mostly framed the issue in terms of medicine and

<sup>71</sup> Novice Nikita (Popov), “Chto delat', esli Bog ne daet detei?,” *Pravoslavie.Ru*, June 16, 2016, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/94319.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Hill, “Framing of Abortion”; Hill, “Russian Orthodox Framing.”

<sup>73</sup> Elena Esaulova, “Doktor ne Bog, no borets c liudskoi bol'iu. O chem govoril Vladyka s vrachami,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, October 18, 2018, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://krsk.aif.ru/society/doktor\\_ne\\_bog\\_no\\_borec\\_s\\_lyudskoy\\_bolyu\\_o\\_chem\\_govoril\\_vladyka\\_s\\_vrachami](https://krsk.aif.ru/society/doktor_ne_bog_no_borec_s_lyudskoy_bolyu_o_chem_govoril_vladyka_s_vrachami).

<sup>74</sup> Andrei Kuraev and Mariia Senchukova, “Protodiakon Andrei Kuraev: Igra v dochki-materi na den'gi,” *Pravmir*, May 21, 2012, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/kuraev-igra-v-dochkimateri-na-dengi/>; Kuraev was forbidden from serving and removed as protodeacon in 2020, and ultimately defrocked by the Moscow City Archdiocese Court of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2023 (for the full texts of the Archdiocese Court rulings, see <http://moseparh.ru/resheniem-eparxialnogo-suda-g-moskvy-protodiakon-andrej-kuraev-priznan-podlezhashhim-izverzheniyu-iz-sana.html> and <http://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0269-ot-28-aprelya-2023.html>, accessed January 1, 2025).

<sup>75</sup> Archpriest Sergii Filimonov, “Protoierei Sergii Filimonov: ‘Metody EKO Tserkov'iu ne blagoslovliaiutsia,’” *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, May 19, 2010, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://ruskline.ru/news\\_rl/2010/05/19/protoierej\\_sergij\\_filimonov\\_metody\\_eko\\_cerkovyu\\_ne\\_blagoslovlyayutsya](https://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2010/05/19/protoierej_sergij_filimonov_metody_eko_cerkovyu_ne_blagoslovlyayutsya).

<sup>76</sup> Dar'ia Roshchenia and Archpriest Aleksandr Abramov, “Inostrantsy edut v Rossiiu, chtoby im vynosili rebenka. EKO, surrogatnoe materinstvo i etika,” *Pravmir*, July 8, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/inostrantsy-edut-v-rossiiu-chtoby-im-vynosili-rebenka-eko-surrogatnoe-materinstvo-i-etika/>.

public health, economics, claims that IVF procedures constituted murder, human rights, adoption in Russia, and the country's demographic situation.

Medical framing of IVF delved into technical aspects of treatment protocols that clerics found concerning. As with religious framing, alarms were raised regarding the implantation of multiple embryos and subsequent reduction. Priest Fedor Luk'ianov opposed concessions regarding IVF within the Church and criticized the claim that IVF treatment protocols had been updated to avoid reductions, countering "the existence of 'merciful' procedures is just a front for advertising 'classical' IVF with selection of 'quality' and culling of 'poor quality' conceived children, freezing of embryos, and other immoral manipulations."<sup>77</sup> Concerns were also raised regarding health consequences for children conceived through IVF. Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin) warned that "as a result [of IVF], sick children are brought into the world. Unfortunately, this is built into the technology itself. People doom their children to sickness and suffering. . .if one doesn't do IVF, nobody will come to harm."<sup>78</sup>

Framing regarding economics was used by opponents of IVF, leveling accusations of greed and corruption at the fertility industry. Archpriest Aleksandr Il'iashenko lamented, "there are entire units and institutions that think up [ways to] pump millions out of unhappy or just ignorant people."<sup>79</sup> Income inequalities between prospective patients and gamete donors were another concern, with Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin) charging "donation of oocytes almost always means economic discrimination" against donors, and that "reproductive health becomes a commodity that a female donor must sell, subjecting herself to serious risk[s]."<sup>80</sup>

Rational-instrumental framing of IVF as murder focused primarily on the practice of reduction of embryos after implantation. Bishop Panteleimon (Shatov) warned that "unfortunately, the test tube method of gaining a child is connected with the murder of children. . .many implanted embryos are reduced, that is, simply put, they are murdered."<sup>81</sup> In a pattern reminiscent of rational-instrumental framing of abortion, references to murder were also tied to Russia's role in World War II. When speaking out against the reduction of implanted embryos and the disposal or resale of unused embryos, Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov declared the latter to be "fascism in its purest form. . .and we, as we are told, are the country that conquered fascism."<sup>82</sup>

Claims regarding the humanity of embryos were used by opponents of IVF who framed it as a human rights issue, with Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov contending, "the Church is against IVF. . .because we know that an embryo is already a human. And he has rights. And among them, the most important is the right to life."<sup>83</sup> Human rights framing also pitted the interests of prospective recipient parents against those of both offspring resulting from IVF and society as a whole. Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin) cautioned, "Unfortunately, IVF technology gives indirect support to various forms of same-sex cohabitation. . .Not only does this grossly violate the rights of children to normal family relations, [but] society itself, its values, and continuity of behavior are at risk."<sup>84</sup>

Rational-instrumental framing that raised the topic of adoption proposed it as an alternative to IVF. Archpriest Nikolai Balashov combined religious and rational-instrumental framing when

<sup>77</sup> Priest Fedor Luk'ianov, "Glava Patriarshei komissii: pooshchriaia EKO, poluchaem bol'nye pokoleniia," *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, September 24, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://rusklinie.ru/opp/2020/09/24/glava\\_patriarshei\\_komissii\\_poowryaya\\_eko\\_poluchaem\\_bolnye\\_pokoleniya](https://rusklinie.ru/opp/2020/09/24/glava_patriarshei_komissii_poowryaya_eko_poluchaem_bolnye_pokoleniya).

<sup>78</sup> Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin), "Ieromonakh Dimitrii (Pershin): Esli uzh ekonomit', to ne na pomoshchi nedonoshennyim, a na abortakh," *Pravmir*, February 9, 2018, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/ieromonah-dimitriy-pershin-esli-uzh-ekonomit-to-ne-na-pomoshchi-nedonoshennyim-a-na-abortah/>.

<sup>79</sup> Archpriest Aleksandr Il'iashenko, "Protoierei Aleksandr Il'iashenko: Zhenshchinu, sdelaeshuiu EKO posle gibeli muzha, vovlekli v propagandistskuiu reklamnuuu kompaniiu," *Pravmir*, April 20, 2015, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/protoierey-aleksandr-ilyashenko-zhenshchinu-sdelavshuyu-eko-posle-gibeli-muzha-voevlekli-v-propagandistskuyu-reklamnuuu-kampaniyu/>.

<sup>80</sup> Hieromonk Dimitrii (Pershin), "Ekstrakorporal'noe oplodotvorenii: Ot meditsiny k bioetike," *Pravmir*, October 29, 2010, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/ekstrakorporalnoe-oplodotvorenii-ot-meditsiny-k-bioetike/>.

<sup>81</sup> Pravmir Editorial Service, "Episkop Panteleimon (Shatov): Tekhnologiiia EKO—beschlovechna," *Pravmir*, October 5, 2010, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.pravmir.ru/glava-sinodalnogo-otdela-po-cerkovnoj-blagotvoritelnosti-schitaet-tekhnologiyu-eko-beschlovechnoj/>.

<sup>82</sup> "Predsedatel' Patriarshei komissii po voprosam sem'i, zashchity materinstva i detstva prokomentiroval problemy, svyazannye s EKO," *Pravoslavie.Ru*, September 27, 2019, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/124227.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Iuliia Tutina, "Protoierei Dimitrii Smirnov: 'Mnogodetnye roditeli—eto sovremennye geroi,'" *Argumenty i Fakty*, December 19, 2019, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://aif.ru/society/religion/protoierey\\_dimitriy\\_smirnov\\_mnogodetnye\\_roditeli\\_eto\\_sovremennye\\_geroi](https://aif.ru/society/religion/protoierey_dimitriy_smirnov_mnogodetnye_roditeli_eto_sovremennye_geroi).

<sup>84</sup> Pershin, "Ekstrakorporal'noe oplodotvorenii."

referring to the number of children in state care in Russia, opining that “in some cases, childlessness is a special calling from God. . .there are a multitude of kids on waitlists for adoption in children’s institutions in Russia who would be happy to find a caring family.”<sup>85</sup>

Claims that IVF might improve Russia’s demographic situation were countered by opponents of the procedure who framed IVF as too rare and ineffective to make an impact. Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov argued, “This doesn’t affect the demographic situation at all, because it’s less than one percent [of live births]. That is, it gives nothing, even though it is advertised on a large scale.”<sup>86</sup> Potential harmful side effects from IVF and the likelihood of passing down conditions causing infertility were framed as outpacing any potential benefit. Priest Fedor Luk’ianov charged that “[by] encouraging IVF, we get sick moms, sick children with a high risk of infertility, we get sick generations [who are] more and more dependent on assisted reproductive technologies.”<sup>87</sup>

### Church-State Relations Frames

Of the articles that included framing of church-state relations, the majority (eleven articles) had dominant disillusionment frames articulating disappointment in the state’s approach to IVF, while only two articles featured affinity frames expressing approval of the government. Among articles within the form of religious media, eleven had dominant disillusionment frames, while only one had a dominant affinity frame; of articles within the form of journalism on religion, one article had a dominant affinity frame. None of the articles in either media form contained sympathy frames referring to church-state cooperation or disestablishment frames condemning the state.

### Affinity Frames

In instances where clerics spoke favorably about state authorities, these pronouncements came in the wake of statements by government officials calling for restrictions on IVF. After Head Pediatrician of the Ministry of Health and Social Development of Russia Aleksandr Baranov voiced objections to state funding of IVF on the grounds that the procedure was harmful to child and maternal health, Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov lauded Baranov’s remarks as a sign of improvement in the country’s moral climate: “Such a refusal is important from a moral point of view. . .although it will not increase the birth rate. . .nevertheless, the moral atmosphere of society is improved.”<sup>88</sup>

### Disillusionment Frames

Clerics who expressed discontent with the Russian state were primarily opponents of IVF who objected to state funding of the procedure. Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov highlighted the issue of taxpayers and matters of conscience, opining that “It is disgusting that those technologies that the Church categorically does not bless are nonetheless carried out at the expense of taxpayers, including at the expense of people [affiliated with the] Church.”<sup>89</sup> Archpriest Maksim Obukhov criticized the state’s funding of IVF as part of demographic initiatives and cited multiple social problems that he felt were more relevant to increasing population growth:

This method is questionable from an ethical point of view, because it is accompanied by the death of embryos. This is no secret. But even more questionable is that astronomical sums from the state budget go to support IVF at the same time that [prospective] parents are ready to pay for it. . .In our country, there is a problem of extreme poverty among families with multiple

<sup>85</sup> Pravmir Editorial Service, “Episkop Panteleimon (Shatov).” At the time of Balashov’s comments in 2010, there were 682,000 children not in the custody of their biological parents in Russia; 120,000 of these children resided in institutions. The percentage of children not in parental custody out of the total population of children ages 0–17 years peaked in 2009 at 2.8 percent. See Svetlana Biriukova et al., “Sirostvo v Rossii,” *Demoskop Weekly*, no. 609–10 (2014), <https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2014/0609/tema05.php>.

<sup>86</sup> “Predsedatel’ Patriarshei komissii po voprosam sem’i prinial uchastie v IV Vserossiiskoi konferentsii ‘Zdorov’e sem’i-zdorov’e natsii,’” *Pravoslavie.Ru*, October 17, 2019, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/124791.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Priest Fedor Luk’ianov, “Pooshchriaia EKO, poluchaem bol’nye pokoleniia,” *Pravoslavie.Ru*, September 24, 2020, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://pravoslavie.ru/134155.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Archpriest Dimitrii Smirnov, “Protoierei Dimitrii Smirnov: Luchshe eti den’gi napravit’ na pomoshch starikam,” *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, September 29, 2009, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=185160>.

<sup>89</sup> Smirnov, “Protoierei Dimitrii Smirnov.”

children. We have homeless families with multiple children who are at risk of having their child taken away. We have a problem with not only poverty, but destitution as well. This is a more serious condition than poverty. This is also a serious problem, which is much more relevant to solving the demographic issue.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study represents a departure from previous research on ROC framing of abortion, both in terms of the volume of coverage in religious media and journalism on religion and the number of clerics who were willing to make pronouncements on IVF.<sup>91</sup> The relative dearth of coverage and commentary regarding IVF as compared to abortion reflects Engeli and Varone's designation of IVF as an ideal type for morality policy issues that are more technologically complicated, and thus present a greater challenge to subject matter experts who attempt to articulate their position in public forums.<sup>92</sup> This contrast also supports Silber Mohamed's assertion regarding the temporal difference between abortion and IVF.<sup>93</sup> While abortion was ubiquitous as a birth control method for decades during the Soviet period, IVF is a much more recent addition to the medical field that has yet to have a direct impact on the lives of most Russians, and thus generates less interest among clerics and readers of either media form analyzed here.

The fact that the number of articles found in Russian Orthodox news portals outstripped those found in online newspapers indicates a greater interest in IVF as a subject of morality policy and internal debate in ROC circles. The fact that religious media sources had a comparatively larger share of rational-instrumental dominant frames than journalism on religion articles points to a difference in the role of clerics in these media forms. While clerics spoke as subject matter experts in bioethics and demographics in Orthodox news portals, their comments on more mainstream newspaper sites were often from a standpoint of pastors, offering advice. The dominance of rational-instrumental frames across media forms can also be viewed as evidence of the highly technical nature of debates on IVF, where even discussions of the ROC's stance on the issue as an institution veered into medical terminology.

This level of complexity, along with the ongoing internal disputes in the ROC, was also reflected in the lack of solidarity among the quoted clerics regarding the permissibility of IVF. The willingness of clerics to question the ROC's own set of guidelines, the *Social Concept*, signaled a major departure from previous studies of morality framing in the Church, in which clerics employed different arguments to convey their views, but ultimately presented a united front.<sup>94</sup>

As with previous studies of morality policy debates in Russia, the findings on morality framing of IVF showed a lower level of procedural framing than morality policy studies in the West.<sup>95</sup> That said, framing of relations between church and state in this study made a significant departure from prior studies of church-state relations and framing of abortion in the ROC, as there were no pronouncements using either symphony frames referring to cooperation between church and state, nor were there disestablishment frames pointing to an adversarial relationship of the state versus the Church or the Russian people.<sup>96</sup> What little church-state framing was found was mostly disillusionment frames by clerics opposed to IVF, who expressed frustration with the Russian state's willingness to fund the procedure.

Compared to previous studies, the absence of symphony frames is most likely due to the lack of direct coordination between the ROC and the state on this matter. Unlike abortion, where the introduction of mandatory waiting periods opened the door to initiatives such as the participation of clerics in pre-abortion counseling, IVF is an issue where state policy and funding of the procedure either present no opportunities for collaboration or clash with the beliefs of clerics

<sup>90</sup> Archpriest Maksim Obukhov, "Nam udalos' ubedit' mnogikh v tom, chto abort—eto ubijstvo," *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, April 13, 2017, accessed January 1, 2025, [https://ruskline.ru/news\\_rl/2017/04/13/nam\\_udalos\\_ubedit\\_mnogih\\_v\\_tom\\_chto\\_abort\\_eto\\_ubijstvo](https://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2017/04/13/nam_udalos_ubedit_mnogih_v_tom_chto_abort_eto_ubijstvo).

<sup>91</sup> Hill, "Framing of Abortion"; Hill, "Russian Orthodox Framing."

<sup>92</sup> Engeli and Varone, "Governing Morality Issues," 239.

<sup>93</sup> Silber Mohamed, "Embryonic Politics," 462.

<sup>94</sup> Hill, "Framing 'Gay Propaganda'"; Hill, "Framing of Abortion"; Hill, "Russian Orthodox Framing."

<sup>95</sup> Hill, "Framing of Abortion"; Hill, "Russian Orthodox Framing."

<sup>96</sup> Stoeckl, "Tri modeli tserkovno-gosudarstvennykh otnoshenii"; Hill, "Framing of Abortion"; Hill, "Russian Orthodox Framing."

who wish to discourage the population from partaking in IVF.<sup>97</sup> The absence of disestablishment frames in this study is more difficult to explain. While it could stem from the limited scale of use of IVF as opposed to the pervasiveness of abortion as part of the Soviet health care system's legacy, the fact that even those clerics who were opposed to IVF were less likely to engage in strident criticism of the state when discussing a procedure that could entail selective reductions of fetuses is a puzzle that merits exploration.

While this study concerns a key period in the development of the Russian Orthodox Church as a participant in morality policy debates and its interactions with the post-Soviet Russian state, recent events suggest a need for further research. Proposals to offer IVF services to widows of Russian soldiers active in the war in Ukraine have been met with opposition from individual ROC clerics.<sup>98</sup> However, the extent to which said clerics are able to criticize the actions of the state is now more tenuous in light of restrictions on speech that discredits the Russian military.<sup>99</sup>

Although morality framing is a concept with origins in the West that has since spread eastward, the church-state relations typologies employed in this analysis of the Russian Orthodox Church could be applied to studies of morality policy in the West, including research on framing of IVF. In the United States, debates on abortion have spilled over into discussions of IVF, making the latter an unexpected campaign issue in the 2024 presidential elections.<sup>100</sup> A study of how anti-abortion groups view IVF and how they respond to overtures by conservative candidates regarding the legality of fertility treatments would be a new setting in which to apply the analytical lens developed here.

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## Author Biography

CAROLINE HILL (BA, The Evergreen State College, USA; MA, University of Amsterdam; MS, Uppsala University) is a doctoral student of Sociology of Religion in the Department of Theology and at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University, Sweden. Among her most recent publications are "Russian Orthodox Framing of Abortion in Online Journalism on Religion," *Social Compass* 70, no. 3 (2023); "'Gay Propaganda' and Morality Policy: Orthodox Framing in LGBT Rights Debates in Russia," in *Contemporary Populism and Its Political Consequences: Discourses and Practices in Central and South-Eastern Europe*, ed. H. Dajč, I. Jarič, and L. Dobrovšak (Zagreb: Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, 2022); and "Framing of Abortion and Church-State Relations in Russian Orthodox Online Portals," *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021). Hill's primary scholarly interests include morality policy, the Russian Orthodox Church, and qualitative methods.

<sup>97</sup> Federalnyi zakon ot 21.11.2011 g, No. 323-F3.

<sup>98</sup> Iuliia Baranova, "Sviashchennik ne podderzhal ideiu EKO dlia vdov uchastnikov spetsoperatsii," *Gazeta.Ru*, June 17, 2024, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2024/06/17/23265367.shtml>.

<sup>99</sup> "Obvinennii v diskreditatsii armii sviashchennik ob"iasnil rech' k prikhozhanam," *RBK.Ru*, March 12, 2022, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/12/03/2022/622cc9069a794751f9d1d5d2>.

<sup>100</sup> Carter Sherman, "Anti-Abortion Groups Warn Trump's Row Back on Position Risks Losing Votes," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2024, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/30/trump-ivf-anti-abortion-groups>.

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