

## Article

# Global Contexts: How Countries Shape the COVID-19 Experience of Amish and Mennonite Missionaries Abroad

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**Abstract:** Across the globe, governments restricted social life to slow the spread of COVID-19. Several conservative Protestant sects resisted these policies in the United States. We do not yet know if theology shaped the resistance or if it was more a product of a polarized national political context. We argue that the country context likely shapes how conservative Protestants' moral worldview affects their perceptions of the pandemic and government restrictions. Countries implementing more regulations, those with limited access to healthcare, food, and other essential services, and those with past histories of epidemics may all shape residents' perceptions. Drawing on the case of American Amish and Mennonite missionaries stationed abroad, we content-analyzed accounts of the pandemic from an international Amish and Mennonite correspondence newspaper. We found that the missionaries' perceptions of the pandemic and governmental restrictions differ from those of their U.S. counterparts, which suggests that context likely shapes how religious moral worldviews express themselves concerning public health interventions.

**Keywords:** religious worldview; COVID-19; international; Amish; Mennonite; pandemic



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## 1. Introduction

Governments around the world restricted social and economic life to slow transmission of COVID-19. Schools and businesses closed, and governmental officials urged citizens to maintain social distance and isolate themselves from others to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Certain conservative Protestant sects in the U.S. resisted these directives (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Perry et al. 2020a, 2020b; Pew Research Center 2020; Stein 2021). The non-compliance may reflect a religiously motivated distrust of science, medicine, the government, and the media (Armer and Radina 2006; Baker et al. 2020; Galanter 1999; Gastañaduy et al. 2016; Glassman 2018; Miller and Karkazis 2013; Offit 2015; Thompson and Kisjes 2016). The behavior may also reflect political sentiments that are independent of religious beliefs. These studies draw exclusively from U.S.-based samples collected during extreme political polarization and social upheaval (Corley 2020; Kerr et al. 2021). The context likely matters.

Religious moral worldviews influence how religious beliefs translate into attitudes and behaviors. Wellman and Keyes's (2007) study demonstrates how these worldviews are partially malleable and shaped by context. Research also suggests that the extent of government interventions and restrictions in a pandemic can affect people's perceptions of risk and the effectiveness of strategies to mitigate those risks (Duan et al. 2020; Maekelae et al. 2020). People's perception of the threat of COVID-19 and the efficacy attributed to various interventions influence their compliance (Maekelae et al. 2020). Governmental restrictions convey the seriousness of the situation, which may, in turn, affect people's assessments of risk and the necessity of such rules. Additionally, a country's prior experience with epidemics and the availability and access to healthcare, food, and other essential services likely also affect people's perceptions of the pandemic and government responses to it. Are

the perceptions of conservative Protestant sects shaped by the country context in which they reside?

We content-analyze COVID-19-related accounts from American Amish and Mennonite missionaries in nine countries worldwide to address this question. We use cross-national, longitudinal data from an internationally circulated Amish and Mennonite correspondence newspaper—*The Budget*—which publishes letters from scribes living in Amish and Mennonite communities worldwide. These letters offer regular updates on what is happening in these communities and provide an unparalleled lens into the experiences of missionaries abroad during the pandemic. We then examine and compare the COVID-19-related discourse in these Amish and Mennonite communities worldwide.

### 1.1. Religious Moral Worldviews

Worldviews help people make sense of their world (Berger 2011; Smith and Emerson 1998; Wellman 2008). Social structural factors mediate worldviews: “Reasonable people who are located in very different parts of the social world find themselves differently exposed to diverse realities, and this differential exposure leads each of them to come up with different [ . . . ] constructions of the world” (Luker 1984, p. 191). Religion is a potent source of differentiation (Berger 2011; Smith and Emerson 1998; Wellman 2008). Accordingly, religion plays an outsized role in shaping people’s attitudes and behavior in several broad social domains.

Moral worldviews shape values, mold preferences, and demarcate symbolic boundaries (Wellman 2008; Wellman and Keyes 2007). Wellman (2008, p. 59) compares worldviews to onions in that they are “layered organic structures centered” on a “core and in which certain values and opinions are given more weight than others” the closer they are to the core. While individuals within the same religious tradition may share a moral core (Wellman 2008; Wellman and Keyes 2007), each worldview “exhibits unique variations according to the soil it was planted in and ways in which it was nurtured” (Wellman 2008, p. 60). Each onion is unique, and its outer layers—the farthest away from the core—are more malleable and exhibit variation.

Wellman (2008) argues that moral worldviews consist of four layers. At the center is a moral core, which coordinates non-negotiable allegiances imposed by a worldview. These cores manifest consistently across members of groups sharing the same worldview. The second layer contains moral “values” derived from the core. These values are relatively constant across people sharing a worldview. “Moral actions and projects”, which translate the values into behaviors and attitudes, including economic and political positions, reside at the third level. People vary in how their values translate into behavior and positions. Finally, the fourth layer contains “culturally conditioned customs and aesthetics such as protocols of social interaction, practices of worship, tastes in music, the architectural style of churches, and what form worship takes” (Wellman 2008, p. 79). This layer is the most varied as it is the farthest from the moral core.

Wellman and Keyes’s (2007) study of international evangelical Protestant missionaries found stability in core moral worldviews, unaffected by their missionary work abroad. However, the outer layers of their worldview changed. Many missionaries discovered that specific values and behaviors of their host culture, such as prioritizing interpersonal relationships and respecting/honoring elders, were more consistent with their moral core. Accordingly, they assimilated these into the outer layers of their moral worldviews. Many came to view American consumerism, materialism, and constant busyness negatively and their host culture’s emphasis on human relationships above work and goods positively (Wellman and Keyes 2007). Evangelical Protestant missionaries who shared the same moral core with their domestic counterparts criticized specific components of American culture and its penetration into the evangelical church. Wellman and Keyes’ study suggests that cultural and geographic context shape the outer layers of a religious worldview and drive behavior. In the present paper, we apply this premise to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Does country context shape religious worldview and thereby influence perceptions of the pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions?

### *1.2. Perceptions of COVID-19 Restrictions in the U.S. and Cross-Nationally*

COVID-19 spreads when respiratory droplets from an infected person infiltrate the mouths or noses of people nearby (CDC 2020). Thus, the risk of transmission is greatest when people “are in close contact for a prolonged period” (CDC 2020). The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommend several strategies for reducing transmission, including limiting contact with non-household members, maintaining social distance, wearing masks, washing hands often, among other preventative measures (CDC 2020; World Health Organization 2020). Some Americans resisted or rejected these medical guidelines and government restrictions. Motivations varied. Some suspected COVID-19 to be a hoax, a moral panic, or part of a vast conspiracy theory concocted to deprive citizens of their rights. Others believed the dangers of COVID-19 were overblown and the mitigation protocols unnecessary (Pew Research Center 2020).

A body of cross-national research suggests that political and cultural context plays a salient role in risk perception and compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. For example, Duan et al. (2020) found that citizens in mainland China who viewed local government efforts to prevent and control COVID-19 favorably were generally willing to comply with governmental mandates. Citizens’ perception of COVID-19 risks partially mediated this relationship. Government interventions appear to signal greater risk, which translates to higher levels of compliance. In some nation-states, stricter COVID-19 protocols translated to greater compliance among the people. Maekelae et al.’s (2020) cross-national study found a relationship between government restrictions, perceptions of governmental efficacy, the perceived risks of COVID-19, and compliance. Across the sample, residents in countries with more severe lockdowns were more likely to perceive government interventions as effective and perceive COVID-19 as riskier. Thus, they were more likely to take precautionary measures. People’s perceptions of risk and government restrictions affected their compliance with such regulations.

While most Americans supported restrictions at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Millhiser 2020), a clear partisan divide emerged. Republicans and Independents were far less likely to accept limitations on civil liberties than were Democrats (Kerr et al. 2021; Xu and Cheng 2021). Media commentators focused almost exclusively on political explanations, neglecting cultural factors, including religious worldviews (Perry et al. 2020b). Yet, evidence suggests these worldviews shape public opinion. According to surveys collected in March and June 2020 (Pew Research Center 2020), White evangelical Protestants reported the lowest rate of concern that the government would “lift the restrictions too quickly” (55%), the lowest rate of wearing masks/face coverings “all or most of the time” when in businesses or stores (48%), and the lowest rates of viewing all of the following as necessary to address the COVID-19 pandemic: “closing businesses”, “asking people to avoid gathering in groups of more than ten”, “canceling major sports and entertainment events”, “closing k-12 schools”, and “carry-out only restaurants”. A particular branch of evangelical Protestants—U.S. Christian nationalists—are particularly hostile to COVID-19 restrictions (Perry et al. 2020b).

U.S. Christian nationalists embrace libertarian ideals of government and neo-liberal free-market economic policy (Perry et al. 2020b; Whitehead and Perry 2020). They also tend to question scientific authority (Baker et al. 2020). Accordingly, Christian nationalists are less likely to wear masks, wash their hands, social distance, and isolate (Perry et al. 2020a) and are more likely to oppose government restrictions that protect the vulnerable (Perry et al. 2020a). They see public health restrictions as antithetical to liberty and economic prosperity (Perry et al. 2020b). These findings suggest that there is something intrinsic to U.S. Christian nationalist theology—their moral core—driving opposition to COVID-19 restrictions. Still, Perry et al. (2020b) point out that U.S. Christian nationalism emerged in a

particular historical context connected to neoliberal and libertarian principles (Kruse 2015; Marti 2019) and later, Donald Trump (Whitehead et al. 2018). This context established fertile ground for misinformation to spread and hostile skepticism of the Government's intentions to take root in conservative religious networks. Survey research on Christian nationalists in the U.S. in 2020 cannot distinguish internal, moral core influences on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to COVID-19 from exogenous political forces in the broader culture. The present study attempts to isolate religiously motivated perceptions of COVID-19 and related policies by focusing on conservative Anabaptists. The Amish and some conservative Mennonites in North America generally opposed government restrictions to control COVID-19 (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stein 2021). Though these groups do not share the same political motivations and culture as Christian nationalists, they present similar resistance.

### 1.3. Amish and Mennonites

The Amish and Mennonites are Anabaptist groups that separated from mainstream Protestants in 16th century Europe. After suffering much persecution in Europe, Amish groups migrated to the U.S. seeking religious freedom (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2016). Mennonite groups also left Europe during this period and settled in the U.S. and other countries worldwide (Kraybill 2010; Kraybill 2001; Loewen and Nolt 2010; Scott 1996). The Amish and Mennonites are two distinct groups that share similar values rooted in the Anabaptist tradition. Early Anabaptists emphasized the separation of church and state, indicating the church should be free of government control. The importance of church and following God's law is prominent in Anabaptist groups today. While following Biblical teachings remains a central component, church members try to live their faith through daily actions. The church's organization as a spiritual and social community creates a structure conducive to helping others and strengthens bonds across members. Anabaptists believe people should decide to follow God's law and, as such, adhere to the practice of adult baptism to join the church (Kraybill 2001; Snyder 1995).

In stark contrast to U.S. Christian nationalists, Anabaptists believe in clearly separating church from state (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill 2001). Anabaptist groups generally follow the state's rules, believing God ordains government (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill 2003; Yoder 2003). However, when laws clash with religious mandates, traditional Anabaptists follow their religious beliefs. For example, many states mandated that horse-drawn buggies bear visible signs indicating a "slow-moving vehicle". These signs were considered "flashy" and "vain" by some conservative Amish groups. They believed that state-imposed requirements to display bright orange triangles, reflective tape, or any sort of luminous material on their buggies was a direct violation of their religious beliefs, which emphasize humility (Kraybill 2003). However, outside of the most conservative Amish groups, most other Amish groups complied with the new regulations (Anderson 2014). As Anderson (2014, p. 103) notes, it is not that the Amish and Mennonites do not care about safety; rather, the "measures purported to bring about health and safety are weighed against their view of life, religion, and the world". In fact, "many times Amish accept state proposals aimed at safety; sometimes, based on cultural and religious reasons largely lost to outsiders, they reject them" (Anderson 2014, p. 103).

The relationship between Anabaptists and health care is rooted in the same core belief, that God is in control. Anabaptists view health as a gift from God that should be valued and protected (Garrett-Wright et al. 2016). Related to the communal focus of their moral worldview, Anabaptists generally believe the family and community bear responsibility in caring for members. For example, the Amish believe families, not the state, should oversee medical care, particularly for minor children (Huntington 2003). Some Anabaptists are likely to seek alternative care before turning to mainstream medicine (Garrett-Wright et al. 2020). Garrett-Wright et al. (2016) note Anabaptist respondents prioritize healthy diets and exercise as a preventive strategy and vary in terms of getting immunizations. While

preventive strategies vary, most Amish and Mennonite groups use the healthcare system to treat serious medical issues (Kraybill 2003; Scott et al. 2021; Wenger et al. 2011).

The underutilization of preventative medicine has led to several epidemics in Anabaptist communities over the past several decades, including measles outbreaks in 1988 and 2014 and a polio outbreak in 1979 (Huntington 2003). In some instances, people in Anabaptist communities showed an increased willingness to get vaccinated (Huntington 2003; Wenger et al. 2011). Anabaptists believe that individual responsibility and social responsibility are tightly linked. The Amish believe they “have a moral responsibility not to bring harm or injury to anyone” (Huntington 2003, p. 188). Accordingly, disease outbreaks can motivate vaccination campaigns. In the case of COVID-19, government regulations that impede communal religious practices counteract the Anabaptist ideal of “bringing no harm”. Restrictions on social gatherings, for example, disrupt church fellowship, which is central to the Anabaptist moral worldview. Technological prohibitions limit options for fellowship in traditional Anabaptist groups. For instance, many Amish churches forbid telephones, cell phones, radios, and other mass communication mechanisms. Their members cannot join a Zoom call. Accordingly, many traditional Anabaptist groups resisted the pandemic guidelines.

The CDC investigated two COVID-19 outbreaks in Amish and Mennonite communities, one in Elkhart County, IN (Duran et al. 2020) and the other in Holmes County, OH (Ali et al. 2020). Interviewees reported reluctance to follow specific preventative measures at both sites. Most of the Indiana interviewees said “that they do not always follow COVID-19 preventative measures” because doing so was problematic or incompatible with cultural practices in the community (Duran et al. 2020, p. 28). They provided mixed reports regarding whether their family and friends practiced the preventative measures. Some reported total disregard of the protocols by family and friends, while others reported haphazard compliance. Ohio interviewees pointed out that the preventive measures conflicted with their cultural practices. Social distancing is inconsistent with the centrality of church worship, and masks are neither culturally nor socially acceptable (Ali et al. 2020). These reports align with contact tracers’ observations that identified six separate social gatherings in the two weeks before the outbreak in Ohio. Some of the Indiana interviewees “expressed that they would likely not socially distance themselves from sick loved ones or from others if they were sick. They expressed the importance of family connections and would rather die around family in their home than be alone in the hospital” (Duran et al. 2020, p. 28). These sentiments highlight the communal nature of the Anabaptist moral worldview. Distrust of medical information was manifest in both reports. For example, “Most participants stated that they did not believe the media, the government, or the healthcare system were providing accurate and reliable information about COVID-19. Frequently, participants found it very hard to identify trusted individuals or organizations when asked. However, after multiple queries, some were able to report that they trust local doctors who they have a relationship with or someone who is from the local area. Some participants simply stated that they were ‘going to trust God’” (Duran et al. 2020, p. 28). These statements indicate that they are more willing to trust local sources of information (Huntington 2003) than broader sources, such as the media and government.

Both reports documented the broad distribution of misinformation concerning COVID-19. In Indiana, informants reported believing that their community had reached herd immunity, that COVID-19 was not serious, and that the prevention measures were unnecessary, overstated, or ineffective (Duran et al. 2020). The moral imperative to not harm others is likely less pervasive when people do not believe COVID-19 creates harm in the first place. While most Ohio informants appeared to understand how COVID-19 transmits and ways to prevent it, several repeated misinformation about the harmful effects of masks and the general efficacy of specific natural remedies, such as taking “vitamins and herbs” (Ali et al. 2020, p. 2). These reports from the CDC are consistent with recent work finding that many U.S. Amish communities held in-person church services in the first two

months of the pandemic and allowed out-of-town and out-of-state visitors at their services (Stein 2021).

The Anabaptist worldview emphasizes the separation of church and state and resistance to government interventions in their religious life, which implies persecution. At the same time, the Anabaptist worldview believes in obeying state law as long as it does not interfere with God's law. Church services and fellowship are essential elements of God's law, as is not causing harm to others. When faced with new state health or safety interventions, Anabaptists must weigh these considerations—do no harm, follow God's law, and follow state law if it does not interfere with the former—all within the backdrop of a theological heritage stressing persecution for the faith. The side Anabaptists (and sects within the larger affiliation) chose varied over time depending on the intervention and circumstances surrounding it. Thus, what side they, and their churches, will take, or rather, what elements of their moral core will be activated, is not a foregone conclusion. In the U.S., it is clear that many Anabaptists interpreted the government health mandates as interfering with God's commandment to fellowship (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stein 2021; Stoltzfus 2021) and not as a method of enacting their moral imperative to do no harm. However, this may reflect the politically conservative rural climates they are embedded in (Stoltzfus 2021). Are Anabaptists in other countries responding to the COVID-19 public health mandates in the same way as their U.S. counterparts are? This question leads us to the current study.

#### 1.4. Current Study

Most research on the relationship between religion and COVID-19 has taken place in the U.S., drawing primarily on samples of white evangelical Protestants and Christian nationalists. These groups are embedded in a hyperpartisan political context, making it nearly impossible to separate theological influence from other cultural factors that shape belief and behavior. Citizens identifying with the Republican Party and President Trump were more likely to traffic in misinformation about COVID-19. Conservative Protestants, including those classified by Perry et al. as Christian nationalists, tend to align with the Republican party. It is impossible to distinguish the role of context from intrinsic theology in responses to COVID-19 based on the existing data.

Following Wellman and Keyes (2007), we argue that national contexts shape how conservative Protestants understand both the pandemic and the government-imposed restrictions designed to contain it. People in countries with stricter government restrictions tend to view these measures as effective and COVID-19 as riskier compared with citizens in countries with weaker restrictions (Maekelae et al. 2020). Those living in countries with less access to quality healthcare, in which routine treatable illnesses can be lethal, may be more likely to view COVID-19 as a severe health threat and, therefore, be more supportive of government interventions. Countries with prior histories of epidemics may respond similarly. Do the perceptions of conservative American Protestants of COVID-19 government restrictions vary by country context? To investigate this, we examine American Anabaptist missionaries in other countries whose religious moral core is the same as that of their American counterparts, but their country context differs.

#### 1.5. Anabaptist Missionaries

Missionary outreach was an essential component of the initial Anabaptist movement in the 16th century. A primary goal of early Anabaptist evangelism was to "spread the gospel of Jesus Christ" to grow church membership (Kraybill 2010, p. 145). Missions activity subsided in subsequent centuries due to persecution and governmental suppression. In recent decades, revivalism and evangelical movements increased Anabaptist missionary outreach (Kraybill 2010; Loewen and Nolt 2010; Schlabach 1980). Modern missionary work includes evangelism, distributing Bibles and Christian literature, and providing material aid such as food and clothing to people in poverty worldwide. Kraybill (2010) notes that some international church groups emphasize foreign missions rather than outreach

within their home countries. This tendency promulgated institutional growth of Anabaptist foreign mission initiatives in the 1900s.

Many mission organizations bring groups of Amish and Mennonites together, working toward a common goal of helping others (Kraybill 2001). Mission programs offer a variety of services that allow U.S.-based Anabaptists to participate through volunteering and donations. Anabaptists actively involved in missionary work abroad demonstrate a willingness to seek new opportunities, in this case, for evangelism in other countries (Nolt and Meyers 2007). While missionaries are indeed bound to the communal aspect of Anabaptist beliefs and value the contribution to the greater good, they are also likely to gain a sense of personal fulfillment from serving in the mission field.

Several American Anabaptist missionaries write letters regarding their experiences to an Amish and Mennonite correspondence newspaper—*The Budget*. We use these letters as data on the perceptions of the pandemic and COVID-19 government restrictions among American Anabaptist missionaries living abroad.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper is part of a broader inquiry into Amish and Mennonite reactions to COVID-19. We draw on a large corpus of correspondence published in *The Budget* between March and December 2020. Correspondence newspapers have long provided a means for communication and social connections across plain Anabaptist settlements (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2008). These newspapers also provide an outlet for Conservative Mennonite mission organizations to share updates on work with the larger Anabaptist community that provides financial, social, and spiritual support. *The Budget*, published weekly, is the most broadly distributed Amish and Mennonite correspondence newspaper with a circulation of around 18,500 (Stein et al. 2021). Representatives from Amish and Mennonite communities—scribes—submit letters to the newspaper that provide community news, including health, weddings, funerals, births, and other events. Scribe letters focus on items of shared interest and avoid controversial topics. The submissions serve to construct meaning about the community amongst the Budget readers (Nolt 2008). While most scribe letters are from U.S. communities, there are also several international scribes, many of which are American missionaries stationed abroad. These letters provide a rich source of data on the experiences of Amish and Mennonite communities abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic that would otherwise be nearly impossible to study.

As part of a systematic content analysis of *Budget* letters, we noticed subtle differences in how scribes located outside the U.S. and Canada discussed COVID-19 and its consequences. This discovery led us to closely examine all entries written by scribes located outside of the U.S. and Canada and published between March and December 2020. Our analysis followed the principles of *abductive analysis*, an approach to qualitative data analysis grounded in pragmatism (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Abduction bridges deduction and induction. Deductive logic derives inferences from propositions, while inductive reasoning extrapolates from observation. Abductive logic infers a plausible explanation of novel observation by considering what the interacting agent already knows. Abductive analysis seeks out novel or unexpected observations in a set of qualitative data for careful comparative analysis to generate novel theoretical propositions. These international entries differed in content and tone from scribe letters originating in the U.S. and Canada. Abductive analysis offered a strategy for making sense of this.

Researchers' "positionality" is important to consider when conducting qualitative research to identify potential sources of bias (Orne and Bell 2015). The lead authors who performed the data analysis are sociologists of religion who study Amish and Mennonite populations but are not Amish or Mennonite. There are both advantages and disadvantages to studying a religious group as outsiders. A core disadvantage is the possibility that we are not ingrained enough in Amish and Mennonite discourse to pick up on inferred language. It helps that we are studying responses to government restrictions with specific associated language (e.g., mask-wearing, social distancing, quarantine, closures, and COVID-19

tests). We also draw on an accumulating body of research examining the ways that Amish and Mennonites in the United States reacted to these restrictions, providing a frame of comparison for Amish and Mennonite missionaries' reactions to restrictive policies (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Stein 2021; Stoltzfus 2021).

On the other hand, an advantage of being outside researchers is that we may be able to identify sociological processes that the religious groups themselves might be opposed to seeing. Members of conservative religious groups typically perceive their moral worldview as both "correct" and unchanging. They are often reluctant to recognize the potential influence of context. For example, Wellman and Keyes's (2007, p. 392) evangelical informants expressed that their values "[ . . . ] were eternal and sacrosanct, above culture and given by God through the Bible". It is not that evangelical religious worldviews are not affected by context or are unchanging; it is that those who hold them perceive them as "absolute and above culture" (Wellman and Keyes 2007, p. 383). This perception makes it particularly difficult for "insiders" of religious groups to study how context shapes their worldviews.

We identified missionary entries in several ways. First, many missionary scribes indicated their organization as a subheading in *The Budget* submission. Second, we considered international scribe entries that explicitly referenced mission-type work. Some international entries reference established Mennonite communities, while others represent mission-minded churches. The scribes for mission-minded churches clearly described the activities of the community members. Our sample included 138 missionary entries from 11 communities within nine countries—Ethiopia, Iraq (Kurdistan and "Northern"), Israel, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Middle East (not further specified), Nicaragua, and Ukraine (Shipintsi and Zappрудya). Ten of the scribes are associated with Conservative Mennonite organizations or churches.

Conservative Mennonites tend to fall in the middle of the traditional spectrum and actively engage in mission work (Kraybill 2001; Scott 1996). Conservative Mennonite groups comprising several different churches make up about one-fifth of the U.S. Mennonite population (Kraybill 2001). The Beachy Amish-Mennonites, for example, separated from the Old Order Amish church in the early 1900s. The Amish-Mennonites hold similar views as those of traditional Amish but are generally more open to innovations, including automobiles and electricity (Kraybill 2010; Scott 1996). Other conservative Mennonite groups formed in the 1950s, splitting from the larger Mennonite Church conference. These conservative groups opposed progressive ideas that they believed were infiltrating the Mennonite Church. They found common ground in agreement to avoid "worldly" temptations; however, differences in standards of dress, acceptable youth activities, and forms of church government led to several further schisms, yielding many distinct conservative churches (Scott 1996).

Despite their differences, conservative Mennonite groups tend to work together within mission organizations. Additionally, some Amish groups that allow for evangelism are active in these mission activities (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Seven of the scribes in our sample are missionaries with Christian Aid Ministries (CAM). Other scribes associate with other missionary organizations, including Kingdom Channels and Master's International Ministries. The remaining scribes represent the Washington-Franklin Mennonite Conference and the Old Order Amish.

CAM is one of the largest and most prominent Anabaptist mission groups, created in 1981 by traditional Anabaptists in the U.S. and Canada. CAM is staffed mainly by Beachy Amish-Mennonites and other conservative Mennonites but receives support from Amish communities (Hurst and McConnell 2010). CAM promotes its outreach efforts through the lens of Christian theology, which is appealing to traditional Anabaptist groups (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 2010). In addition to the broader efforts of spiritual and material aid, CAM operates medical clinics, supports international church development, and has a disaster relief focus as part of its program.

Kingdom Channels and Master's International Ministries are also associated with conservative Mennonite groups. Kingdom Channels emphasizes the leading of the Holy

Spirit and was founded in 2016 to provide English language lessons to refugee children in Northern Iraq (Kingdom Channels 2021). This project grew into three locations in Iraq and one in Jordan. In addition to teaching English, they also engage in humanitarian aid and send short-term mission teams to respond to crises. Master's International Ministries operates mission churches in Ukraine that provide material and medical aid supplies and Christian literature and education to community members (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online 2021; Master's International Ministries 2021).

The Washington-Franklin Mennonite Conference is one of the most conservative churches in the Conservative Mennonite Movement. The conservative conference has a history of programs serving communities, including children's schooling, resource distribution to people in poverty living in Appalachia, and prison ministries (Scott 1996). The Washington-Franklin Conference has over fifteen churches in the US and two mission churches, one each in Ethiopia and Haiti. The focus on schooling and prison ministries is evident in the domestic and international communities (Pilgrim Ministry 2020; Scott 1996).

While Old Order Amish groups generally do not engage in field missions (Hurst and McConnell 2010), the teaching efforts at the Old Colony Mennonite settlements are an exception. The people that serve at Old Colony settlements include a range of Anabaptist groups from Old Order Amish to Beachy Amish-Mennonites. The scribe from Chihuahua, Mexico is affiliated with the Old Order Amish and works at an Old Colony Mennonite school. Kraybill et al. (2013, p. 366) note that this "is a partnership between Amish schoolteachers from the United States and highly traditional, plain-dressing Old Colony Mennonites who live in northern Mexico and are descended from Russo-German immigrants". It is a "uniquely Amish transnational project" because it "circumvents Amish dictates against evangelism and air travel: the relationship does not involve proselytizing, and the Amish can travel to Mexico by train or bus" (Kraybill et al. 2013, p. 366).

Table 1 provides information on the activities of the missionaries and the sponsoring organizations. Of the 138 entries, 81 mentioned topics related to the pandemic. We coded these entries and identified themes related to COVID-19 restrictions and their experiences of the pandemic.

**Table 1.** Missionary Locations, Organizations, and Ministries.

Location	Organization	Ministries
Nazareth, Ethiopia	Washington-Franklin Mennonite Conference	School, handwashing stations, prison ministries, and gifting Bibles.
Kurdistan, Iraq	Kingdom Channels	Restoration team, visiting IDP camps, English class, distribution of food, cleaning supplies and hygiene products.
Northern Iraq	CAM	Visiting IDP camps, distribution of food and hygiene products.
Jerusalem, Israel	CAM	Distribute food, health items, wheelchairs, and other aid to the poor.
Nakuru, Kenya	CAM	Food distribution and digging wells.
Chihuahua, Mexico	Old Order Amish	Teaching mission; operate a school.
Middle East	CAM	Medical team: burn care, medical care to refugee camps and remote villages, food distribution, hygiene kits, and layette bundles.
Managua, Nicaragua	CAM	Food, clothing, and healthcare item distribution.
Shipintsi, Ukraine	Master's International Ministries	Church planting, tilling gardens.
Zapprudya, Ukraine	CAM	Food and clothing distribution, schools, and medical care.
Liberia, West Africa	CAM	COVID-19 aid, distribution of food and medical supplies, and school.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Government Restrictions

Eighty-one entries mentioned the pandemic. Of these, nearly all (84%) mentioned government restrictions, including curfews (1%), driving restrictions (10%), flight issues (25%), closed borders (10%), travel restrictions (32%), and gathering restrictions (9%). The experiences of many of the residents in other countries were quite different from those in the U.S. We provide detailed excerpts to capture this fully.

In Nakuru, Kenya, the government imposed a curfew: “Kenya is still facing restrictions due to COVID-19, with several hotspots in Nairobi and Mombasa being locked down. The 7:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew is still in effect until June 6th. Our families have been confined to our respective compounds for most of the past 10 weeks”. (17 June).

Officials in Ethiopia enforced quarantines, taking travelers to hotels designated for isolation:

“We arrived . . . in Addis on June 3. [ . . . ] This hotel was one of the hotels designated to take travelers entering the country who needed to be quarantined. We needed to stay in our rooms at all times, so we spent some time each day on the balcony watching the busy street, as well as the construction of a few multi-story buildings. Each day until we had a swab test, someone came to take our temperature. We ordered our meals by phone or from a menu someone showed us at our door”. 15 July, Nazareth, Ethiopia

The family remained in quarantine for two weeks and was released upon receiving a negative COVID-19 test. They received a certificate providing evidence of their negative test.

Israel required masks at all times except when a person participated in sports:

“Despite the heat, as I biked to my office, I noticed many joggers and bikers wearing masks. The law here is that a mask must be worn in public, even outdoors, but there is an exception for sports. As Israel has one of the highest infection rates (COVID-19) in the world, it became the first advanced country to order a second lockdown to fight the pandemic” (25 September, Jerusalem, Israel).

Like the U.S., retail stores in Chihuahua, Mexico limited the number of shoppers to help reduce COVID-19 transmission:

“On Wed. we did not have school as we had planned to go to Chihuahua to do our Christmas shopping. On Tues. our plans changed a bit. “They” were saying that in Chihuahua they won’t let more than one person from each group into the stores at one time. And “they” also said that “they” are pretty strict about too many people in one vehicle”. (18 November).

Nine percent of the COVID-19 entries mentioned the police enforcing the restrictions. For example, a missionary in Ukraine, reported that borders, schools, and universities were closed and that church services were limited to no more than ten participants:

“We were informed that to disregard the ban of gathering for religious services in groups of 10 could cost the head pastor a fine or imprisonment. The government put the police in control of how the quarantine is executed. Luzhani, the village adjacent to Shipintsi, is in lockdown and constant police presence because of several confirmed cases of coronavirus”. (8 April, Shipintsi, Ukraine).

Public transportation services were limited, and the police aggressively enforced mobility restrictions:

“On July 1st, the buses between Shipintsi and the city began rolling again, after being shut down for 3-½ months because of the coronavirus pandemic. [ . . . ] Passenger trains began pulling into the Chernovtsi station in the middle of the month. Brother R\*, who lives in a border town on Ukraine and works in Romania, is struggling with the coronavirus restrictions. After a 2 week isolation session in

Romania he received a document from the police that he thought would allow him to daily cross the border to go to his job in the furniture factory. However, his police document was not sufficient, for which reason he has stayed at his job in Romania for 3 weeks without coming home to his family". (12 August, Shipintsi, Ukraine).

### 3.2. Perceptions of Government Restrictions

The descriptions of these restrictions and their enforcement differ remarkably from the pandemic experience in the U.S. Many U.S.-based scribes expressed disapproval of the guidelines and a willingness to disregard or ignore them (Stein 2021). The missionary entries, in contrast, consistently reflected support for the restrictions (including, in some cases, a desire for more limitations). In some instances, missionary scribes expressed positive by-products of the restrictions.

Several missionaries mentioned wearing masks without criticizing the requirement. A correspondent in Iraq even opined that mask-wearing should reduce the virus's spread:

"A normal day for us will probably include donning our masks and going to a few shops for a few groceries in the morning or evening". (8 July, Northern Iraq)

"Some areas of Iraq are seeing an increase in COVID cases. Our immediate area has not been affected yet. We are required to wear masks while in public. Most people obey the guidelines, which should reduce the risk of a large outbreak. Thankfully, businesses can remain open and there are no curfews at this time". June 17, Northern Iraq

"Lots of people are wearing masks in public, and we are all being careful not to travel more than we have to". (1 April, Zappрудya, Ukraine)

"And in the middle of a hectic morning when there are 3 things that need doing, to take a moment and thank God for this busyness because it means we can interact with people again! And best of all, the joy yesterday to go back to church after 6 long months! [ . . . ] Worshipping with our African friends was sweet again; though I quickly discovered singing through a face mask is not my favorite thing to do!" (25 September, Liberia, West Africa)

Notably, even though the scribe in Liberia indicated that wearing a face mask while singing is not their "favorite thing", they still wore it and did not criticize the practice.

Many scribes explicitly supported the strict lockdown procedures implemented by their governments or implicitly supported them through lack of criticism. The writer based in Ethiopia provided detailed information on the government restrictions enacted:

"The first case of the virus showed up in the capitol around March 10. The government took the danger of the virus very seriously and began to close things down. First they told people to refrain from large gatherings, including church. Then they began to close down businesses and city to city transportation. The Ethiopian brethren stopped coming to the office around the 20th, so we slowed down to only serving walk-in students. The next week all public transportation within the city was stopped, which greatly changed the town. Now many people are walking to town for food, walking to their jobs if they still have one, and many are just sitting at home hoping and praying that the virus will not spread through the city". (15 April, Nazareth, Ethiopia)

The scribe indicates that the government "took the danger of the virus very seriously" and that many people stayed home "hoping and praying" that COVID-19 would not spread.

In Liberia, the scribe notes compliance with a government stay-at-home order:

"Lockdown measures continue to be put in place and enforced. As of this past Fri., the government has issued a stay-at-home order. Vehicles carrying food or medical supplies are still allowed to move about if they carry a government-issued pass. We have been staying on the compound, even sending in our orders for groceries. This is the fourteenth day I have spent on the compound, by far a

record for me. I must say that everyone seems to be in good spirits". (15 April, Liberia, West Africa)

The scribe made a point to indicate that everyone is "in good spirits" during the stay-at-home order, which suggests acceptance of the restrictions.

Further evidence for lack of opposition to the government restrictions is in what is missing from entries—criticism, hostility, and lack of compliance, illustrated through several entries of the missionary family located in Jerusalem, Israel:

"We were meandering our way through some Jewish neighborhoods at sunset on Yom Kippur, when we realized that many synagogues are currently outdoor synagogues, because of the laws prohibiting indoor gatherings of people. The streets in front of the neighborhood synagogues were lined with people holding prayer books and chanting their evening prayers. Often there were people standing on both sides of the street, facing the synagogue. It felt both majestic and intrusive, biking smack through the middle of sunset prayers on Yom Kippur". (14 October)

"The lockdown affects Sukkot traditions also. It is traditional to invite friends or family to your "sukkah" (booth), but the current laws forbid this. Saturday morning our family took to bikes again for some fresh air and exercise. We decided to bike through some Jewish neighborhoods and observe the sukkot (booths). [ . . . ] People take their meals in the sukkot, so we enjoyed hearing the happy sounds of dishes clanking and people eating as we biked around". (14 October)

"Reflection reveals that lockdowns can unlock fresh opportunities. As soccer fields transformed into synagogues, our family enjoyed observing some outdoor High Holiday action that ended with the Feast of the Tabernacles. We also need to worship outside currently, but at least we can do that!" (11 November)

There was only one entry mentioning that American missionaries failed to abide by the restrictions:

"We were privileged on Aug. 23rd to resume our church services here. However we were limited to a space or 2 m between worshippers unless you were seated beside a family member. The first Sun. the Americans did not wear their masks, but the Ethiopian brethren felt everyone should do so, since the government recommends it. Now most everyone wears those fuzzy things during the service except when speaking or singing. . . . The greetings used here changed from 6 years ago. In pre-COVID-19 times, a buddy-type greetings for the men, was a shoulder bump and if it was long-time, no-see you gave several of those alternately from right to left. The feminine greetings was similar but instead of a shoulder bump, it was a cheek touch. A professional greeting was a right hand-shake while touching your left hand fore finger to your upper right arm. That has changed now to a slight bow while placing your right hand on your upper chest while trying to maintain the proper distance". (16 September, Nazareth, Ethiopia)

As the Ethiopian brethren insisted on following government recommendations to wear masks, the American missionaries complied. Additionally, the scribe notes how greetings have changed during the pandemic to accommodate physical distancing. This entry indicates how context affected compliance and likely contributed to their perceptions of the restrictions.

### 3.3. Voluntary Restrictions

Several scribes reported that their organization imposed voluntary restrictions on themselves. Writers in Liberia and Iraq implemented self-imposed quarantines and continued lockdowns on themselves:

“Today is the first day that we have ended our self-imposed quarantine on our compound. We had been relying on our national staff to do our deliveries and other work while we took care of the warehouse and paperwork. [ . . . ] We had been locked down for 127 days, starting on March 23. All of us are glad to have the ability to leave the compound to do things”. (5 August, Liberia, West Africa)

“Last Friday, June 4, was the last day of the government-enforced lockdown. Our CAM compound is still not planning to open up at this point, until we see what the next step is that the country will be taking. It’s getting very long, but it helps me when I count my blessings”. (24 June, Northern Iraq)

A scribe in Kurdistan, Iraq, reported that their group chose “not to visit any of the IDP [Internally Displaced People] camps to protect others in case we would be carrying the infamous COVID-19” (25 March). The scribe in Managua, Nicaragua described how people were voluntarily practicing social distancing even though the government had not implemented many requirements:

“We live in a country where testing is extremely limited and the government does not give much direction how to handle a virus”. (8 April)

“In spite of a country that hasn’t implemented many restrictions or social distancing, it’s interesting to see how people have created a measure of this on their own. We are concerned about taking necessary precautions and at the same time get involved with transporting medications and treatments to those around us who need it”. (27 May)

Voluntarily self-imposed restrictions are evidence of support and agreement with such rules.

### 3.4. Contextual Factors and COVID-19 Perceptions

In addition to government restrictions and residents shaping perceptions of COVID-19, other country context factors likely matter as well. Past experiences with epidemics may contribute to taking COVID-19 more seriously and supporting government restrictions. In Liberia, the scribe writes:

“Coronavirus became a reality to us here in Liberia on March 16, with the first case being reported in Monrovia. For a lot of these people it brings back memories of Ebola. Some are scared about a food shortage, and others are having a hard time getting water because the pump they normally access is now inside a locked compound. There is a gas shortage, and transportation is expensive. But in talking with some of our national staff, they have challenged me in that even though they are scared, and they know firsthand what effects a pandemic like this can have on their country, they pray, commit it to God, and trust Him to take care of them”. (1 April)

Memories of Ebola and resulting food and water shortages are fresh memories for Liberians. The scribe reports that “they know firsthand what effects a pandemic like this can have on their country”, which may influence their perceptions of the pandemic and government responses to it.

The pandemic’s exacerbation of impoverished country conditions may also contribute to these perceptions. The Northern Iraq scribe provides details of a young woman’s tragic experience:

“J\* sought treatment for her burns in a different province. The public hospital treated her for a while then they stopped because she didn’t have identification papers with her. Her husband returned to camp to get her papers. While he was there the travel ban went into effect and he could not return to his wife, so she couldn’t get treatment. She decided to return to camp but was detained at a checkpoint. After 3 days, they finally sent her for 14 days of quarantine then allowed her to return to the camp. [ . . . ] Her story causes me to try to imagine the powerlessness of having no money to pay for the hospital expenses and being

denied care because you are a refugee and don't have your proper papers. After a visit like this you leave feeling very privileged". (9 September)

The scribe reports "feeling privileged", suggesting that this encounter had a meaningful impact on them. Where residents cannot afford routine medical care, the scribes can envision the tragic effects of COVID-19 spreading through the population.

COVID-19 restrictions, in affecting people's ability to work and attend school and organizations' ability to secure donations, also amplify food, hygiene, financial, and educational disparities:

"The continued restrictions create added difficulties for some families. One man said he is not able to go to work since the COVID-19 lockdowns. We are privileged to help a small local organization with distribution of food and cleaning supplies along with hygiene items for needy families. Most of the people helped live in small villages outside the city. [...] One Christian man says "Thank you" from all the Christian villages of Iraq for the help they receive from the churches in America". (19 August, Kurdistan, Iraq)

"The schools are non existent in camp. The school situation wasn't very good before COVID-19 and when the virus came, the remaining schools were closed down and haven't opened up again. We often hear people asking how their children will learn if they have no school. Instead the children play all day on the dusty streets or become bored with the life of nothing to do in camp". (21 October, Northern Iraq)

"With quarantine restrictions loosening a little bit here, we've been able to get out more. In the beginning of June we visited the Father's House, a Home in Kiev that works closely with Children's Service. They help troubled children from abusive homes as well as orphans. They lost some of their supporters from other parts of Europe due to COVID-19, so CAM helped them out with food parcels, as well as comforters and soap. It was well worth seeing the smiles on the children's faces when they helped unload the truck!" (1 July, Zaprudnya, Ukraine)

Hearing these accounts may influence the perceptions of the missionaries regarding COVID-19 and government restrictions.

#### 4. Discussion

Government restrictions that enforce preventative measures are essential for reducing the spread of COVID-19. Americans reacted to these restrictions in the U.S. in a polarized fashion, driven by political ideology (Kerr et al. 2021; Xu and Cheng 2021). While much research has focused on politics to explain resistance to COVID-19 restrictions, other studies suggest that conservative Protestant religious groups may play a role in this opposition (Perry et al. 2020a, 2020b; Pew Research Center 2020). Drawing on Wellman and Keyes' (2007) theory of religious moral worldviews, we argue that country context influences the outer layers of the moral worldview. It affects how the moral core shapes beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the outer, more malleable, layers of the moral worldview. Using data on American Amish and Mennonite missionaries stationed abroad, we find that their perceptions differ from reports of their U.S. counterparts. Their letters suggest that they explicitly and implicitly supported COVID-19 restrictions in words and behaviors, even going so far as to self-impose restrictions in some cases. The entries did not include COVID-19 misinformation but, instead, provided information consistent with the CDC and WHO guidelines. In contrast to their counterparts in the United States, reports submitted by Amish and Mennonite missionaries abroad lack opposition, criticism, and skepticism toward COVID-19 policies. These entries typically express acceptance and support of the restrictions, conveying that the authors perceive COVID-19 as a dangerous disease.

The entries also suggest that context matters. Official restrictions along with local norms appear to influence missionaries, who generally reported accepting and complying with them. Moreover, as reported in their letters, the missionaries' perceptions appear to be

shaped by the local conditions—poverty, overtaxed healthcare systems, and prior disease outbreaks. Amish and Mennonite worldviews focus on building and sustaining relationships with others (Nolt and Meyers 2007). They primarily receive and trust information from local sources with an established relationship (Duran et al. 2020; Huntington 2003; Stein 2021). As Duran et al.'s (2020, p. 28) study pointed out, community members “get most information from each other rather than from an outside source.” Such closure can create echo chambers of misinformation (Stein et al. 2021). Thus, COVID-19 misinformation prevalent in their communities certainly shaped perceptions of the pandemic and the government's efforts to contain it in the U.S. (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020).

On the other hand, the missionaries extensively interact with residents of their communities and build relationships with them as a part of their missionary work. The entries described the diversity of interactions they had with community members—internally displaced people, people with different religious traditions than them (e.g., the Yezidi in Iraq and Jews in Israel), government officials, and even people from neighboring countries. Scribes mentioned enjoying learning about different religious and cultural practices and spending time getting to know the members of the communities they serve. Their missionary activities pierce closed communication networks since missionary activities serve others. Accordingly, their information networks extend beyond their limited religious communities and open them up to additional information streams and diverse worldviews, including residents' past tragic experiences with other public health crises. In many cases, residents supported or at least complied with the guidelines. Even in cases where they did not, witnessing first-hand the direct negative impact of COVID-19 on these communities may have triggered the missionaries moral core belief of “do no harm” in a way that has not occurred widely among their U.S. counterparts.

These results suggest that perceptions of the pandemic and government restrictions may not be intrinsic to the moral worldviews of Amish and Mennonites. Instead, particular contexts may trigger some aspects of their moral core and not others (e.g., separation of church and state versus do no harm) that shape the outer layers of their worldviews and, thus, their perceptions and behaviors related to the pandemic and government restrictions. While we focused on the Amish and Mennonites, the theoretical mechanisms proposed could apply to other religious traditions as well. For example, research on German protesters of government COVID-19 restrictions identified that only a tiny percentage were Christian (Nachtwey et al. 2020). More research is needed comparing perceptions of government restrictions and the pandemic among people within the same religious traditions who have the same moral cores but reside in different countries or contexts.

This study has some limitations. First, it focuses on Amish and Mennonite missionaries who submit to *The Budget* newspaper. The findings may not be generalizable to those who do not submit to the newspaper or other religious groups. Since *The Budget* is an essential means of communication for many traditional Anabaptist communities (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2008), we expect that those who submit to the newspaper represent typical Amish and Mennonite missionaries. We do, however, recognize the scribe reports are an idealized representation of the community (Nolt 2008). As such, the reports focus on positive aspects of their experiences, perhaps even more so in international communities. Because missionary efforts depend on donations and *The Budget* readers may be a source of such contributions, this may affect the letters the missionaries write. This dynamic suggests that missionaries would attempt to mirror the responses of U.S. Amish and Mennonite communities, but we find the opposite. This divergence could be, in part, due to international mail restrictions during the beginning of the pandemic. One scribe even noted not being able to receive international mail for six months. Even so, collecting data from *The Budget* is advantageous for several reasons. The Amish and Mennonites are less trusting of outsiders in general and restrict communication technologies, making collecting data from them directly during non-pandemic times difficult and, during the pandemic, next to impossible. While it would be preferable to have more detailed information on the missionaries, including their citizenship status and their organization's relationship with the government,

this is also not practical to obtain during a pandemic. Longitudinal, cross-national social scientific data of any kind are uncommon during normal times. This further highlights *The Budget* as a unique data source in its provision of numerous longitudinal correspondences from 11 missionary communities in 9 different countries, which provides an unprecedented lens into the pandemic experiences of Amish and Mennonite missionaries abroad as told to other members of their faith. Moreover, although the particulars of the findings may be specific to the sample, the general theoretical mechanism developed may be generalizable and tested in other contexts with other religious groups.

Second, Amish and Mennonites who become missionaries may fundamentally differ from those who do not. Still, we argue that the detailed description provided in these entries and the impact of the residents and conditions on the missionaries supports our argument. Additionally, the report from Ethiopia demonstrating the change in behaviors of the American missionaries due to their fellow Ethiopians increases confidence in our argument that context shapes moral worldviews and resulting behaviors. While the data allowed us to compare the perceptions of American Amish and Mennonites living abroad to prior research on the perceptions of their U.S. counterparts, more research on missionaries' perceptions of COVID-19 is needed.

Some level of COVID-19 restrictions or guidelines will likely be in place for some time until the establishment of herd immunity. It is important to understand the factors that may shape people's perceptions of the restrictions and the pandemic more generally. While U.S. conservative Protestants are more likely to oppose various government restrictions (Ali et al. 2020; Duran et al. 2020; Perry et al. 2020b; Pew Research Center 2020), this may not be due to their intrinsic beliefs or moral worldview. Our analysis of American Amish and Mennonite missionaries abroad indicated that their reported perceptions and experiences of the pandemic differ from those of their U.S. counterparts, suggesting the critical role context plays in expressing religious moral cores. Future research would benefit from exploring how different contexts may make certain moral core beliefs more or less salient during public health emergencies, informing future public health interventions.

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