

Digital Field of Communication of Religious Organizations



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Abstract: *Studies on the interaction of religious organizations and their followers on social networks go back about ten years. Recognition of the crucial role of social networks in the religious life of modern society can be considered a generally accepted position among scholars. However, such interactions on the Russian internet remain poorly understood. The phenomenon of online religion is still not fully open. In modern science, there is a shortage of studies that pay attention to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the classification of religious practices online, taking into account the influence of sociocultural processes occurring in society. The concept of “digital religion” and the attempt to classify it have become the central position of the article. The advantages and the development prospects of the most famous theories of digital religion are demonstrated on basis of their analysis. The article attempts to adapt the concept of the Hjarvard mediatized religion to the Russian model of digital religion.*

Keywords: *media, mediation of digital religion, religious media, virtualization of religious space, religious blogs of the Russian internet.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The virtualization of life is present in almost all spheres of human activity. While originally these changes related mostly to communicative practices, it is now possible to speak of a new net-centric paradigm. Behind the structure of this paradigm, there is a qualitative change in the functioning of communicative space, its network nature. In a post-modern society, it is closely connected with the transformation of traditional attitudes to social reality and the widening of communication capabilities in virtual online spaces. Moreover, the processes of informatization and virtualization have affected such an extremely conservative field as religion. Thus, new definitions have emerged in the scientific discourse: “digital religion,” “mediation of religion” and “network religion.”

The terms “digital religion” and “network religion” refer to the online functioning of religion in present-day cyberspace. Research into this aspect makes it possible to get an idea of general characteristics and trends of religious practices in cyberspace. Along with this, innovative approaches to religious communication provide new opportunities for understanding mediation of religion.

Revised Manuscript Received on October 30, 2019.

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II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sociological discourse on virtualization and mediation of religion appeared at the end of the 20th century as a part of the international research project «The Nordic Research Network on the Mediatization of Religion and Culture (MRC)» (Scandinavian research network to examine mediation of religion and culture). In different networks both traditional and new religious movements obtained new spaces to spread their doctrines and religious practices, as well as for recruiting and affiliating members of religious communities. Among the earliest approaches to the study of this aspect is the institutional version of the theory of mediation proposed by a Danish researcher Stig Hjarvard. He considers the media as a cause of changes in the field of religion: social concepts regarding religion are mostly formed by the media rather than by religious associations. The media itself is an independent unit with its specific reasoning the other social institutions have to adapt to [1]. According to the researcher, mediation is a process in which the media, becoming a part of other social institutions, changes norms and ways of their functioning. Every social institution involves peculiar forms of rationality, its own modus operandi which is affected by technological developments, special character of media texts and commercialization which leads to standardization of media texts. Stig Hjarvard highlights three types of media communication concerning religion: religious media, journalism about religion, trivial religion [2, p. 282].

In his work on the connection between religion and cyberspace, an American religious expert S. O’Leary suggested that the network society would create online religions, whereas traditional religions would be transformed under the influence of the net [3, p. 785]. The American scholar’s prediction came true and in sociology of religion there appeared a full range of scientific areas focused on the new phenomena of religious communication in cyberspace. Swedish scholars M. Lövheim and A. Linderman attempted to explore the peculiarities of online religious identification [4]. In his research, M. Lövheim analyzes the web-blogs owned by Scandinavian Muslim women. The analysis of posts and comments led the scientist to the conclusion that discussion of stories of their lives in those blogs resulted in blurring of the boundaries between the private and the public. Besides, blogging shapes new forms of authority: women become authority to their readers, have an impact on the system of statuses built in the Islamic community [5].



Overview of digital religion within the limits of religious movements was undertaken by K. Radde-Antweiler [6]. At the micro-level, mediation theory enables us to track the changes in communication inside religious groups with the arrival of the Internet. For instance, the research of a Swedish sociologist of religion Mia Lövhelm is aimed at studying the way Scandinavian Muslim women are blogging [7]. Hence, a number of new definitions have been introduced in the scientific discourse. First and foremost, it is “digital religion” – a religion filled with technological structures and characteristics of the Internet environment, such as smoothing of traditional hierarchies, instant communication capabilities and the opportunity to get an immediate reply, expanding access to the sacred and to private information [8]. The other term is “religious media” which is commonly understood as “media institutions and practices created and controlled by the religious actors or groups” [9]. This includes mass media, social networks, private media, groups in messengers and blogs with religious content. In the context of the present article, the emphasis is placed on the analysis and classification of blogs with religious context which exist on the territory of Russia.

Houses of worship remained, but there appeared one more, new “resident address,” a new space where its new characteristics emerged and new opportunities opened up. Penetration of religion into the virtual space took place almost immediately after the launch of global nets. Eventually, digital religion evolved into several forms: information websites, fact sheets and forums which later were replaced by social nets and blogs. Virtual communities differ from other virtual forms of social inclusion due to the fact that, firstly, they use communication channel common for all members, secondly, they have clear-cut boundaries (membership) and, thirdly, their members feature shared goals/interests [10].

A blog or a web blog (the English word meaning “Internet news journal,” “Internet diary,” “online diary”) is a website the main content of which includes regularly posted entries containing texts, images or multimedia [5, p. 122]. Short texts sorted in reverse chronological order are typical for blogs (the last entry is at the top). The differences between blogs and traditional diaries are as follows: blogs are usually open to audiences and outside readers of these blogs can interact with the authors (by means of comments in guest blogs or in their own blogs). Bloggers are people who write and manage blogs. All together, bloggers are commonly referred to as the blogosphere.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Russia, the Internet has become quite an accessible and affordable mechanism for webcasting and receiving information on religious issues for ordinary religious followers as well as religious communities and preachers. The significance of Internet-technology is increasing owing to the fact that the traditional Russian mass media, such as TV, very rarely highlights religious topics. The second part of the article provides the results of the biographical interview. Qualitative methods help to define the components of religious identity. However, neither

methodology is universal; the author gives an attempt to explain the most difficult aspects the researchers face using these techniques. [10, p. 107] The methodology can be helpful in studying the religious affiliation of spouses in a mixed married couple as it can explain the mechanism of the shift in religious beliefs of a spouse and find out how the relationships between the spouses and their relatives and friends have altered due to the marriage. [3, p. 117] According to the study of VKontakte social network, the most common religion which users of this network state in their profiles is Orthodox Christianity (10 million users). This is followed by Islam (1.5 million), Buddhism (363 thousand) and atheism (463 thousand). According to the number of groups with more than a thousand members, two groups are leading: Orthodox Christianity – there are 106 of them (total 2461 groups), and Islam – 97 groups (total 3425). Protestantism comprises 77 groups with more than a thousand members; Catholicism, Buddhism and Judaism are presented by nine, four and three groups correspondingly [15].

The first part of the work with the Internet-resources of religious content demanded their structuring. To explore the religious publics and blogosphere of the Russian internet, main systematic characteristics were defined and, based on their specific character, the array of religious blogs could be classified [2, 313]. Peculiarities of the object under study require identifying new typological patterns different from the ones used for classifying the traditional mass media. As far as the classification of religious Internet-resources in the Russian internet is concerned, they are classified on basis of their authorship. In accordance with the authorship, they are divided into blogs and publics of official representatives of religious organizations. In particular, Patriarch Kirill’s account (<https://vk.com/patriarhkirill>) has 457 thousand subscribers; there is also Damir-hazrat Muhetdinov’s blog (<https://damir-hazrat.livejournal.com/feed/>); user page of Dalai Lama XIV, Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso (Lhamo Thondup: <https://vk.com/dalailama>) and others. It should be noted that official accounts, not fakes are provided here. Besides, there are some official pages made for religious organizations. Nearly most of the parishes belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church have their own official profile pages. Particularly popular are such Internet portals as Islamtoday, orthodox Yelitsa, Protestant.ru, Pravoslavie.ru. In addition to standard functions these portals allow their users to contact the priest, ask him questions, find inmates of the same confession and also participate in the activities held by their religious organization, perform religious rituals (for example, order a prayer service, light a candle online). Moreover, users can make find their soul-mates and found a family with the help of these portals (<http://prihozhane.ru/>) or play online games (<https://islam-today.ru/obshestvo/igry/>). On Odnoklassniki there are 2613 Orthodox groups, 9715 Muslim groups, 221 groups practicing Buddhism, and 18 Protestant groups. As digital religion is inseparable from the online multi-media environment,

it is also possible to single out one more criterion for classifying – presence of multimedia: text, photos, computer graphics, audio- and video-files. It is worth noticing that more often a combination of several types of multimedia is used, not a single one. Firstly, it depends on the nature of the presented information; secondly, it is directed at certain audiences. Analysis of the current state of the blogosphere indicates the ever-growing number of multimedia in online diaries. For one thing, they are images made by the author with the help of mobile devices followed, as a rule, by a short comment; for another, there are an increasing number of video blogs fundamentally different from text blogs by the presence of verbal means of communication, a more vivid picture coupled with a rather quick view of the subject-matter. In this aspect, YouTube is getting interesting. Among popular channels are Mir Pravoslaviya (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmSIOaJ7oLugaQOqI2GnCG>), video blog Orthodox Christian/ Pravoslavnaya Hristianka (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-UI1_rsaOU), Muslim Blog/Blog Musulmanki. Also, it is worth mentioning some popular bloggers: Pavel Ostrovsky, Alexander Kukhta, Andrei Tkachev, Suleiman Polishchuk and Mikhail Pankov.

Also, YouTube religious channels usually belong to men, while on Instagram religious community is mostly represented by women. There are groups with predominantly female audiences aimed at discussing issues of everyday needs and women psychology (2% in Orthodox Christianity and 16 % in Islam). Very often you can find information about some outlets selling clothes appropriate for this or that religious faith. A few groups are available which post information concerning clothes and accessories with a religious focus as well as groups functioning as dating portals.

Another clear basis for classifying is stratification according to the declared religion. The majority of Islamic groups are closed; one can only join them under permission of a moderator. In Orthodox groups, on the contrary, content is open to everyone who wishes to see it. On the most Muslim websites (islam-today.ru; <http://yaumma.ru>; Musulmanin.com) there are special pages for women. In LiveJournal and on Instagram there are eight blogs of women, who have changed their religions (Sasha Golovkova, Sumayya (Inna) Isaakova, Djamilia (Natalia), Aisha (Anastasia), Aisha (Olesya), Russian Muslim (Russkaya musulmanka?), Aliya (Lilia) Merzoeva, Madina (Varina)). In social nets women's groups are also represented, "Russians in Dahab / Russkie-v-Dahab," "Russians in Sharm-El-Sheikh/ Russkie-v-Sharm-El-Sheikh," "Russians in Cairo/ Russkie-v- Cairo," "Kabluchok" (Kuwait city) among them.

Considering that different ways of presenting copyrighted content and holding rights of the content work on the Internet compared to the traditional mass media, it is suggested to distinguish several types of blogs on the basis of proportion between original and borrowed content. Not only posts themselves can be regarded as original copyrighted content, but also comments to them. In addition, it is important that even with the links to other blogs or sites and a large volume of citation, an overwhelming majority of blogs represent original content in form of a personal

comment to the post.

There are 6 % Orthodox, 5 % Islamic and 18 % Protestant groups focused on communication and discussion of vital religious and theological issues. In other groups, people important for the followers of a particular religious movement become subjects for their discussion (21 % in Orthodoxy, 4 % in Islam, 5 % in Protestantism). Groups are also created to draw users' attention to construction or maintenance of already existing religious buildings (12 % in Orthodoxy, 4 % in Islam), to debate on the holy texts (1 % in Orthodoxy, 9 % in Protestantism).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Internet makes it possible to organize beyond-space religious interaction, to enable information exchange, coordinate and control religious practices in global reach with significant savings of effort and resources. Via the Internet webcasting of religious ideas takes place, positive/negative images of religious groups and organizations are formed, new believers are recruited. Analysis of religious situation demands greater attention to online religious activities. Current approach to "digital religion" allows to speak of classifying the media forms of religious communication. Among the channels transmitting religious issues in the Russian internet, a number of publics and blogs can be pointed out. They, in turn, can be divided according to the authorship into groups or individual ones, created on behalf of the official representatives of religious associations and also by individual laymen. Besides, modern religious channels are not different from secular channels in content, quality and form of material presentation, coverage of broad areas of activities. In the number and popularity of religious channels, ROC comes first, then come Islamic media, Protestant and Buddhist ones.

To sum up, the phenomenon of digital religion can be interpreted as an independent digital space, a meeting point of traditional religious culture and communication environment of postmodernity. The emergence of digital religion is inseparable from the development of post-industrial society, during which the religious sphere, its narratives and symbolic structures become objects of active design by religious communities and their followers who are lacking new spiritual experience that goes beyond the existing institutional norms.

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