Religious Identity of Russian Internet Users: Attitudes Towards God and Russian Orthodox Church

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Abstract: The paper examines the religious identity of Russian internet users, analyzing attitudes towards God and the Russian Orthodox Church in the internet-based 'mass self-communication'. Since the religious identity debate is mostly located not in mainstream media but on the internet, the author focused the research on the self-expressions and discussions on the website lovehate.ru. Content analysis proved that young Russians in matters of belief/disbelief rely mainly on their own experience and the experience of other people (family, friends, acquaintances), and not on faith, authority or tradition, as would be expected initially. In the minds of Russian internet users, religion is located in the inner circle of communication (family, relatives, friends), and religious identity for them is still much less significant in comparison to ethnic identity.

Keywords: religious identity, public debates in the internet, Runet

Religious identity studies are being conducted in the context of the broader academic and public debate on secularism. The classical theory of secularization has been criticized by many well-known scholars in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century under the evidently increasing influence of the role of religion and religious institutions in many countries. In particular, Peter Berger considers the assumption that we live in a secularized world to be a mistake, as well as the idea that modernization inevitably leads to the decline of religion. Modernization has also a powerful effect of counter-secularization (Berger 1999).

Based on religious identity, the influence of religion on society during the last decade has attracted the reflection of prominent philosophers. The book *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, published in 2011 in New York, brought together the reflections of Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Cornel West, resulting in a live dialogue on a vi-

brant subject (Butler et al. 2011). Rethinking traditional approaches, these scholars evidently show that many ideas about religion and public life are myths still rooted in mass consciousness. The book reminds readers that religion is neither totally private nor totally irrational, and that the public sphere is not necessarily the place for radical deliberation on religion if the analysis is to be deep and objective.

The approach to the attribution of religious identity has always been a challenge for researchers - both in Russia and abroad. Scholars suggested many criteria to classify subjects to a particular religious group for certain empirically observable indicators (Varzanova 1997; Taylor 1989; Sinelina 2001; Filatov and Lunkin 2005; Luchenko 2008; Kloch 2011; Campbell 2013). Formal belonging to a particular religion, even in cultures and countries with fixed membership in religious communities (Germany, Italy, Sweden), and in the context of the dynamic processes of secularization and counter-secularization, sociologically and psychologically does not guarantee the same religious identity. In modern Russian Orthodoxy this problem becomes even more complicated.

Different approaches often give contradictory results. The most natural approach is based on *self-identification data*. Approximately 60-80 % of the Russian population claim themselves to be Orthodox Christians. Radically different results are obtained by estimating the number of *observant followers* of every religion, the reason being that members of many ethnic groups often choose to self-identify as adherents to a certain religion for cultural reasons, although they would not fit any traditional religiousness criteria (church attendance, familiarity with basic dogmas of their faith). For example, even though 80% of ethnic Russians self-identify as Russian Orthodox, less than 10% of them attend church services more than once a month and only 2-4% are considered to be integrated into church life. This corresponds with the concept of the 'vicarious religion'.

According to three sociological indicators of religiosity, analyzed by Levada center - the level of practicing (participation in liturgical life), and the observing of God's commandments (do not kill) and Church commandments (to observe Lent) – the Russian population is far from keeping Orthodox Christian identity. According to Levada center data, 73% of respondents painted eggs but just 6% attended Easter liturgy, which is a must for Orthodox believers. Further, only 3% of respondents observed Lent, while 51% do not consider abortion to be a killing, which again is not in line with Orthodox teaching (Levada 2013; 2014).

Religious identity for Russians is still much less significant in comparison to ethnic identity. Responses to the question 'Who do you perceive yourself with pride that in the first place add your self-respect?' show that during the period from 1989 to 2008 the share of respondents that chose 'I am Russian' rose from 43% to 50%, while those who chose option 'I am a believer' - from 4% to 15%. Independent research organization 'Sreda', in early 2012, conducted a nationwide representative survey (field work: FOM-Penta, sampling size: 1,500) showing that people rarely confess (2% – 'once a month or more often') and rarely observe Lent (5%).

Conducting critical analysis of public opinion polls on religious self-identification and their methodology, Russian sociologist Iulia Sinelina raised the problematic question of the 'identification of respondents who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, but poorly know dogmatic and rarely attend church worships'(Sinelina 2001). Sociologist T. Varzanova discovered in the 1990s that 'respondents were ready to justify from personal experience

their beliefs in witchcraft, horoscopes, communication with spirits much better than Christian faith'. At the same time, according to Varzanova, the Orthodox faith 'proved to be very far from ideal prescribed 'Orthodox Creed'' (Varzanova 1997). Describing in his research the increase in ideological uncertainty and eclecticism with beliefs in reincarnation and astrology, ufology, energy vampires, witches, shamans and so on, sociologist Dmitrii Furman suggested that religion is not winning vs atheism in Russia, rather atheism is winning vs religion (Furman and Kaariajnen 2006).

Additional difficulties in defining religious identity appear in studies of internet communications. Expanding research methods to the internet and on-line practices faces a number of advantages over traditional methods of gathering information (Boyd and Heer 2006), but as well raises the problem of interpretation in the reconstruction of religious identity based upon users' profiles, because rather often users - for different reasons – falsify their personal information. We consider not user profiles but their texts to be a more valid empirical field for discovering their religious identity, from a methodological point of view.

From a sociological perspective, texts of web discussions may be considered as 'spontaneous responses to a big open-ended question' and therefore allow to explore a more subtle and detailed picture of Russian mentality and spirituality than can be obtained by representative public opinion polls (Anikina and Khroul 2011). German scholar Oliver Krüger underlines the promising perspectives of internet-based research: 'Immanent Internet research offers many new perspectives for religious studies. While traditional media like books, magazines, and television enable us to see only the supplier and the supplies on the *religious market*, the Internet – as an *interactive* medium – now makes it possible to be aware of the consumer's perspective as well'. (Krüger 2005: 1). Krüger suggests that, although the internet enables us to trace many instances of 'invisible religion,' the empirical field of research causes some new methodological challenges that must not be ignored.

Russian internet users' attitudes towards God and their religious identity

The traditional, proven and dominant methods of acquiring knowledge on religious identity are sociological studies which use the methods of mass survey, expert survey, content analysis, focus groups, etc. Popular attitudes towards God and beliefs since the times of George Gallup have been traditionally studied with public opinion polls methodology and techniques.

'Mass self-communication' (Castells 2007) is becoming a more and more promising subject of popular culture studies in general, and religious identity research in particular. But at the moment, the booming of 'big data' research methodologies and techniques has still not provided academia with any valid methods of representative public opinion surveys based on the self-expression texts analysis. Another promising approach to mass consciousness studies was proposed in the 1980s by Soviet and Russian sociologist Professor Grushin: 'Text analysis will help answer the question of mass consciousness far more completely and reliably that this can be done using the traditional public opinion polls' - this is the essence of 'Grushin hypothesis' (Grushin 2010: 75). The idea is that the same subject could be reflected and explicitly fixed, not only in responses to the sociological questionnaire, but also in spontaneous texts.

Therefore, in order to generate a more detailed description of the religious beliefs and identity of Russian internet users, we analyzed texts of visitors to the website lovehate.ru, which is one of the best known places for spontaneous self-expression and discussion. We coded and rubricated the analysis, taking into consideration attitudes towards God and arguments used. As of 10 August 2014, the site had received a total number of 1,000,352 messages from 249,812 registered users (125,556 men and 124,256 women), expressing their attitudes on 76,482 different subjects.

Image 1. 'Frequency of keywords mentioned in the Russian blogosphere and social media within the context of 'ROC' or 'church' or 'orthodox'. Data collected on 23 March 2014.
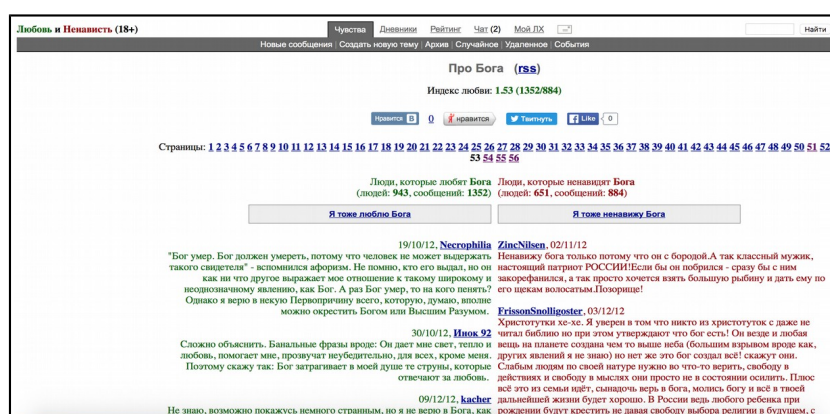
Source: http://lovehate.ru/God/54 (accessed 2 September 2015)

The discussion topic 'I love / I hate God' is one of the largest on lovehate.ru. We conducted semantical and structural analysis of all 1,715 posts on that topic ('I love' = 1039, 'I hate' = 676). The procedural 'framework' of statements about God, which is set by the administrator for all themes, is sharply polarized: I love / I hate. This opposition led some people to certain confusion: 'I write this column, not because I hate God, but because there is no neutral option'; 'In my opinion, you can not just say I like God or not.' 250,000 users is a relatively small number compared to the tens of millions of users of vk.com and other sites, but what is most valuable is the structure of the texts, which allows for arguments that do not occur on vk.com.

Another problem is whether users' statements truly reflect their real attitudes towards God and their religious identity. Some reports clearly show that there may be significant 'gaps' between an author's real position and their text online. The problem of the interpretation was mentioned by Mia Lövheim from Sweden during the analysis of her research results: 'The experiences of the informants show how it rather leads to a reaffirmation than a reconstruction of stereotypes about religious identities, and to a construction of boundaries in order to separate authentic or 'serious' religious identities from 'fake' versions. These findings show that we need a more critical and nuanced discussion of the anticipation that online interaction, due to its differences in cues for presenting and interpreting identity' (Lövheim 2005: 17). For example, in the 'positive' column 'I love God', one of the users published the following messages: 'I do not believe in God do not believe in the devil.... I am my own god

and the devil'; 'I think so: one day you will understand that it is absolutely not necessary to believe in God'.

Several specific features of Russian internet users' relationship with God have been found after processing the data.

1. Relationship with God is described mostly in personal and group (family) context, not the context of public sphere.

The space of user-God relations is characterized by an evident shift towards personal space (698 of total 40,7%) and small groups (family and friends – 27,8%) – while on the contrary, entire society as a context is mentioned in 13.8% of messages and the world is mentioned in 23.4% (total sum exceeds 100% because there are several levels in some posts). Many submissions emphasized the personal aspect of a relationship with God, and for some authors religious dogmas are secondary in relation to the inner feeling 'Religion - this is what a person feels within himself'; 'God is yourself, you can manage own destiny by yourself'; 'God is not necessary to impose, God is personal to everyone'; 'He is always with me, with my friends and relatives!'

In principle, it can be assumed that the proportion of private / public and individual / global connotations found in the texts of the target site reflects the proportion of the mass consciousness of Russians, but this assertion needs further verification using other tools (for example, opinion polls).

2. Spontaneous texts describing the relation to God, internet users mostly refer to their own experience (59.5%) and the experience of other people (16.4%), not on faith (10,6%), authority (6.1%) or tradition (3.1%).

Generalized theoretical understanding of personal experience: 'Just cannot live without faith, I cannot believe in nothing'; 'I communicate with God without intermediaries'; 'I believe in God. Only a few in his own way, no incense and candles. Just he and I are good friends.' Concrete evidence of site visitors on the intervention of God in their personal experience: 'I am not religious, and not from such a family. Just noticed a strange phenomenon - I feel bad and want help. And then I come to the old icon and pray. And intervene unearthly powers! Helps for 6 day of my period is no easy exams!';

As a working hypothesis, we assume that faith and tradition ('the holy Orthodox Russia – Sviataia Rus'') will be the dominant way to justify one's relationship to God. However, this hypothesis has not been confirmed - by faith, Orthodox Christianity is mentioned very rarely (only in 10% of messages) and mostly in a neutral and negative way: 'I'm not sentenced to Christianity. I just believe.'

3. The arguments in the text are based mainly on emotions and feelings (61.6%) - much less, on logical arguments (34.1%).

Sometimes feelings are not specified, but simply described as feelings ('God is. 'Cause I can feel his presence'), or sometimes referred to as feelings that they do not need to reconstruct ('I do not love God, I'm afraid of him'). Some users try to equate God with the mind ('This is the highest cosmic intelligence of the universe, without which there would be no life on Earth'), or to perceive its presence in all the surrounding world ('If he - all, how can you not love him and ignore' - *him is written with small letters in original*), as well as to emphasize the rational principle in God ('The proof of the existence of God can be built on an empirical basis', 'There's pure logic. And it's pretty logically painted '). The opposite side is a uniquely configured and less nuanced way of expression ('Reason is the greatest enemy of faith', 'Any religion restricts the bounds of reason and imagination').

Generally speaking, text analysis of the self-expressions and discussions on lovehate.ru shows that young Russians in matters of belief/disbelief rely mainly on their own experience and the experience of other people (family, friends, acquaintances), and not on faith, authority or tradition, as would be expected initially. The most convincing is the socio-historical explanation for this phenomenon: in the Russian tradition, there has been a consistent eradication of faith over a fairly long period of time. As a result, there has been a diminishing appeal to faith, tradition and authority - a 'birthmark' of Russian history - found in the minds of users.

Another notable 'birthmark' is the exclusion of religion from the public sphere in the minds of Russians, and the displacement of it ad marginem into the inner circle of communication (family, relatives, friends). In western societies, this process is in accordance with general secularization. In Russia, after perestroika, religion was probably expected to have a more active influence in the public space, including political manifestations - the creation of Christian or Islamic parties. However, this has not happened. And, in addition to external factors of a social nature, the investigation uncovered one of the internal reasons - visitors rarely even think about the possibility of one's own public-level relation to God. The global level is manifested in the form of a stereotype ('all have to believe in God' / 'everyone understands that there is no God').

Self-identity towards Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church

The situation with traditional media formats within the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is far from being advanced: ROC is not controlling any big media project. The first reason is financial, but there is also a lack of professional media managers. ROC has neither a newspaper with a wide circulation, nor a 24-hours FM radio station, nor a competitive television channel except a rather unprofessional cable one. Occasionally priests take part in talk shows – once, there was even several Orthodox priests. Currently, though, the most widely used media tool is the internet – there are more than a thousand sites on any topic, including official webpages, online magazines, special interest pages, calendars, the possibility to ask a priest online, etc. These groups recruit Orthodox or pro-Orthodox members and therefore do

not represent the average user, in comparison to lovehate.ru and other neutral, not religiously marked, websites.

In contrast to the topic of self-expression towards God, that demonstrated mostly positive attitudes ('I love' = 1039, 'I hate' = 676), the analysis of lovehate.ru discussion topics on Orthodox Christianity and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) evidently shows rather negative attitudes and opinions. Our observation is proved by the numbers of pro/contra messages 'ROC' (46/151), 'The idea of studying in secondary schools Orthodoxy' (227/507). Interestingly, the general evaluation of Orthodoxy is more balanced and less negative: 'Orthodox Christianity' (191/195).

The social and political activity of ROC faces more criticism than Orthodox Christianity as a religion: 'ROC proposal to impose a dress code for the people of Russia' (8/18), 'ROC proposes to create a criminal penalty for heresy' (36/50), 'when Orthodoxy is called the only true religion' (27/42). This suggestion maybe proves not only statistically and quantitatively, but also qualitatively, as to the rhetoric of users' voices: 'ROC is a bunch of scams, to brainwash people. Their desire is just power'; 'What is the ROC? Ordinary sect, pumping money from gullible citizens and providing a corrosive effect on the moral and cultural foundations of the nation'; 'ROC is a business project'; 'ROC, in most cases do not care about people, but about the godless government'.

The difference of the attitude towards Orthodox Christianity and the ROC is evident in the following suggestion: 'I love the Orthodox religion and Orthodox culture, myself; I am an Orthodox man, but terribly hate the ROC…'; 'Orthodox faith, in my humble opinion, the only leads to salvation of the human soul ... But there is a wish to the ROC. I would not like to see our church was transformed into a house of merchants'. The arguments of those who are in favor of ROC and defend it, are mostly rooted in ethnical and geopolitical discourse: 'I am Russian and therefore I am an Orthodox. It is natural'; 'ROC is an integral part of the thousand-year history of Russia, she has always supported our morals and I will always be with her, as the rest of the true believers'; 'It is the link between Russia and Ukraine and other fraternal Orthodox peoples' (written in 2013, long before the war in Eastern Ukraine).


Conclusion: the failure of public dialogue in religious identity perspective

Public dialogue management is an essential part of mediatization culture. The role of contemporary mediatization of religion in religious identity formation in Russia may be illustrated by the coverage of one case. On the 25th of January 2011, the Russian Orthodox Church presented for public discussion a list of so-called 'eternal Russian values'. According to one of the co-authors of the text, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the project entitled 'The National System of Values' had been elaborated in order to 'fill in the vacuum of values in society.' The list of values included eight public virtues ranked according to their importance - justice, freedom, solidarity, unity, self-restraint and sacrifice, patriotism, welfare and love. Each point was accompanied by a commentary: freedom presumes personal freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and sovereignty and independence of the Russian people. According to Chaplin, these virtues have remained invariable in Russia 'despite all the conservation and modernization processes' (Russian Church Calls 2011).

The Russian Orthodox Church called for the public debate of the document, saying the list was not fixed and could be amended. 'There were many interesting comments, and some of them are included in the document. It will be further updated and modified in line with the debates involving various non-government organizations,' Chaplin said.

But this call was almost ignored by the Russian media and was almost invisible in the Russian public sphere - the dialogue on values failed because of the journalists' ignorance. On the very first day the document was widely and fairly acidly commented on on the internet, but the big media were almost silent about the initiative, and the discussion died from the very beginning. The Church officials were portrayed as a very aggressive people, imposing their values towards the entire society (see Image 2).

Image 2. Screenshot from www.lenta.ru webpage.
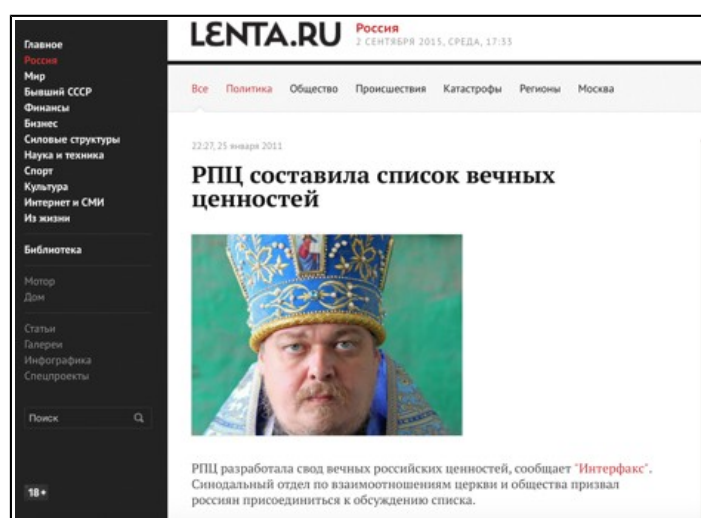
Source: http://lenta.ru/news/2011/01/25/values/ (accessed 2 September 2015).

The question is who is passive - journalists, the audience or both? The question is always urgent in societies where the rules of the game and the framework of interaction have been determined from above. The case described above explicitly shows a lack of comprehending the necessity of public dialogue and the accountability in the professional culture of Russian journalists. Another question is whether this 'dialogue manager' is free enough in Russia to be an independent and influential actor?

The phenomenon of 'monologization' of the dialogue with the public sphere has been analyzed by Swede Kristoffer Holt: 'When Benedict appeared officially on Facebook in May 2009, as a 'famous' person that Facebook users could become a fan of, there was a section for free discussion among the fans. During the first year, there were many lively discussions in this discussion group, ranging from spiritual questions to criticism of various positions of the church... But, after a while, this feature disappeared from Pope Benedict's Facebook page. Now, the Facebook page mainly channels content from *Radio Vaticana* and the Vatican's YouTube channel. The interaction allowed is restricted to 'liking' content or writing short comments on it'... This is not intended as a criticism of the lack of interactivity, merely

pointing out that for the Church, these new participatory media soon turned into new channels of one-way communication' (Holt 2011: 60).

The logical and processing sequence '*pluralism - dialogue - consensus*' in the context of religious identity in contemporary Russia has problematic fields located in the dialogue area. Some of our observations of recent years, based on interviews with journalists and data analysis, lead to the conclusions of: 1) *narrowing the debate* on the religious identity in mainstream media; 2) *reducing the possibility* for journalists to articulate the Christian values and their identity (for example, some journalists were fired for expressing their anti-homosexual views); 3) *removing of the dialogue* on religious values and identity into an uncensored and free area of internet resources – mostly, to blogs or forums of similar value-orientation users.

Public dialogue on values in Russia has evident difficulties rooted in the religious identity focused on the private sphere, and distrust towards ROC in the public sphere. The set of objections and protests against the politically marked activity of ROC, expressed by lovehate.ru users, generated the set of arguments against the 'establishment of moral censorship' in Russian media within the frames of public debates over the idea for Public Council for Morality on TV (2008-2011). Finally, the idea has been rejected both by public opinion and State Duma (see Khroul 2010; 2011; 2012).

As examined in this paper, user-God relations in Russia still do not presume the expansion from private to public sphere, therefore attempts to mobilize wider circles of people to support Orthodox Church actions (new churches construction in Moscow, protests against profanation of religious symbols, etc) normally face ignorance and even intolerance.

The domination of private over public, and personal experience over authority and tradition ('I'm not sentenced to Christianity. I just believe.'), in religious identity does not give much space for religion as a mobilizing factor in Russia. Ethnical issues are still much more influential, and therefore the slogan "Russkii mir" [Russian world] is much more popular in Russia than "Pravoslavnyi mir" [Orthodox world].

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