A Person in Self-isolation Mode: The Transformation of Religious Communication Under the Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The paper is devoted to the analysis of the transformation of cult and ritual practices as well as extra-cult religious activities that occurred as a result of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the advanced opportunities offered by the virtual space, various religious organizations and individual leaders have the opportunity to teach a person with their religious doctrines. But if in ordinary times the virtual religious space often functioned as an "addition" to the real religious space, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it became almost the main channel for broadcasting religious teachings and ideas. In this regard, the capabilities of the virtual environment allowed any believer to seek and experiment. For some people, this may lead to a deeper understanding of their religious traditions and practices, but for others, it can open up entirely new ways of worshiping God generating a variety of new ideas and trends. On the example of Christianity and Islam, the most widespread religions in Russia, it was revealed that during the period of restrictive measures in the country, some forms of religion have undergone significant changes and accelerated digitalization. New opportunities for religious digitalization for humans were also identified.

Keywords: Religion, Religious communication, Virtual space, Internet, COVID-19, Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global virtual space generates many local subspaces with their own characteristics and users. One of such spaces is the religious one which is gradually having an increasing influence on the Russian user as well. It is formed both by the official resources of the main religious institutions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), accounts and communities in social networks, thematic blogs and forums, and by new religious institutions and online games with religious content emerging in the virtual space. Just like the real religious space, it is exposed to external influences and, in fact, is a complex virtual projection of the real society. In an everyday existential situation, such subspaces can function as local and little-known to the general user. However, in the event of emergency situations, such as, for example, a pandemic,

environmental disasters, large-scale economic crises, which are both a challenge and a threat to all of humanity, it is the religious segment of the virtual space, which is based on the factor of faith and salvation, in one way or another supported by modern media technologies becomes the most important lever of influence on a person. It accumulates all worldview and social problems sharpened by a crisis situation. The eternal problem of theodicy is comprehended at a new level of retribution for the global sins of all mankind. The situation unfolding before our eyes with the COVID-19 pandemic both in Russia and around the world makes it possible to move from general hypotheses and theories to a specific analysis of the reaction of the Internet space to this situation.

The representation of the majority of religious associations in the virtual space can be considered one of the "trends" of modern religious life in our

country. The specificity of the virtual religious space in Russia was described in our previous work [1]. We can say that the Russian religious virtual space has a number of features:

- It is limited in use by the presence of Russian-speaking and Church Slavonic content which is explained by the predominance of Russian-speaking users;

- This space is used mainly by the youth audience, which is presumably due to both insufficient mastery of new technologies by the Russian older generation (over 50) and the age of the most active Russian Internet audience (99% of the country's residents from 18 to 24 use the Internet daily) [2];

- The structure of virtual religious networks is very similar to ordinary virtual social networks in several ways: mass consumption (a large number of subscribers), commercialization of a virtual product (on almost every website and in a mobile application, there is a donation system for the development of projects), as well as series production (new applications of religious content appear at regular intervals – every week, and are updated even more often).

Thanks to the advanced opportunities offered by the virtual space, various religious organizations and individual leaders have the opportunity to acquaint any person with their religious doctrines. In this regard, there is no need to visit houses of prayer and pastors. From this aspect, one can agree with the statement of E.O. Gavrilov who wrote "... the Internet has become a means of strengthening religious identity, but at the same time leads to its erosion" [3]. But if in ordinary times the virtual religious space of Russia functioned as an "addition" to the real religious space, in the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became almost the main channel for broadcasting religious teachings and ideas.

The attitude of religious institutions representatives around the world in this situation was also ambiguous. At the very beginning of the epidemic, the calls of certain clergymen to treat the disease with prayer in religious buildings and rituals destabilized the epidemiological situation not only in a number of Russian regions, but also around the world. But at the same time, the balanced advice of the leadership of confessional communities saved many from this rash step. Therefore, within the framework of this work, we will analyze the transformation of cult-ritual practices and beyond-the-cult religious activities that occurred as a result of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as analyze possible changes in a person's religious consciousness under the influence of accelerated digitalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The actively growing popularity of the Internet contributed to the creation in the 90s of the XX century of a special scientific direction, within the framework of which new methods of studying religion in the Internet space were developed. The problems associated with the transition of religion to the virtual space are well represented in the scientific literature. Fundamental studies of the virtual religious space have been going on for over 25 years [4], [5], [6], [7]. A scenario of structuring the virtual religious space (online religion / religion online) is described in detail in the works of K. Halland who proposed his own theoretical approach for classifying religious communities on the Internet [8]. A lot of works by H. Campbell [6], [9] are also devoted to studies of the religious activity of users in the online space. Over the past three decades, researchers have aimed to study more closely virtual religious communities and their activities on the Internet to follow up which aspects of traditional religious practice can actually be transferred to the online space and to what extent religion is transforming while it adapts to new digital technologies [10], [11].

Among all the researchers, the works of E.A. Ostrovskaya [12], [13], T.P. Minchenko [14], O.K. Mikhelson [15], and others should be highlighted. As part of the analysis and identification of the specifics of the virtual religious space, Russian researchers considered the peculiarities of the interaction of religious institutions and the Internet space [16]. Based on a sociological approach to the study of religion they studied the phenomenon of online pilgrimage on the Internet [17], revealed the role of the Internet in the formation of the level of religiosity [18], and also analyzed the structural units of observing religious confession on the video hosting platform YouTube [19]. A sufficient number of foreign scientific works are also devoted to the state of religious communities in conditions of various crisis situations (economic, political, social, etc.) [20], [21], [22], [23]. However, there are practically no Russian papers devoted to the transformation of religious networks under the influence of various crisis situations.

3. THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The lock down of prayer establishments during the coronavirus pandemic forced most religious institutions to act in a new way: religious services and communication with people were quickly and efficiently transferred to the Internet. Many churches have repurposed their offline events to new conditions in order to avoid an outflow of their flock: ceremonies and prayers, educational courses, messages, sermons, concerts of religious music, answers to questions from parishioners, etc. It should be noted that transfer of religious activity to a virtual space is not a new phenomenon. Modern religious studies have explored this subject from different points of view and contexts: ritual transformation [24], virtual temples [25], online religious communities [26], etc.

However, the transfer of religious activity to the virtual space as a "pragmatic response to cultural changes" [27] is perceived by some researchers rather negatively [28], although the growth of religious exchange through virtual space is obvious. According to the latest Google report, one of the most popular prayers in their 2020 search query was "Prayer for Coronavirus", a prayer in which global netizens ask God for protection from COVID-19 disease, the strength to resist, and thanks for the efforts of healthcare providers [29]. For Russian Orthodox Christians, the synodal department of the ROC also approved the text of a similar prayer "from a harmful epidemic" in Church Slavonic. Based on the results of a sociological survey by the Pew Research Center, more than 50% of respondents noted that they actively prayed to stop the spread of coronavirus infection, and there were more positive responses from older people than positive responses from young people; 57% of those who say they attend religious services, usually at least once or twice a month, said that they watched the broadcast of religious services on the Internet or on TV [30].

The lockdown regime in many countries around the world has prompted most believers to turn to the virtual space in order to continue worship and not interrupt their religious practices. But, in turn, the virtual space gave a person the opportunity to get acquainted with other forms of worship, liturgical practices, and sermons, to which he was usually not accustomed. In the new conditions, the virtual environment gave a person the opportunity to search and experiment. For some people this can lead to a deeper understanding of their religious traditions and practices, while for others it can open up completely new ways of worshiping God generating a variety of new ideas and trends. The English researcher F. Potter taking the concept of "consumer society" as a basis believes that "every visitor to the church is a consumer in his own way. He chooses where and when to worship, what religion to adhere to, and what priest he wants to visit at Sunday service [31]". The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded consumer choice: anyone (whether he is a believer or not – it does not matter) can now watch the sermon of any religious leader, follow the one he likes, and not be limited to one religious affiliation in a lifetime.

New conditions have stimulated the need to join the virtual community. Now, many religious groups have continued their daily meetings and activities (Bible study, Koran, Torah, liturgy, meetings of youth religious movements, counseling for parishioners and even meetings of leaders of religious institutions) which are carried out using the platforms Zoom, Google, Discord, Instagram, Hangouts and other similar means.

4. EXAMPLES OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION FORMS TRANSFORMATION

The possibility of the lethal effect of the new virus has led to the need to change the way of life observing social distancing and excluding a number of forms of social interaction that require direct physical contact. Such security measures affect religious consciousness, cult and ritual activities. Coming to the conditions of self-isolation a person receives according to Yu.V. Gavrilova and M.A. Zhironkina "the opportunity to get in touch with one's inner world, to think about oneself and one's life, and sometimes people are faced with something for which they are not yet ready" [32]. Many believers had to pray outside the walls of the prayer building, in an unusual environment, at home, where, sometimes, there are no certain icons and images to which the prayer is directed; they refuse to perform a number of cult actions accompanying prayer, limit conversations with clergy, etc.

The "way out" for the conditions was the possibilities of the Internet. It should be noted that the Protestant denominations which for several years practiced weekly services and prayers in the online space in order to convey information to those who cannot attend services due to illness

most quickly adapted to the new conditions. For them, online sermons and reading the Bible via video communication is not a compromise, but a common practice. Besides, some rituals, in emergency cases, can be performed by Protestants without a priest. So, for example, in October 2020, during an online meeting of the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, the commanding bishop announced that now, in urgent cases, lay Pentecostals can perform the ordinances of baptism and communion on their own, and priests – remotely, including marriage online: "Of course, it is better when all this happens live, but if suddenly a pandemic or other obstacles arise, we can instantly go online [33]".

The Russian Orthodox Church has also refocused some of its religious activities online. During the entire period of self-isolation in our country a Kazan priest Anthony Rusakevich known to users of social networks as the "Positive Father" conducted daily online services from the walls of the temple of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Tver via the Instagram. However, the priest has been practicing this type of worship since 2018 [34]. In particular, through his page on the Instagram, he accepts notes for the service from the laity at the request of the parishioners to light candles in the temple and performed the sacrament via video communication. Since the beginning of the pandemic coincided with the celebration of Easter, during the holiday the priest urged Orthodox Christians to stay at home and offered to consecrate the willow and Easter cakes at home.

Along with other confessions, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in the Russian Federation also took action to respond to the challenges associated with the pandemic. For example, in Moscow, the holiday of Eid al-Fitr which is held in honor of the end of the holy month of Ramadan was held without an annual mass prayer at the Cathedral Mosque. The prayer was attended only by employees of the spiritual department and a limited number of clergy. The clergy recommended that Muslims should bathe and pray at home, be patient and obedient and not receive guests on holidays during a pandemic [35]. The main prayer was broadcast live on various social networks.

5. CONCLUSION

As the crisis in religious life caused by the coronavirus pandemic continues, it will be interesting to follow the further transformation of the forms of religious activity as well as the consequences of these transformations for humans. Will the connection between religion and the online space strengthen as an authentic form of worship in the future? It remains to be seen whether priests will be able to involve believers in online worship in the long term, because the majority of believers, for example, in Russia, are aged and well on in years people who have practically no skills in interacting with modern electronic devices. But one thing is certain: as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, the forms of worship have undergone significant changes. In this article, only a part of the changes that occurred in the ritual activities of two confessions (Christianity and Islam) during the pandemic were considered. By itself, virtual religious activity is not a new phenomenon, but in a crisis situation it has become an adequate substitute for real religious activity for an ordinary believer allowing to maintain the epidemiological situation and curb the outflow of the flock, adjusting their religious rituals to new conditions.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Dmiriy Chernichkin is responsible for formulating the problem, writing a major portion of the paper. Mikhail Topchiev contributed to collecting the data, literature review, wording of the conclusion.

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