RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Transformation of Russian Society and Religious Identity: the Modern Period

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Abstract

Introduction. In Russia, the majority of adults identify themselves as belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, which receives significant support from the state. The Church actively participates in social, cultural, and educational life; it engages in the restoration of churches, participates in social and educational projects, opens theology departments in universities, and integrates the fundamentals of Orthodox culture into school education. However, actual participation of people in Orthodox practices remains low: only a small percentage actively engage in communal life and services. This creates a contradiction between mass self-identification as Orthodox and actual participation in religious practices. Unlike other cultural identities, such as sports or music, where active participation is the norm, there is a gap between religious identity and practice in Russia.

Materials and Methods. The research methods employed include analytical, synthetic, deductive, inductive, comparative, descriptive, content analysis (studying texts and publications on the topic of interest), and historical analysis (investigating the historical context of religious identity formation). The research material consists of works by researchers on the phenomenon of religious identity.

Results. The study shows that although many people consider themselves part of the Russian Orthodox Church, their actual participation in religious life remains limited. This is linked to social and cultural changes, as well as the fact that religious identity is often not supported by active spiritual experience. Additionally, the involvement of believers is influenced by the diversity of religious views and competition among various religious groups. To increase interest in religious life, it is necessary to develop new methods for organizing practices and engaging with youth.

Discussion and Conclusion. The study analyzes the attitudes of Russians towards the Russian Orthodox Church. Special attention is given to the high level of identification with the Church despite the low level of actual participation in religious practices. The paper also examines the historical context that allows for the identification of the main reasons for this discrepancy. Particular emphasis is placed on social changes, demographic factors, pluralism, youth spiritual practice, and identity formation. In conclusion, it is stated that integrating people into religious life is a complex process that requires further research. New forms of socially-oriented practices are proposed to improve this process.

Keywords: Religious identity, liberalization, transformation, crisis, construction, practice, self-determination

Трансформация российского общества и религиозная идентичность: современный период

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Аннотация

Введение. В России большинство взрослых людей относят себя к Русской Православной Церкви, которая получает значительную поддержку со стороны государства. Церковь активно участвует в социальной, культурной и образовательной жизни; занимается восстановлением храмов, участвует в социальных и образовательных проектах, открывает кафедры теологии в университетах и внедряет основы православной культуры в школьное образование. Однако реальное участие людей в православной практике остается низким. Это создает противоречие между массовым самоидентифицированием себя как православных и фактическим участием в религиозных практиках. В отличие от других культурных идентичностей, таких как спорт или музыка, где активное участие является нормой, в России наблюдается разрыв между религиозной идентичностью и практикой.

Материалы и методы. Методами научного исследования выступают: аналитический, синтетический, дедуктивный, индуктивный, сравнительный, описательный, контент-анализ и исторический анализ. В качестве материала научного исследования выступают работы исследователей феномена религиозной идентичности.

Результаты исследования. Исследование показывает, что хотя многие люди считают себя частью Русской православной церкви, их реальное участие в религиозной жизни остается ограниченным. Это связано с социальными и культурными изменениями, а также с тем, что религиозная идентичность часто не подкрепляется активным духовным опытом. Кроме того, на вовлеченность верующих влияет разнообразие религиозных взглядов и конкуренция между различными религиозными группами. Чтобы повысить интерес к религиозной жизни, необходимо разработать новые методы организации практик и взаимодействия с молодежью.

Обсуждение и заключение. В исследовании проводится анализ отношения россиян к Русской православной церкви. Особое внимание уделяется высокому уровню идентификации с церковью, несмотря на низкий уровень фактического участия в религиозных практиках. В работе также рассматривается исторический контекст, который позволяет выявить основные причины этого несоответствия. Особое внимание уделяется социальным изменениям, демографическим факторам, плюрализму, духовной практике молодежи и формированию идентичности. В заключение делается вывод, что интеграция людей в религиозную жизнь является сложным процессом, который требует дальнейшего исследования. Для улучшения этого процесса предлагаются новые формы социально ориентированных практик.

Ключевые слова: религиозная идентичность, либерализация, трансформация кризис, конструирование, практика, самоопределение

Introduction. According to a sociological survey conducted by VTsIOM on March 9, 2022, 68% of the adult population of the Russian Federation identify themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church[1]. The state provides serious support to the Church, as one of the largest traditional religions in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church carries out various social[2] and political-symbolic activities [1, pp. 233–234]. At the same time, the integration of people into Orthodox practices (community life, worship services, various brotherhoods and sisterhoods, Bible circles, classes on the basics of faith, youth clubs, etc.) remains approximately at the level of 2–4% of all those who identify themselves with Orthodoxy[3]. This is a contradictory state of affairs, since through religious socialization a person assimilates the norms and values of

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[1] VTSIOM: Velikiy post = All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center: Great Lent. – 2022. URL: https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/velikii-post-2022 (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

[2] Report of His Holiness the Patriarch at the Diocesan Assembly of Moscow; 20 December 2023. URL: http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6085672.html?ysclid=m4h7ryvxwk55094854 (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

[3] VTSIOM. URL: https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/veruyushhikh-v-rossii-mnogo-voczerkovlennykh-znachitelno-menshe/ (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

a particular religious society. However, an interesting phenomenon is observed in modern Russia - the inconsistency of religious identity with religious practices

In 1988, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, met with Patriarch Pimen (Izvekov) of Moscow and All Russia on the occasion of the celebration of the millennium of the Baptism of Russia. From that moment, the process of transformation of the state's religious policy began, which this paper will refer to as liberalization, meaning the free choice of religious identity. The authorities had their own motives and benefits, the Church had its own [2, p. 52]. Citizens received a real right to freely choose their religiosity. Before the revolution it was extremely difficult to change one's faith. During the Soviet regime it was difficult to practice any religion. Only after 1988 Russians found themselves in a completely new religious provision – complete freedom of religion. This provision is formalized in the form of a new law – the "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religions"[4].

Modern Russian policy towards religious organizations is regulated by the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"[5], which affirms the citizen's right to freedom of religious choice and religious self-determination (religious identity), guarantees freedom of activity of religious groups if it does not contradict the laws of the state, and "does not assign to religious associations the functions of state authorities". These provisions of the Federal Law reflect the possibility of religious pluralism for citizens of the Russian Federation. Such a state of state-confessional relations is new for Russia, because previously religion (religious associations) was either oppressed[6] or was asserted as a source of self-identification of both the state [3, pp. 32–46] and individuals (although this aspect is ambiguous [4]). The change in Russian legislation after 70 years of atheistic propaganda allowed religion to get out from under the oppression of Soviet repression. However, for such a long time, the subject managed to detach itself from religious traditions. To unlearn the religious discourse and thus fall into a difficult position of religious uncertainty, which is expressed even in the problems of historiographical nature [5].

Materials and Methods. The category of "identity" in this study is the main one. The ambiguity [6, p. 223] and polydisiplinarity [7, p. 32] of this concept is emphasized, confirmed by the research materials of famous researchers of religion: A.N. Astapov (semantic analysis) [8, p. 30], A.N. Krylov (existential analysis) [9, p. 27] and P. Berger (social interaction and construct) [10, pp. 7–9]. In the process of research, we applied both general scientific methods: analytical and synthetic, deductive and inductive, comparative and descriptive, and special methods: Content analysis (study of texts and publications on the topic of interest) and historical analysis (study of the historical context of the formation of religious identity).

Results. Three themes were identified that will help in describing the problem of religious identity and liberalization. The first theme is devoted to the problem of historical formation of the concept of identity. Notions of identity appeared long ago [11], but only in the 20th century this topic is subjected to our usual conceptualization. Irish researcher Mary Moran, in the article "Identity and identity politics: a cultural-materialist history", describes the historical formation of the identity process. The author argues that the problem was not conceptualized until the 1950s. Computer analysis of the texts gives the following result: none of these authors uses the word "identity" or considers this problem as modern social theories consider it [12, pp. 16–17]. M. Moran, following Raymond Williams [13, p. XI], demonstrates the relationship between changes in the social environment and human consciousness: "The possibility to interpret oneself as a person with an identity (personal or social) is a historically new formulation" [12, p. 23].

The second topic is devoted to the problem of multiple identities in the context of globalization. The process of liberalization of public consciousness can be considered as one of the conditions for the formation of postmodernism, which implies the rejection of any metanarrative [14, p. 17]. Instead of universal values, the value of an individual and various minorities comes to the forefront.

However, modern humanistic values advocate the rights of minorities, and the importance of self-expression and self-determination is perceived as a global phenomenon [15, p. 4]. In its extreme manifestation, man is left to himself. He should educate and define himself, since the highest value of modern liberalism is the expansion of individual freedoms for self-realization [16, p. 112]. But, since the world is very rich and diverse, it is difficult for a person to make such a choice. This process is explored by Daniel Moulin in "Discussion and construction of religious identity in English secondary schools: a study of the reported experiences of Christians, Jews and Muslims". Describing the stay in English schools of adolescent Muslims, D. Moulin points out the flexibility of their identity depending on the social environment. While at home, among relatives or in the mosque, these children identify themselves as Muslims. At school they may

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[4] "On religious freedom". No. 267-1 of 25 Oktober 1990. URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_16218/ (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

[5] "On freedom of conscience and religious associations". No. 125-FZ of 26 September 1997. URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_16218/ (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

[6] State-Church relations of the Soviet period: periodization and content. An electronic resource. ORTHODOXY. RU. Archive. URL: https://pravoslavie.ru/archiv/sovietstate-church.htm/ (accessed: 01.12.2024) (In Russ.)

identify more with their nationality (e. g. "Pakistani"), playing in multinational groups they may generally identify themselves simply as children, or schoolchildren [17, pp. 11–17]. This multiple identity is also a characteristic feature of the modern European world.

The third topic is devoted to the problem of modern perception of personality through the prism of freedom and independence. This phenomenon can be associated with the phenomenon of capitalism and the strengthening of the idea of private property as a way of owning not only land, property, but also oneself [18]. "Man's self-identity – what is 'proper' and 'decent' to him – was clearly linked to the rational and ethical management of his 'property'." However, on the margins of this classical and medieval theme there are traces of a more crude and primordial understanding of possession as unlimited domination over what is in the power of man – himself, children, land or slaves – according to Roman private law" [19, p. 74]. Possession of property and independence is the basis for the emergence of an independent, emancipated identity, freed from the oppression of hierarchical authority.

Discussion and Conclusion. Given the above, we can state the crisis of religious identity. This fact is caused by all the above-mentioned prerequisites, but in a religious refraction. This allows us to draw the following conclusions.

First, liberalization has led to a new state of religion in society. The complication of society by differentiating and separating religion into a separate institution has led to the fact that churches now have to compete for human attention as described by T. Luckmann [20] and P.L. Berger [21] turns religion, according to D.A. Uzlaner [22, p. 49] into a function. Religious institutions are forced to compete in the field of youth work, social service, culture and media, while "progressive" society tries to indicate the place of religion in "private enclaves of social life" [10, p. 153]. A large number of new religious movements, various denominations appear and enter the struggle for people. This leads to the growth of proselytizing, both in traditional religions and NSD. This is where the issue of religious identity, related to the self-perception of the subject as religious in general, and as a representative of a particular religious movement, in particular, becomes relevant.

Second, multiple identities that accommodate the secular and the religious, and sometimes multiple religious identities (religious eclecticism), lead to changes not only in individual consciousness, but also in religious practices; dogmatic and canonical positions. Contemporary confessional theologians often blur the boundaries of their doctrine and their church by describing the importance of inclusivism in ecclesiological systems. The concept of Patchwork-Church is emerging, which is like a patchwork quilt made up of different traditions and practices [23]. This is facilitated, among other things, by Internet resources, which in many ways shape the modern identity of young people (including religious identity) and are a platform for the representation of their identity.

Third, the destruction of traditional religious beliefs is linked to the ambiguity of the modern understanding of the individual through the prism of the value bases of emancipation. Traditional religious authorities and scriptures, practices and teachings are being questioned. Whereas for traditional religiosity, and therefore for religious identity, the social component of religion (churches, congregations, meetings, etc.) is important, for modern religiosity the individual status is important. Modern religiosity broadcasts the idea that each person has the right to dispose not only of his property, but also of his religiosity. Can decide for himself what is true and what is false. Lack of authority and truths, collapse of traditional science, belief in progress and a bright future. The focus on discourse and rhetorical strategies, rather than dogmatic content and meaning, is the basis for the construction of an alternative and individualistic religiosity, which is commonly referred to as "spirituality". Such "spirituality" began to take various philosophical-postmodern and theological forms: "theology of the death of God," "weak theology," "process theology," etc.

Thus, the transformation of modern society brings a person into a state of total freedom, which allows the construction of any identity. These constructs, as a rule, are elective in nature. This state of affairs (distrust of authority, feeling of being an autonomous person, the ability to change one's identity) does not favor the integration of a person into religious society and the transition to practice. Since social interaction constructs not only one's everyday life, but also one's worldview, integration is always closely connected with practice, which requires a certain level of preparation (both theoretical, in the form of training, and practical – in the form of fasts, prayer, works of mercy, etc.) and the consolidation of identity, which is quite difficult for modern man.

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