



Issue 14: Digital Orthodoxy – Mediating Post-Secularity in Russia

EDITORIAL

In October 2015, Runet heatedly discussed the leak of information about the (failed) attempt of the Russian Ministry of Communications to cut the country off from the internet.¹ The crackdown on the freedom of the internet is the marked tendency of President Putin's third term in power, which has resulted in the closing down of thousands of web-pages,² including oppositional news agencies. One of the most important sources of motivation for this prohibitive activity is religious ethics. For example, the League for Safe Internet, blessed by Patriarch Kirill, has been hunting for pedophiles in the social networks since 2011, as well as reporting online pornography, propaganda of extremism, LGBT, methods of committing suicide, and similar information, sinful from the Orthodox viewpoint. In spite of the very high level of internet penetration in Russian society (70.5% in 2015, 'Internet World Users' 2015), the idea of state control over the digital environment has found a receptive soil among the broader public³ and its ardent advocates in the political elite (e.g. Potupchik and Fedorova 2014).

This posits the question – how is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) impacting society and the state in their framing and making sense of the new media? Statistics says that only 2 to 4% of Russians keep the fast during the Lent, or take communion ('Rossiiane o religii' 2013); the Ministry of the Interior (which since the Soviet times traditionally monitors churches' attendance on the most important dates) reported 2,3 million participants of the Christmas service in 2008 (i.e. 3,3% of the population, 'Dannye' 2008). So the number of regular church-goers is not very significant, and the ROC does not play an important role in the lives of the majority of Russians. At the same time, circa 70% ('Rossiiane o religii' 2013)

¹ E.g. in the comments section of a *Daily Mail* article written by Jenny Stanton (2015).

² Today, the informal list of banned websites includes 48045 items ('Reestr' 2015).

³ In October 2014 54% of respondents supported the idea of state censorship in the internet ('Internet-tsenzura' 2014).

name themselves ‘Orthodox believers’. The phenomenon of ‘vicarious’ religion⁴ is common in all Western societies, and it is present on a remarkably great scale in Russia due to the fact that Orthodox religion serves as a synonym for Russian national self-identification. There are signs of weariness of the ROC’s assertiveness among the Russian population; WTSIOM’s press release displays that in 1990 61% of people approved of the spreading of religion, whereas in 2015 it is only 36% (‘Religiia: Za i protiv’ 2015). Still, the ROC remains one of the most highly trusted social institutions, on par with the army and slightly behind the President. Moreover, during the period 2013 – 2015, the ROC has slightly gained in trust (48 and 54% respectively, ‘Rossiiane’ 2015), so the anti-ROC’s campaign and a number of scandals, connected with the ‘Pussy Riot’ affair and the lifestyle of Patriarch Kirill, have not significantly decreased the popularity of the ROC and its leader. This could be explained in the context of the recent turn towards conservatism in Russian society, which entertains age-old images of Russia as a besieged fortress, morally superior to its geopolitical adversaries.

Speaking about ‘vicarious Orthodoxy’ it is important to keep in mind that the ROC was historically a national church of Russia, and like any national church has tight connections with the political and historical self-description of this community. A common trope for self-positioning of the Church is that the ROC is a ‘state-shaping’ religion (*gosudarstvo-obrazuiushchaia tserkov’*), and as such it weaves its own historical narrative with the narrative of the Russian state. Thus, the Orthodox religion in Russia has an ineliminable political and geopolitical component (Engström 2014; Kostjuk 2005; Mitrofanova 2005; Papkova 2011; Simons & Westerlund 2015; Suslov 2014), although, to be sure, it cannot be reduced to it. In the ROC’s intellectual history, the concept of ‘symphony’ is a very important one; it says that the church and the state should maintain harmonious relations of mutual support and mutual non-interference. As Patriarch Kirill argued once, it is not in the history, but here and now, in Putin’s Russia, the principle of ‘symphonia’ has been implemented in its most complete form (Kirill 2010: 251). Indeed, the state’s support of the ROC’s initiatives has recently been very substantial, ranging from adopting the legislation according to which all ROC’s property nationalized after the revolution of 1917 should be given back to the Church, to the incorporation of the course ‘Bases of the Orthodox Culture’ in secondary school, to the introduction of state-paid chaplains to the Russian army, - all these novelties would have been unthinkable without the state’s benevolent backing. In return, the ROC supplies the Kremlin with a number of rhetorical devices and ideological frames, which help the political elite to consolidate Putin’s predominantly conservative constituency. However, the coalescence of the Church and the state should not be exaggerated; the ROC has its own sense of mission, ideological agenda and doctrinal grounds (especially *Bases of the Social Concept*, adopted in 2000), which provide for a possibility (mostly dormant up to day) to raise an independent and oppositional voice.

⁴ The concept of ‘vicarious religion’ implies that the majority, although not actively participating in religious life, approves of the small group of regular church-goers, who perform religion ‘on behalf’ of the rest (Davie 2006).

Online religions worldwide

The study of religion and digital technologies has recently become a point of growth in social sciences and humanities, reflecting on the dynamic ‘colonization’ of the digital terrains by different religions. Theological traditions and cultural backgrounds have variegated impact on the religion’s ability to ‘domesticate’ digital technologies. The worldwide turn from ‘religion towards spirituality’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005) rendered the actual religious experience less bounded by the tradition and ritual, and pushed it in the direction of religious syncretism and individualism. This ‘spiritual turn’ provides more opportunities for accommodation of the new media. Representatives of the New Age religions, especially, met the early advances of digital technologies into our everyday life with enthusiasm. Some traditional religious denominations managed to grasp and make sense of the computer-mediated technologies remarkably easy as well. For example, Hinduism relatively successfully embraced digital technologies (Helland 2010), among other reasons, because of the idea of purity of the environment in which ritual takes place. According to this tradition, if the image of a god or a goddess is located in cyberspace, not in the physical space, this could be regarded positively by the believers who perform the ritual of *purja* (Scheifinger 2013: 125). Similarly, meditating rituals of Zen Buddhism, or their parts, could be easily transferred online.

By contrast, those religions that emphasise the mystical and corporeal sensorial experience, rather than symbolic aspects of rituals (e.g. Eucharist), resist from transferring services into the virtual world. Another ‘trench’ in a position war with modern technology could be the traditionally patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the church. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, is way more comfortable with the internet than the ROC, finding it a useful tool for the dialogue with religious and secular ‘others’. Though, at the same time, the Vatican disabled the ability to comment on its YouTube channel, fearing the loss of control over the discussion (Campbell 2012). Likewise, in ultra-Orthodox Judaism, the resistance of religious authorities to the destabilizing of their cultural and political hegemony in the digital environment can be fierce (Rashi 2013).

The relation of fundamentalist religions to computer-mediated communication (CMC) is, however, never reduced to a straightforward rejection. Whereas Messianic religions, concentrated on the idea of a covenant with a deity, would tend towards isolationism and unacceptance of the new media, religions striving to expand their Messianic message would find digital technologies to be a useful tool for church mission. But even religions trying to reconstruct the basis of their faith and to return to their roots in the distant past, which usually find it difficult to accommodate any modern technology, eagerly adopt methods of ‘religion online’ for the purposes of propaganda, self-presentation, or search for information (Howard 2011). Likewise, CMC does not unequivocally undermine the ‘epistemic power’ and the authority of the religious hierarchy (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai 2005; Campbell 2010; Livio & Tenenboim Weinblatt 2007). For example, in spite of the prohibition to use the internet by rank-and-file believers, leaders of Taliban could be quite active online in both recruiting new members and fighting with ideological adversaries (Bunt 2009). Modern paganism can also be seen as a ‘back-to-the-roots’ religious movement, and yet it is developing quite dynami-

cally in the internet, which is seen as a platform to spread information, connect with fellow believers and perform some, e.g. Wicca, rituals (Cowan 2005; Krüger 2005).

The Orthodox Church only recently began to pay serious attention to the possibilities of cyberspace and the Orthodox theological dimension of its mission on the Internet. In 1997 Patriarch Aleksii II blessed the world-wide web information technology as a new means for Orthodox missionary work. Today, believers have Orthodox search services,⁵ social networks, web-based dating services, and information agencies. One can follow Patriarch Kirill on Facebook, exchange tweets with the popular priest and actor Ivan Okhlobystin, or leave comments on the blog of the controversial Deacon Andrei Kuraev. The Orthodox religious tradition, conservative disposition of the ROC's leadership and constituency, as well as the Church's participation in shaping today's state political agenda is not very accommodating to the new media, and yet its highest clerics and intellectuals understand that it is better to master the new technology than to fight with it.

Problem statement

The Orthodox segment of Runet, sometimes called 'Ortho-net', is shaped by half-hearted attempts undertaken by the ROC to instrumentalize digital technologies in order to exercise a greater ascendancy over society. On the one hand, 'Ortho-net' has arguably become the main source for informing people about religion, boasting extensive connections with Orthodoxy worldwide, which now numbers some 300 million believers. On the other, Russian-language 'Ortho-net' occupies a relatively modest and isolated niche in Runet. It is notoriously difficult to calculate its share, but one can adequately grasp the 'big picture' by looking up the service top100.rambler.ru, which places the most popular Orthodox webpage (pravoslavie.ru) in only 101st place in the list of Russian-language web-resources ('Rambler Top 100' 2015). Another example is the number of received comments on the blogs in *LiveJournal*; the most popular Orthodox blog by deacon Andrei Kuraev (aka diak_kuraev) with its 1.1 million comments lags far behind Artemii Lebedev (aka tema) with 4,2 million (as of November 2015). It is safe to say that the share of Orthodox content in Runet roughly corresponds to (or somewhat less – due to the fact that older people tend to be more religious and less conversant with the internet) the proportion of regular church-goers in Russian society.

The present issue chronicles and analyzes factors conditioning the ROC's mastery of the internet. One of them is the growing skepticism of Church leaders about new media, which is suspected of breaching Russia's cultural authenticity and implanting values and ideas alien to the Russian culture. Another factor is the weak commensurability of the social ethos of internet users, fostering individualism and social activism, and the ROC's traditional propensity for communitarian ethics and loyalty to the authority. This issue considers yet another discrepancy between cultivation of all kinds of hybridizations and mixtures of different confessional practices and ideas, including monotheistic religions, pagan cults, esoteric doctrines and so on, which is characteristic for the new media, and the ROC's heightened sensitivity and aversion to heterodoxy and schisms. Large sectors of the Runet voice anti-Orthodox criticism, because digital technologies provide powerful levers for anti-clerical

⁵ On 1 March 2015, when this research project was on its finish line, the Orthodox search engine rublev.com was launched under the auspices of the Information Department of the Moscow Patriarchate.

activists who effectively parody Orthodox tweeters, creating disincentives and disseminating memes that ridicule the Orthodox Church, whereas traditional media, such as the press and TV have been purged from anti-religious tendencies during the last decade and a half. All in all, the internet is not seen as a comfortable environment for the ROC, but rather as a battlefield, on which the Church is compelled to wage ‘web wars’ in order to remain in the public space and to maintain control over its flock.

However, the relationship between the ROC and the internet should not be reduced to the clash of antagonistic logics, ethics, ideologies and practices. The problems of communication and mediation of the religious message, the dialectics of the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’, have always been in the heart of the Orthodox theology. For example, disputes over theology of image as a visual ‘doubling’ of the world date back to the iconoclastic era (8-9 centuries AD). The Russian Orthodoxy rejected the theatre and musical instruments, accepting only the chorus of voices as a proxy of the angelic singing, whereas masks and histrionics were seen as the domain of the devil. Echoing iconoclastic disputes, there was tough debate about ‘new iconography’, i.e. Baroque religious painting of the Catholic style in 17th-century Russia. This controversy resulted in the still open sore of the splitting of Orthodoxy into the Niconian church (now – the ROC) and the Old Believers.

Equally central to Orthodoxy is striking the balance between the episcopal authority and the role of the laity in the life of the Church. The internet enables modern Orthodoxy to re-enact the situation of the first centuries of Christianity, providing for a greater freedom of participation and discussion of the dogmas by laypeople. This being stated, Orthodoxy has never been and will never be neutral to the medium of its message, and this explains why in spite of the ROC’s official position the internet is only an instrument of its mission – the actual attitude to the new media is overloaded with emotions, metaphors and theoretical speculations.

Taking this as a starting point of analysis, the present collection of papers focuses primarily on how Orthodox officials, intellectuals and ‘ordinary’ online users are reflecting upon the new challenges and possibilities offered by CMC. Within this research program, this issue posits specific questions:

- how the ROC is recycling its cultural and theological legacy in order to make sense of the CMC (the article by Mikhail Suslov, pp. 1-25);
- what kind of new and original conceptualization of CMC could be developed, grounded in the Orthodox tradition of theology (the article by Fabian Heffermehl, pp. 27-47);
- how the internet is used for the purpose of raising ethical questions and staging moral panics (Hanna Stähle’s paper, pp. 49-71);
- how the internet is shaped into a platform on which the ROC’s cultural hegemony in Russian society could be questioned or ridiculed from the secularist and atheist perspective (Maria Engström’s paper, pp. 73-108);
- how the internet is enabling dissenting voices of the religious heterodoxy (the article by Ekaterina Grishaeva, pp. 109-122).

These central questions are supported by the historical survey on the developing of the ‘digital Orthodoxy’ (Ksenia Luchenko’s essay, 123-132), the study of the impact of the internet into the ROC’s ecclesiology (the teaching of the Church’s nature and structure, see the paper by Alexander Ponomariov, pp. 145-163), the sociological inquiry into the user’s religious profile (the essay by Viktor Khroul, pp. 133-143). The present special issue includes voices from inside the Church, namely the ‘virtual roundtable’, compiled from written interviews with blogging priests and church activists (see the paper by Irina Kotkina and Mikhail Suslov, pp. 165-174), the conference survey on digital media from the Russian Orthodox University (written by Viktor Khroul, pp. 175-179), and the presentation of the digital collection of icons by hieromonk Tikhon (Kozushin) (pp. 181-193). It is important to stress that the issue focuses on the *representations* of the digital technologies by clerics and churchgoes, so digital religious practices and experiences are tangential to this study and should be covered separately.

State-of-the-art

This special issue is grounded in the vast literature devoted to studying the interrelationship between different aspects of religious experience and new media.⁶ The research of digital religion has passed through several stages (Campbell 2013), having already made an important contribution to the understanding of the problem of (post)secularism. Early, ‘romantic’ conceptualizations of the cyber-world, as a place of disembodied spirituality and sacredness, spurred this process and affected the way in which religious traditions consider the internet and utilize its affordances to practice faith and obtain religious experience (O’Leary 1996; Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1995). At the turn of the millennium, the proliferation of digital technologies in everyday life prompted scholars to contemplate the conceptual distinction between two modes of existence of religion on the web: ‘religion-online’, and ‘online-religion’. This distinction illustrates the limits of the secularization hypothesis, because it demonstrates how churches manage not only to colonize the internet (‘religion-online’) but also to develop new religious practices and sensibilities, specific to digital culture – ‘online-religion’ (Helland 2000; 2002; 2005).

Penetration of the internet into all spheres of human culture rendered the divide between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ obsolete. Simultaneously, the distinction between ‘religion-online’ and ‘online-religion’ is becoming less and less relevant; on the one hand, websites initially designed to inform believers (‘religion-online’) provide increasingly more possibilities for participation and interaction, such as commenting and discussing or performing rituals (i.e. ‘online-religion’). On the other, social networks, enabling believers to collectively obtain religious experience, have become the main source of information regarding the life of the churches as well as the field of the churches’ missionary work (Wagner 2012; Young 2004). Social networks have been usefully conceptualized as the ‘third place’ of non-instrumental communication (Baab 2012; Soukup 2006). In this vein, blogging believers do not necessarily strive for the spread of their doctrines, but rather for self-cultivation and obtaining

⁶ Most comprehensive books are here Ahlbäck & Dahla 2013; Campbell 2010; Campbell 2013; Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren, & Ess 2012.

religious experience (Bakardjieva & Gaden 2012; Lee 2009), which more often than not reinforces their religious community (Cheong, Kwon, & Halavais 2008).

Later on, Heidi Campbell, drawing on the ‘social shaping of technology’ approach, argued that success or failure in mastering the digital technology depends not on ‘the innate qualities of the technology but on the ability of the users to socially construct the technology’ (Campbell 2012: 84), which in turn depends on traditions, values, and discursive practices of a given religious community. Such an approach helps researchers to revisit the secularism thesis. Even if the internet may be (or may not – depending on how this technology is being socially shaped) detrimental to the traditional religious authorities (Bruce 2002), it gives innumerable affordances for mediating the experience of the sacred and ritual practices beyond the churches’ fences (Casas, Poon, Cheong, & Huang 2009; Hackett 2006), which has also been explored in the literature on the religious dimension of the digital popular culture (Deacy & Arweck 2009; Geraci 2014; Wagner 2012). The paradox of the social ‘domestication’ of the internet approach is in the fact that the internet serves as the most important platform to ‘domesticate’ it; that the internet is both the object of discursive construction and the instrument of so doing. Thus, ‘domestication’ of the internet is essentially different from the social shaping of other technologies. Consequently, researchers can speak of ‘cybertheology’ (Baab 2012; Horsfield 2012; Spadaro & Way 2014), whereas ‘theology of internal combustion engines’, or ‘theology of electricity’ is hardly conceivable without a great stretch.

The present collection of papers, based on the ‘religious-social shaping of technology’ thesis, tries to push it one step forward by discussing the hegemonic relations in the process of ‘domestication’ of the internet by the Orthodox users. This avenue of research becomes especially pertinent due to the historical embeddedness of the Russian Orthodox Church into the structures of political power, as mentioned earlier. Some articles (by Mikhail Suslov and Alexander Ponomariov) engage with the epistemological authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, whereas others (by Hanna Stähle, Ekaterina Grishaeva and Maria Engström) discuss the possibilities of resistance through irony, dissidence and heresy.

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