STATE, RELIGION and CHURCH

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How Religion Becomes Visible: Old Believer Communities in Social Media

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The article discusses how Old Believers create a space of new visibility for their religion in social media. The author analyzes online and offline practices as complementing each other, examining the Facebook pages of those communities and settlements in which anthropological fieldwork was previously conducted (the Northwestern Black Sea region). Based on Heidi Campbell's theoretical approaches and using materials from online observations and field research as sources, the author analyzes two approaches of Old Believer self-representation in social media: 1) a digital narrative created on behalf of the religious community that is institutionally encouraged and an authorized way to make religion visible in public space, 2) and a digital narrative about the community's everyday life and Old Believers' lived religion. Despite all the differences, in both cases visible religion is being constructed online for both internal and external users.

ONE of the consequences of the mediatization of religion is its increased visibility in the public space. Nowadays, a social media user can not only learn more about this or that Old Believer

community but can even "step into" a church through numerous photographs and videos of sermons available online. Typically, Old Belief churches prohibit filming during services (it is however possible with the priest's blessing), and members of other denominations are only allowed to witness the service from the parvis. This latter rule was institutionally formalized by a decree of the Metropolitan Council of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church (ROORC) from February 2015, which states: "We request non-Old Believers to stay in the narthex for the entire duration of the service, to refrain from entering the temple, venerating the icons, and performing any visible prayer rituals." In many cases, more visual information can be found on social media than standing on the parvis.

Two interconnected questions expectedly arise in this context: (1) how representatives of religious communities ensure their group's presence in social media, giving it more visibility in the public space, and (2) what effect this increase in visibility has on these religious communities.

There have been numerous studies on the impact of the Internet on religious practices by English speaking experts (Dixon 1997; Houston 1998; Dawson 2001; Babin and Zukowski 2002; Young 2004; Herring 2005; Laney 2005). They focus on various aspects of the perception of Internet technologies and consider the Internet as a context for creating communities. Multiple empirical studies into online Christian practices have been conducted. Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner reviewed these works in detail in a chapter of a monograph on Christian reflections on virtual life (Campbell and Teusner 2011). The study of post-Soviet interconnections between religion and media has generated a few works as well. In particular, an issue of the online journal *Digital Icons* was dedicated to digital Orthodoxy in Russia, including the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Internet, religious practices using digital technologies, and forms of self-expression in digital media (Strukov 2015). It is also worth mentioning E. Grishaeva and V. Shumkova who have been studying online practices of Christian communities (Grishaeva and Shumkova 2018).

To date, there is no scholarship on the uses of the Internet and social media in Old Believer communities. At the same time, this area is of interest because it encompasses several relevant problems, among which are the emergence of new everyday practices in religious communities, the understanding of these practices, and the interaction of conventional behavioral patterns with technological innovations, the search for new methods of inclusion in a community, strategies for ensuring the presence of religion in the public space, and, expectedly, the changes that modern technology and its usage cause in religious com-

munities themselves. The fact that very diverse opinions on the use of the Internet and social media exist among Old Believers—from full or selective acceptance to motivated rejection—makes the exploration of this range of issues even more interesting.

Methodological approaches

Analysis of the manner in which religion is represented in social media and the impact that the use of media technologies and public visibility have on these communities is based on materials from online observations, anthropological fieldwork, and interviews of Old Believers in Moldova and Romania recorded during expeditions between 2008 and 2019. In this paper, I analyze online pages of the communities and settlements, in which I previously conducted field research. Ethnographic observations allow the scholar to understand what goes on online and make it possible both to differentiate between participants of online communication and to understand the broader context of the interaction. Rather than contrasting between offline and online practices, this approach allows scholars to analyze them as complementary practices that function in different contexts (Georgalou 2017; Yus 2011). Moving away from strict differentiation of online and offline practices is motivated by the impossibility to distinguish between them due to their close ties in daily life. For example, one could conduct a church service and post its video recording on a Facebook page. There are numerous variations among the further usage of this video: it can be watched by parishioners who missed the service or by those who were there and want to rewatch it. This example shows that certain posts and webpages can be considered an extension of religious practices.

I base my analysis of how Old Believers ensure the presence of their faith on social media on Heidi Campbell's theoretical frameworks. In her studies on the usages of social media by various congregations she calls for paying attention not only to religious tradition (in this case it would be the Old Belief or, more specifically, the traditions of the Belokrinitsky Old Believers) but also to practices among specific groups (e.g., among the Belokrinitsky Old Believers in Chisinau) (Campbell 2010, 20). Campbell pointed out that approaches and objectives for using social media can vary in communities within one religious tradition depending on a range of factors, such as how they determine the boundaries of the community or their perspective on religious leaders and text media (Campbell 2010, 15). The scholar offered her own approach to examining the engagement of religious communities with

new media, the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology (RSST). This approach incorporates the reactions of representatives of religious communities to media technologies and the beliefs and concepts that influence their choices. If the perception of a technology in a community is influenced by religious and sociocultural factors, the community itself is shaped by the influence of the media technology. To address the questions of how a community forms responses to new media technologies, Campbell suggests exploring the history, traditions, beliefs and concepts, discourses, and the process of negotiation and assessment within a community (Campbell 2010).

I explore several Old Believers' positions, concerns, and the process of creating norms for engaging with social media using decrees of Councils, information on church activities, observations, interviews of the Belokrinitsky and Novozybkovsky Old Believer communities in Moldova and Romania, and data from online observation of what Old Believers from the same regions post on their social media accounts.

Ethically, I adhered to certain important principles. During oral interviews, some of my interlocutors expressed a desire to stay anonymous, thus their identification will be withheld from the paper. In these cases, I disclose only the region and omit the name of the specific settlement. The absence of established ethical guidelines for online observations, in my opinion, calls for discussions of solutions for potential problems in each individual case. In this paper, I analyze in detail only those open-access community accounts on social media, whose objective is to inform a wider audience about their culture and religion. The matter of whether to disclose the names of people who post on these open-access sources was settled in favor of open data, as relevant comments are made in the public space, and as the oral interviews and online observations led me to conclude that the participants of online communication are aware of this publicity.[1]

Attitude toward the Internet: the official position of ROORC

Digital media functions as one of the current channels of missionary activity. The presence of religion online is thus endorsed institutionally.

Matters of using the Internet have been discussed in recent years at Moscow Metropolitan Councils of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite

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1. Apropos, the recommendations on bibliographic descriptions and citation rules developed at the School of Cultural Studies at the Higher School of Economics: https://culture.hse.ru/standart_bibliograf_opisanija.

Church. The texts of ROORC decrees on communications and the publication of the 2011 Council show an interest in new media. For example, a decision was made to "broaden the utilization of possibilities of modern information resources for preaching salvation" (ROORC Council 2011). In 2013, the Council agenda already contained a separate item on the positions on the Internet and its advantages and drawbacks were discussed: "The clergyman pointed out that any given virtual action on social media leaves an indelible trace in monitoring systems and information storage. Thus, in his opinion, people should understand that a person's behavior online should be even more responsible than in daily life" (ROORC Council 2013 b). The corresponding decree of the Council states: "Christians should be spiritually vigilant while using the Internet" (ROORC Council 2013 a). In 2019, the item "on the actions of Old Believers on the Internet" was discussed and the following decision was made: "To call upon Christians to approach their comments on the Internet and other media responsibly, upholding Christian ethics and bearing in mind that, as the Scripture says, 'every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement'" (Matthew 12:36) (ROORC Council 2019). In conjunction with developing an official Church position and discussing acceptable ways of ensuring the presence of Old Belief communities online, a variety of online courses were organized for Old Believers and anyone interested.

In September 2019 the department of education at the ROORC Moscow Metropolis launched an online Sunday school for adults, in which lectures were offered on exegesis (Acts of the Apostles), the Old Testament, the liturgy, and Church Slavonic for anyone who was interested. The recorded lectures were posted on a website (*nashavera*.com), on social media (VKontakte), and on YouTube after the webinars.[2]

The online course "foundations of church journalism" was also organized by the ROORC Moscow Metropolis in 2019. Anyone could attend after filling out a questionnaire and submitting a statement of purpose. The main target audience was active Old Believers who were "planning to learn or already engaged in the media space (managing the parish website, writing news columns, posting comments on social media)."[3] Those in attendance included Old Believers from several regions of Russia and abroad, including Moldova. In lectures on church journalism, it was emphasized that the main goal of religious mass me-

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2. More on the course at http://rpsc.ru/news/mitropoliya/sm-january2020/?fbclid=IwA
RodjfwkcBCnoISr7KEUUtNBaC2XYAm4e1B0k1XdS3ROwLp4KGsE6w1u3H4.

3. See details on the ROORC website http://rpsc.ru/news/mitropoliya/journalist-2019/.

dia was preaching and that it was important to understand precisely what should and should not be said on social media about the Old Belief.

As Campbell showed, official discourses and practices play an important role in forming responses to the challenges of using modern technology. An analysis of the official position of the ROORC on the Internet and online resources allows scholars to discuss the willingness to and the promotion of using social networks in missionary activities. However, there are a variety of opinions on this among Old Believers, including among priests. On the one hand, many clergymen speak against life in isolation and often are active users of social networks and moderators of Old Believer community websites. On the other hand, there are priests in the same region who express negative views on using social networks and on distributing information about the Old Belief on the Internet.

Old Believer attitudes toward the Internet: A view from the field

One of the circumstances that complicates the situation, making it more interesting at the same time, is that representatives of some communities, predominantly rural ones, still perceive the Internet (and social networks) as a negative component of modern life. It is an example of what Campbell, echoing John Ferré, called an approach to media technology as a separate way of cognition, in which religious communities are suspicious of media because they shape the culture and promote values that contradict religious convictions (Campbell 2010). Having studied Old Belief communities in Moldova and Romania since 2008, I came across such views on modern media among Novozybkovsky Old Believers in the village of Sarichioi (Tulcea County, Romania) and among the older generation of Belokrinitsky Old Believers (villages of Cunicea, Egorovca, Dobrogea Veche in the Republic of Moldova, and the city of Bender in the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic) (Gergesova 2019).[4]

Here are two cases to consider:

1. Sarichioi, October 2008. Finishing an interview with a member of a Novozybkovsky community at her home, I asked per-

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4. This is not characteristic for all Old Believers in this community. In particular, there is an article on the Old Believers' website ruvera.ru about Old Believers in Irkutsk which says that Novozybkovsky Old Believers "use modern communication technology—watch television, use Internet and cell phones. As the community leader says, 'God gave them, we should use them.'"