

## Media Representation of Religiousness in Modern Russian Society

### Медийное представление религиозности в современном российском обществе

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#### Abstract

The study is devoted to a relevant topic – the analysis of the media representation of religiousness in modern Russian society based on media materials. In the scientific literature, there are various assessments of religious media discourse: some authors argue that the media reflect and others that the media distort the real situation. The study presents the idea that the ambiguity of assessments of the level of religiousness and its features is only partially explained by ideological differences between the discourses. To a large extent, such ambiguity is formed as a consequence of the instability of religious identification. Media materials note the superficial nature of religious consciousness, which is evidenced by the low level of churching, predominantly ceremonial nature of religious practice, and shallow knowledge of the essence of dogma. However, according to the authors of the study, an insufficiently high level of religious culture should not be assessed as a profanation of faith. The analysis of the texts published in

#### Аннотация

Статья посвящена актуальной теме – анализу медийного образа религиозности современного российского общества по материалам СМИ. В научной литературе присутствуют различные оценки религиозного медиадискурса: одни авторы утверждают, что СМИ отражают, другие – что СМИ искажают реальную ситуацию. В статье проводится мысль о том, что неоднозначность оценок уровня религиозности и ее особенностей только отчасти объясняется идеологическими различиями между дискурсантами. В большой степени подобная неоднозначность формируется как следствие неустойчивости религиозной идентификации. В материалах СМИ отмечается поверхностный характер религиозного сознания, свидетельством чему считается низкий уровень воцерковленности, преимущественно обрядовый характер религиозной практики, неглубокое знание сути вероучения. Однако, по мнению авторов статьи, недостаточно высокий уровень

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Russian printed and online media shows that the image of religiousness in the secular segment of the information field differs from the media of different political orientations.

**Keywords:** media representation, discourse, religious consciousness, faith, religious identification.

## Introduction

Attitude to religion and the state of religious consciousness has been a constant topic of media discourse for several decades. There are many reasons for this, including more or less thorough ones, both stable and situational. Interest in this topic is caused by serious changes taking place in the system of public values and informational occasions manifesting them. Among the latter are such resonant events as the trial of Pussy Riot in 2012, the adoption of the law on insulting the feelings of believers in 2013, the ban on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017, and many others.

The volume of attention to church issues in the sociopolitical media is estimated as very significant. According to A. Iu. Garbuzniak and O. B. Solodovnikova, in six major national printed media (*Novaya Gazeta*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Izvestia*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Kommersant*, *Ogoniok*), at least a third of the issues contain relevant materials (Garbuzniak & Solodnikova, 2017). In turn, P. A. Baev shows that the frequency of references to the categories "church" and "priest" in the newspaper "Argumenty i Fakty" sharply increased compared to 1980-1990 in the early 2000s and reached its peak by 2005 (Baev, 2011). All of these publications are devoted to issues of faith and, in one way or another, create the effect of the powerful presence of religious discourse in the information environment.

If one correlates the volume of the stream of publications with data on the number of believers, then the impression of conformity of reality to its media display is created. It must be admitted that sociological assessments of the level of religiousness in Russian society vary, but according to even the most modest of them, almost every second Russian is a supporter of a particular faith. According to the data of the Public Opinion Foundation published in 2014,

религиозной культуры не следует оценивать как профанацию веры. Проведенный авторами статьи анализ текстов, опубликованных в российских печатных и интернет-СМИ, показывает, что образ религиозности в светском сегменте информационного поля различается в СМИ разной политической ориентацией.

**Ключевые слова:** медийный образ, дискурс, религиозное сознание, вера, религиозная идентификация.

only 19% of respondents did not consider themselves believers, while the rest considered themselves belonging to one of the faiths (Orthodoxy – 68%, Islam – 6%, other religions – 3%) (Churching of Orthodox people, 2014). According to the survey conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center, 71% of Russians considered themselves Orthodox Christians (Kuperman & Saigal, 2017). According to the Levada-Center, the share of those who considered themselves religious increased from 35 to 53% in 2014-2017 (Kochoergina, 2017).

Of interest is the fact of the discrepancy in the quantitative estimates. It can be assumed that these inconsistencies are caused by methodological reasons: different methods of collecting and processing information or cognitive attitudes of researchers. However, it is possible that the difference in data really reflects the quality of the religious identity of Russian society.

The sphere of religious experience is unusually difficult for an outside observer to penetrate, but it is far from transparent for self-observation as well. At first glance, it seems that the statement "Russia is an Orthodox country" is equivalent to the statement "Russian people are religious". However, the synonymy of these judgments is not at all obvious. It is also not obvious that by the nature of religious discourse one can judge the significance of faith in society.

It is believed that a variety of discourses "create a distorted perspective of omnipresent religiousness and religion" (Korm, 2012). Perhaps this judgment is true in relation to Russian media. We are interested in Russian realities, but, as in all other cases, external comparisons are useful for assessing internal states.

In our opinion, it is necessary to investigate how accurate the media representation is to the real state of religious consciousness and the role of religion in society. This problem can only be solved if the results of theoretical analysis are confirmed or refuted by means of empirical research. The theoretical part involves understanding the following topics:

- how faith and its expression are correlated in public discourse; the solution of this issue requires penetration into the essence of religious consciousness;
- how the format of conducting public discourse affects its content;
- how the media discourse affects the object of its display – the state of religiousness.

Within the framework of one study, it is not possible to answer all these questions. In this study, we aim to consider the features of public discourse on faith and form assumptions about the current state of religious consciousness in Russian society.

Conceptual basis of the study. There is a large number of materials devoted to the analysis of individual parameters of religious media discourse. At the same time, there are not many comprehensive studies of this area of the information field. Such materials usually highlight flaws in covering religious topics in secular and confessional media, some of which are of interest to this analysis.

The mediasphere is an area where everything related to politics is emphasized. Therefore, it is quite natural that in the research of the mediasphere the main attention is paid to the analysis of sociopolitical issues. These are topics of relations between the state and the church, the church and civil society institutions, in particular, the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church (the ROC) in the regulation of the artistic process (Kashinskaia, 2008).

It can be argued that the main issue that interests analysts of religious public discourse is the issue of its relevancy or irrelevancy to the real state of the mentality of a Russian citizen. The opinion is expressed that the mediasphere does not reflect the state of the spirituality of modern society. Therefore, A. Shchipkov believes that over the past 20 years, the degradation of the moral component of the information field has been observed. However, at the same time, according to him, the majority of Russian citizens share Christian values (Shchipkov, 2014). There seems to be some exaggeration in this view. Neither

from the point of view of the influence of the media on public consciousness nor from the position of the public ordering media content it is possible to explain such a deep gap between the media policy and the information needs of the audience.

In connection with the problem of the relevancy of the display of reality in the mediasphere, it is of interest to analyze the concept of mediatization. Mediatization is understood as “the spread of the influence of media on the most important areas of social life and the reverse process of involving various aspects of social activity in the information sphere, that is, the creation of zones of intersection of media and social phenomena” (Klushina, 2014). In this definition, a significant novelty has not yet been revealed in the description of the relationship of the media environment and society. Similarly, traditional media can be characterized. Mediatization as a certain special property is manifested in the following statement: mediatization is a process “as a result of which, any sphere or institution becomes somewhat dependent on the logic of media”.

“Logic of media” – this phrase includes a number of components: visualization, personalization, dramatization, popularization, performance, and narrativization. Although one can see the fixation of a certain ordinary state.

All spheres of public life are subjected to mediatization: political, cultural, spiritual. Therefore it is legitimate to talk about the phenomenon of the mediatization of religion.

Its signs are the broadcasting of religious services in the media, the distribution of quasi-religious content that replaces sacred texts, the combination of religious discourse with news, and the promotion of religious organizations through the creation of newsbreaks or their own channels for disseminating information. As S. Giarvard notes, the mediatization of religion is not a universal phenomenon for all modern culture. To a greater extent, it is characteristic of highly developed Western countries in the past 20 years. Nevertheless, he identifies three key aspects of the mediatization of religion.

1. Media becomes an important, if not paramount, source on religious issues. Mass media present and disseminate content related to various religious practices and experiences, and interactive media provide an opportunity for the expression and replication of individual beliefs.

2. Religious media discourse is organized in accordance with popular media genres. At the same time, religious symbols, practices, and ideas become material for media texts on both secular and religious issues.
3. As a cultural and social environment, media take on many of the functions performed by institutionalized religions and provide people with spiritual guidance, moral guidelines, rituals, and a sense of belonging.

Speaking about the phenomenon of mediatization, one cannot fail to note its internal inconsistency. It clearly manifests itself in the online space, where the dependence on the media as a tool is combined with the tendency to creative expression. Unlike the media, interactive Internet resources, in the first place, blogs and social networks, provide an opportunity to speak not only to professional communicators or newsmakers, but also to any user. For example, any holistic image in its historical and informational plan should cover the entire path without distinguishing its temporal constructs from the past, present, and future (Kudashov et al., 2017). At the same time, there is a need to supplement the picture of the world with elements of extrascientific knowledge (Musat et al., 2019). This refers to the fact that the universal features that are endowed by various historical generations appear to be extremely positive. Therefore, the historical process reflected in the textbooks represents a gradual weakening of the negative traits of humanity and the strengthening of its positive characteristics (Pfanenshtil et al., 2019).

Compared to other areas of media participation, self-monitoring is less involved in the virtual environment. Online statements are supposedly more spontaneous. However, this feature should not be exaggerated, since it is common for a person to feel a personal connection with the text created by them despite the fact that this connection is not visible to anyone except the author. The study by A. Voiskunskii revealed these ambiguities: on the one hand, weak ego involvement and, on the other, emotional dependence on external evaluations of one's content (Voiskunskii et al., 2013).

The online environment demonstrates multidirectional trends – anonymity and authorship, media dependence and self-determination. Thus, studying religious discourse without resorting to interactive Internet platforms is essentially incomplete. However, we leave this fragment of the information environment for the next study.

## Methods

The main method used to collect and process empirical material was the content analysis method. We analyzed 147 texts published in Russian printed and online media from December 1, 2017 to April 8, 2018. The full sample included texts of sociopolitical and informational publications: RIA Novosti, TASS, Kommersant, Vedomosti, Nezavisimaya Gazeta (including the NG-Religion app), Forbes, bfm.ru, Rosbalt, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Novaya Gazeta, gazeta.ru, Moskovskij Komsomolets, RBC, Regnum, izvestia.ru. The materials were collected through the “Polpred” mass media database with the keywords “faith”, “religion”, “Orthodoxy”, “Islam”, “Christianity”, and “believers”. The topics, the ideological component of the texts, as well as the context in connection with which religious discourse arises, were examined.

## Discussion

The media discourse contains assessments of the qualitative features of religiousness; in particular, its superficiality and conventionality are noted. This conclusion is based on the argument of low churching. Along with an increase in the number of adherents of various faiths, the proportion of those who regularly practice the restrictions and rituals of their church remains insignificant. According to reports, from 2000 to 2013, it remained virtually unchanged and amounted to only 12% (Churching of Orthodox people, 2014). Even among the Orthodox people who are churched, there are few who practice Great Lent (12%) or regularly read the Gospel (24%) (Values: religiousness, 2014).

Some authors conclude from this the imaginary nature of religiousness. According to Levada-Center specialist E. Kochergina, “all this indicates environmental pressure and general opinions forcing the individual to conditionally or conformistly redefine himself as an Orthodox person” (Kochergina, 2017). Does this statement conclude that the media, giving religious discourse such an important place, distort the real meaning of faith in the life of Russian society? It seems that it is worth avoiding superficial assessments.

The depth of religious consciousness can be considered in two aspects: firstly, as the degree of identification with faith; secondly, as the level of understanding by believers of the essence of religious dogma.

The status of a religious theme does, in part, lie in the plane of social conventionality. However, this phenomenon is characteristic not only of religious discourse. Conformism should not be regarded only as a kind of external and coercive pressure. From the point of view of social psychology, conformism is not only a static state, but also the process of identity formation. It is the transformation of social values under the influence of both the environment and individual motivation.

Religious identification can be initiated by a combination of two motives: to be on the side of an influential community and the desire to gain faith. Separating these modalities of the desired state is not at all easy. It can be assumed that participation in the religious discourse on the side of believers for some media communicators has a compensatory meaning, that is, makes up for the deficit of faith. This assumption is based on two premises. First, the compensatory function – the function of complementing reality – is inherent in the media discourse as a whole, most clearly it manifests itself in the online space. The second premise proceeds from the psychology of religious faith: religiousness needs support, confirmation through evidence and polemic, despite the fact that the exact opposite is declared. Evidence of this is the rich history of religious philosophy and theology, the tremendous spiritual efforts made to apologize for faith in an era when religiousness, it would seem, was a natural state of a person.

From all that, a conclusion can be drawn: the state of religious consciousness is unlikely to be unambiguously assessed in a qualitative sense, which, on the whole, is quite accurately presented in the media discourse.

There is one statement often found in the media, which, in our opinion, contains a distortion of the real situation. It is the question about the causes of the state of religious consciousness. The essence of this statement is that both faith and its absence are explained by the action of external factors.

If the discourse is conducted on behalf of Christian spirituality, then the lack of faith is explained by the legacy of Soviet-era atheism (Khramov, 2017) and representatives of secular culture explain the surge in religious sentiment by the action of media propaganda (Kochergina, 2017). In addition, an image of the audience is created, which passively perceives an information impact directed at it.

Church and secular positions agree on one more question: a feature of Russian religiousness is its deep rootedness in Russian history. This opinion is often broadcast in the media, although there is another. For example, in the program “Prav? Da?” at OTR (Obschestvennoe Televidenie Rossii, Public Television of Russia) (11/07/2017), V. Buldakov, Doctor of Historical Sciences and leading researcher at the Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, argued that it was a mistake to think that Orthodoxy was a force uniting Russian society. If one recalls the attitude to the church of the recognized spiritual leader L. N. Tolstoy, the rootedness of the Orthodox tradition does not seem so obvious. However, this historical fact is not remembered in the media. Instead, the following ideology is used: Orthodoxy plays the role of a “cultural code” for Russian identity.

The popularity of the concept of cultural code is a characteristic phenomenon. This term does not have a clear meaning and leaves open the question of identification with Orthodoxy (not only as faith, but religious faith) while having clearly positive emotional and value components. The semantic fuzziness of the concept allows hiding the lack of certainty of identification, which is manifested in the media image of religiousness in modern society.

In our opinion, the uncertainty and instability of identification can be interpreted as a manifestation of emotional and cognitive plasticity, which is a property of the human psyche and an inalienable right of a person as a social subject. Plasticity as the ability to change position provides the possibility of informational, including media, impact on the opinions, assessments, and attitudes of communicants.

## Results

Continuing the discussion about the peculiarities of religious identification, let us turn to the question of what it means to believe in the ideas of those who consider themselves Orthodox Christians and how deep the understanding of the obligations that faith imposes on a person's way of thinking and way of life is.

This aspect of religious consciousness is assessed in the media quite critically. “An extremely low level of perceptions of the bulk of the population of post-Soviet countries about religions even from the standpoint of these religions themselves” is noted. It is also said that

religiousness often takes on a ritual, almost entertaining character.

The insufficiently high level of theological culture does not yet indicate that one is dealing with profanation of faith. The psychology of faith is individualized and allows variants when deep religious feelings are combined with superficial ideas about the essence of Christian dogma and, in particular, Christian morality.

Accusations of superstition against believers can be found in the mediasphere. Moreover, the question of the essence of the differences between faith and superstition is very difficult to solve. If, from the point of view of Christian dogma, superstition has a significant difference from religious consciousness and this difference can be rationally defined, then from the standpoint of the psychology of faith, the difference is not so great and the boundary between the magical thinking and the thinking of a believing Christian or Muslim is practically undetectable.

The foregoing does not mean that the problem of religious culture does not exist. In our opinion, it asserts itself in those cases when the establishment of faith is carried out in the media and online medium by contrasting religion with science (Trostnikov, 2000). The apology of faith through accusations of science indicates a lack of historical knowledge. In theology, there is a tradition of a conflict-free solution to the question of the relationship between reason and faith, although the solutions proposed to it are not indisputable.

At various venues, there are many aggressive manifestations in the relations between secular and religious cultures, which reflects the generally high degree of the hostility of modern media (Kroz & Latinova, 2007). If the meaning of faith is a deeply personal matter, then the nature of the public discourse on faith goes beyond private life. It is necessary to resist the spread of aggressive content in the mediasphere. Cognitive simplicity and emotional restraint should be contrasted with literacy and media discourse culture.

It can be assumed that the manifestations of aggressiveness in the discussion of issues of faith and the role of the church in public life testify not so much to the state of religious consciousness as to the features of the mentality of modern Russian society.

There is reason to talk about the dependence of religious discourse on the characteristics of the mediasphere. However, differences in positions regarding important topics are determined not by the properties of the information space, but by the differentiating factors of the sociosphere – political, ideological, and others.

The religious discourse of secular media exists in two forms: as a discourse of positions and assessments and as a value-neutral discourse. The latter has an educational function and includes texts explaining the meaning of rituals, religious holidays, the history of churches and their modern structure. Such content is present in the materials of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, including the specialized NG-Religion app, *Regnum*, *RIA Novosti*, and others.

The discourse of positions and assessments can be divided into two directions: conservative and liberal. This division does not reflect all the features of the media political structure, although in general terms it corresponds to positions that are clearly opposing each other in the information field. To characterize these positions, we again turn to the data of our own study conducted in 2017-2018.

Conservative religious discourse is present in the texts of *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, *izvestia.ru*, and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. These media mainly cover the activities of the ROC. The church acts in unity with the state, implementing a policy of protecting traditional values; relations between the authorities and the church are evaluated positively.

The state of public consciousness is characterized as a “religious revival”, which, according to conservative media, favors moral recovery. Business media, represented by such publications as *Vedomosti*, *Kommersant*, *Forbes*, and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, demonstrate great criticality in assessing the state. For example, within the framework of the “liberal” discourse, the union of the church and the state is seen as an undesirable and even dangerous phenomenon. In the alliance of churches and the state, writes A. Melnikov, the editor-in-chief of NG-Religion app, the state plays an initiative role and the ROC has a reactive position that assumes support for any important government decisions (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 03/07/2018). The church’s educational initiatives are also being questioned. The fragmentation and heterogeneity of the religious consciousness of Russians are emphasized. Such judgments are contained in the

texts of Vedomosti, Kommersant, Forbes, and Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

Doubts are expressed about the fact that the church has the right to claim the role of the moral leader of Russian citizens. Strengthening the position of the church, according to Nezavisimaya Gazeta journalists, does not at all lead to an increase in morality among Russians, especially young ones. "On the contrary, the cynicism of the young generation is growing against the backdrop of the increasing role of the church" (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 02/12/2018).

One can raise doubts about the growing cynicism, but there is really no correlation between the growth of religiousness of society and the state of public morality.

The topic of the relationship between morality and faith is very popular in the information environment. The public discourse on this issue, in our opinion, is distinguished by some peremptory judgments. Statements are made about the key role of religion in the formation of morality (Legoida, 2003). Moreover, neither historical nor logical justifications are usually given.

It is not that moral standards in society were originally formed within the framework of religious consciousness. However, there is a historical fact: decades of domination of atheist education in Russia did not lead to the loss of moral guidelines in comparison with both previous and subsequent times. In addition, to talk about a significant level of morality in those centuries when education was religious is at least problematic.

However, in our opinion, it should be taken as a psychological fact that religious discourse is a "convenient" language environment for talking about the moral values of society. The reasons for this phenomenon should be discussed separately, but to say "this is unchristian" seems more natural and convincing than saying the same thing using secular language.

Thus, the secular part of the authors and the audience of the media leads a moral discourse using church vocabulary and imagery, which enhances the effect of the presence of a religious component in the culture of modern Russian society.

## Conclusions

As a result of the reflections on the media representation of religiousness presented in this study, the following conclusions can be formulated:

- 1) The analysis of the media representation of religiousness should be based on deep theoretical foundations, including the doctrine of the nature of man, the theory of social determinism, the psychology of religious faith, the history of the relationship of faith and disbelief, as well as media theory.
- 2) The ambiguity in assessing the level of religiousness of Russian society reflects a lack of certainty and instability of religious identification. In this sense, the media representation of religiousness is accurate in relation to its real state.
- 3) The representation of religiousness in the secular segment of the information field differs in the media of different political orientations.
- 4) There is a widespread belief in the media discourse that religiousness changes under the influence of external influences, in particular, the effects of the media.

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