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## **SOCIAL PHENOMENON OF ONLINE RELIGION: PECULIARITIES OF ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION**

### **Introduction**

Social relations that form in virtual religious communities can be considered, on one hand, as some simulating copies of social connections that exist in real church that have imperfect and mimicking nature. Supporters of this opinion suppose that virtual religious communities are unable to replace real interaction in physical church, being only supplement to it. For example, according to Campbell H. and Clark L., online community served as a “supplement, not substitute” for offline church involvement [5; 8]. On the other hand, the opposite evaluation of the virtual sociality is possible in which it appears as more efficient and demanded form of social interaction between cyber-actors. Apologists of this position state that cyber-space allows forming stronger links between religious cyber-actors than in real life. As a result, it is considered that virtual religion can replace real religion. As an example, S. Kale supposes that “virtual religious experience could substitute traditional church community in some cases” [15, p. 479].

This paper presents Orthodox treating of virtual religion phenomenon for marking which we will use the concept of “online religion” introduced by C. Helland and accepted in modern virtualistics: “there is distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) versus the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online)” [3; 6; 10; 11; 12; 13; 19].

Let us try to answer several questions in our study. A first is the following – is it possible to consider appearance of religious (in particular, orthodox) forums in Internet as an attempt to strengthen position of Church in modern society? Second – is it possible to assume that such positioning in cyber-space inevitably represents only imitation and simulation of religious relations in real life? Third – is it possible to expect that some day the on-line religion will replace real religion (real Orthodox)? Most probably, there are no strict answers to these questions currently. The phenomenon of “online religion” has paradoxical nature; due to this, its explanation can include both positive and negative evaluations.

### **Online religion basis: spiritual catholicity or social solidarity?**

Let us illustrate the paradox of religious cyber-situation using an example of Orthodox concept of catholicity. Catholicity as spiritual congregation of believers, as meeting of visible and invisible (existing in eternity) spheres of church is the “soul of Orthodox” [2, p. 145]. Is it possible to expect that Orthodox forums are able to recover (in virtual space) the spiritual modus of catholicity, the form of uniting religious persons? It is possible to answer both “yes” and “no”. “Yes” because “Church can be present even in a place where two or three persons have gathered for God’s Name. And then it is possible that such church cells might not know each other and not directly communicate between each other. However, this means nothing because uniting of these persons in Saint Spirit does not become weaker” [2, p. 163]. In other words, in cyber space the spiritual uniting of persons can take place when they tend to communicating each other. Catholicity or spiritual uniting might become reality in virtual space of cyber-communication. However, from another hand, one might have doubt that virtual catholicity has the same nature as real-church catholicity. Let us try to describe certain simulation processes in cyber-religious space.

First, social actors that participate in intelligible cyber-communication hide their persons under nicknames. Then, it is difficult to understand who really needs spiritual advice and/or guidance of churchmen-moderators of religious sites or who simply gets satisfaction from participating in “religious party”, from talks about eternity. It is problematic to discriminate for whom participation in religious forums can be “a way to real church” and for whom it’s only a way of spending time, a way of intellectual entertainment (although it might be so that such “flaneurs” might later become really religious persons).

If anonymity is a necessary peculiarity of cyber-communication, then does this characteristic remain in the space of virtual-religious communication? Again we can answer both “yes” and “no”. On one hand, some virtual communities (for example, forum of missionary portal deacon Andrey Kuraev) presumes necessity to register with pointing real name and e-mail for participating in communications. On the

other hand, even such “security measures” do not solve the main problem: cyber-actors still remain distant from each other since they usually do not see or listen to each other, do not know real life/biography of each other keeping anonymous at deep soul level.

Second – real catholicity and real churchliness presume not only spiritual, but also corporeal participation of believers in Christian sacraments. But in virtual space the real (not virtual) corpus of a human is absent and it is unable to take part in interpersonal communication. Besides, ecclesial communion that presumes interaction of alive persons can be either obstructed or simplifies in the situation of contact absence (the situation of principal impossibility to see eyes, faces, emotions and body reactions of communicating persons).

Third, the principle of “free enter/exit” [14] that characterizes a typical process of cyber-communication can distort and simulate sincerity of virtual communion of believers opening possibility of superficial, non-continuous, disinterested presence at religious forums where other practices can be realized in parallel such as talks to friends and relatives, having dinner, watching TV, etc. The most serious problem consists in the fact that virtual union (which is considered by its apologists either as supplement to live religiosity or as one way leading to it), in fact, might become not supplement of catholicity but its “comfort substitute” that allows solving soul problems “sitting at home”, without efforts and presence at worships, without meeting alive people.

However, if the concept of catholicity is not appropriate for describing online religion (online Orthodox), then, maybe, it is more reasonable in this context to apply a more neutral (sociological) concept of “solidarity”? Let us determine the main characteristics of solidarity phenomenon that appears in the context of virtual religious relations.

A classical sociological and social-philosophic topic of solidarity appeared in works of A. Comte and E. Durkheim in the 19-th century. Despite of its considerable theoretical “age”, it still attracts attention of sociologists and social philosophers that try to describe modern transformations of this phenomenon. In Ukrainian science, a bright attempt to “modernize” the theory of solidarity has been done by K. Ursulenko. Instead of using the concepts of *mechanical* and organic solidarity of E. Durkheim, she employs the concepts of normative and structural solidarity that exist in time not sequentially but simultaneously (according to K. Ursulenko, similarity in norms and values as well as structural interdependence always appear “in parallel” [17, p. 132]).

Let us see in what modification of the social solidarity appears in the context of virtual communities. Is it possible to state that in virtual

space only mechanical (normative) or only *organic (structural)* solidarity is realized?

Mechanical solidarity, according to E. Durkheim, is based on total similarity of thoughts, senses, styles of behavior of members of a certain communion. However, such a similarity does not provide natural inclination of individuals to co-existence since there is also necessity in support from institutes of control which force individuals to unite in certain social structures. Trying to describe virtual communication via prism of this concept, it is possible to conclude the following. Virtual communication is not a result of external forcing, although, at the same time, it can be a results of “internal” forcing as this happens in phenomenon of Internet addiction (then, a person does not fully control his/her actions and stays under influence of some virtual codes). Concerning another important parameter of “mechanical solidarity”, i. e. the existence of similarity of values, ideas and attitudes of individuals, it is again difficult to state that members of virtual communities are absolutely identical. It seems at the first glance that each of them wishes to have his/her original style of communication, own virtual image. Meanwhile, according to conclusions of modern psychologists, philosophers and sociologists, there exist certain unification, slang-verbal sameness of virtual communication participants that often becomes the basis for discriminating cyber-actors to “familiar” and “unfamiliar”, to “permanent citizen of virtual village” and virtual “strangers”.

The concept of organic (structural) solidarity presumes an opportunity of spontaneous uniting of persons, not due to external necessity but thanks to internal desire to be together, to stay in touch. The structural solidarity appears not between similar but between different people that tend to each other due to non-identity. In social sense, the organic (structural) solidarity appears itself in organization interaction, in involving the individuals into life of associations, in their adherence to a common deal.

Let us employ the concept of “organic solidarity” for considering the character of virtual communication. One might mark the presence of indirect involvement of particular persons into virtual communities that excludes an opportunity of face-to-face exchange of opinions and viewpoints. On one hand, this experience is less traumatic from the social viewpoint since it allows possibility to “hide”, “escape”, “disappear”, to use a block of techno-wall or screen from social aggression. On the other hand, such contacts “at distance” result in slightly absurd social aggregates that include individuals closed in their rooms and silently sitting before computers who do not know each other but are satisfied by such techno-symbiosis.

Thus, in the virtual social-structural space, there are simulation of personal involvement into communication (inter-personal contacts face-to-face are replaced by contacts made indirect by technical means); simulation of norm-value union (instead of spiritual propinquity one has verbal-slang similarity); simulation of free spontaneity of communication (instead of spontaneously appearing need in communion there appears addiction to “entering virtual galaxy”). Online solidarity does not last in time existing only “on-line”; it has the character of emergent, random, unmotivated order as described by Z. Bauman [1, p. 37].

It is possible to assume that the concept of online religion can be in the best way explained using the concept of solidarity but not catholicity, social but not spiritual uniting. Virtual-religious solidarity has point, non-permanent and non-fixed character; it presumes both the presence of common mental settings for cyber-actors (joint religious interests and requests) and desire to exchange opinions (to interact, to cooperate intellectually) concerning different religious problems; these are both norm and structural items of uniting. In this case, a specific transformation of religion from spiritual to entirely social form of cyber-actors’ interaction takes place. Then, religion loses measures of deepness and height, becomes a “flat” phenomenon which is closed in margins of on-line. Online religion “falls out” from the space of God-human communication in sacraments and transforms to one-dimensional social contacting of invisible actors dealing with joint discussion of religious questions.

In online religion, it is possible to observe simulation of one more category of real religion – eternity. M. Castells describing peculiarities of virtual space and time used the concept of “timeless time” [7] that means new type of “eternity in Internet” (more exactly, substitute of eternity). Internet allows creating collages of different time cultural products, that have been created in the past, are under creation in present or are projected for future with their mixing; as a result, the time can be annihilated [7]. Time compression in Internet, co-presence of the past, present and future only simulate eternity that cannot be understood as the sum of time instances. Eternity is trans-time; if there is eternity then there is no time. Thus, summation of time moments practiced in Internet space can be treated as simulacrum, imitation of eternity that, according to N. Berdiayev, can be more correctly called “foolish infinity”.

Another backgrounding of “timelessness” of virtual world consists in its being out of space (virtuality is “localized” not in 3D space, but in virtual space of information flows). However, time is always connected to space, “time is local” [7]. Thus, losing space background, time disappears offering

place to timelessness which is just the essence of virtual event. Just timelessness but not eternity might become an attribute of online religion.

One more aspect of virtuality timelessness that has been conceptualized by M. Castells is *simultaneity* of events happening in different points of the Earth that, due to Internet, are synchronized so densely that any time gaps between them disappear. A sign of timelessness also deals with possibility to recombine these events in a free mode that hangs up a question on correct sequence and chronological accuracy of their description with producing a “time collage”. The possibility to control the time, to direct the events, to put them according to his/her own will transforms a cyber-actor to a cyber-god who is confident in power over time and eternity. According to M. Castells, such “systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena” results in “undifferentiated time which is tantamount to eternity” [7, p. 494]. Although, as it seems, it is more correct (in this context) to talk about simulation, imitation, distortion, falsification of eternity.

#### **Online religion organization: sect or church?**

It is also possible to put forward some doubts concerning one more peculiarity of online religion. This peculiarity appears not apparently and not always, despite this, its features can be observed. We mean simulation of churchliness and preference of the sect form in online religion. Analytics of the sect form of religion can be found in the paper by M. Weber “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1904) where he proposes some criteria of sect behavior.

If the church accepts all believers, the sect takes only those who have got the highest religious attestation, those who recommended themselves as true believers and who obey all requirements of religious community. Therefore, any sect carries out a thorough selection of believers and uses special filters with removing unreliable ones. Initial features of such filtering practices can be observed in some online religious communities where the role of sieve is performed by a procedure of thorough and detailed registration. In fact, registration is the practice that, first, breaks the principle of freedom in entering church community and, second, it introduces some formal-bureaucratic character into religious life context. Despite of rational arguments about necessity of protecting religious forums from entering trolls, one can argue that such a practice might have undesirable consequences such as disappointment in religious communities due to non-trusting attitude to persons.

If the church teaches people to forgiveness and mercy, a sect is more categorical, it prefers to punish guilty persons and to remove them from community (regular lustrations are one of the most

typical characteristics of sect life style). Concerning online religion (religious Internet-communities), it considers possible to ban a person, to prohibit entering portal in cases if somebody has not performed registration procedures. A person can be not allowed to enter religious community without explaining the reasons why he/she was absent in virtual worship for some time; this is stated by administrators of some religious sites. Such practices are typical for sect but not for church.

One more characteristic of sects that differs them from church is strict control over executing the rules of religious community and the cult of discipline: "the discipline of the ascetic sect was, in fact, far more rigorous than the discipline of any church. In this respect, the sect resembles the monastic order. In contrast to the principles of the official Protestant churches, persons expelled because of moral offences were often denied all intercourse with the members of the congregation. The sect thus invoked an absolute boycott against them, which included business life" [18]. In religious-online communities, an idea of strict discipline is implemented permanently. Non-correspondence of cyber-actor behavior to this demand is fraught with banishment or removal him/her from the community without warning. For example, in some religious forums, cyber-users can be banned if they have registered but have not visited portal during one month or if they have used unreliable info in their personal data. It is clear that in real church, "unreliable info" cannot be a reason for person banishment from religious community since there is always hope for human penitence and changing to better. Moreover, church does not punish those believers who, for instance, have not attended worship despite they consider themselves as members of community.

### Conclusions

Thus, it is possible to have two viewpoints concerning practice of religion positioning in Internet. On one hand, this can assist religion popularization among youth. According to the results of study performed by M. L vheim, "young people seem to come into contact with religion via the Internet than through local religious communities" [16, p. 205]. Besides, as M. Castells stated, in information epoch, it becomes necessary for church leaders to confirm their presence in Internet whilst refusing from online positioning is fraught with forgetting and shifting to periphery of social life [7]. This viewpoint is also supported by R. Hackett who has stated the following: "it has got to the point where a religious organization seems to lack credibility, even identity, without a web presence" [11, p. 69]. The positive aspect of online religion can be also noticed in the fact that it allows supporting religious practices and participating in religious actions to emigrants who left their sociocultural

environment and do not have an opportunity to visit physical church of their religion. According to P. Cheong and J. Poon, "the internet is also utilized for the creation of spaces that link the offline and online, allowing, for instance, immigrants in geographically dispersed contexts to connect with each other and their sacred homelands or to establish safe, supportive, and religiously tolerant environments online" [9, p. 190].

On the other hand, the phenomenon of online religion might lead to the effect of total socialization of religious relations, total transferring of religion (including Orthodox) at the level of Internet-communication. The result of this can be indifference to real-church life that opens itself in sacraments of Church.

We should also keep in mind one more danger dealing with online positioning of religion that can be noticed using McLuhan's concept of patchiness of electronic communication means. Mosaic coexistence of different sort and quality information in Internet (religious, criminal, political, advertising, etc.) leads to a specific effect of sense resonance when the high and the low, the spiritual and the material mutually amplify/attenuate information content of each other, mix different values and ideals. According to M. Castells, such agreeing of the church leaders to coexistence in Internet space of religious and profane forms of sociality can assist not spiritual enhancement of society, but its accelerated secularization: "By having to concede the earthly coexistence of transcendental messages, on-demand pornography, soap operas, and chat-lines within the same system, superior spiritual powers still conquer souls but lose their suprahuman status. The final step of secularization of society follows, even if it sometimes takes the paradoxical form of conspicuous consumption of religion, under all kinds of generic and brand names. Societies are finally and truly disenchanting because all wonders are on-line and can be combined into self-constructed image worlds" [7].

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#### Анотація

**Батаєва К. В. Соціальний феномен online релігії: особливості православної інтерпретації. – Стаття.**

У статті подано результати інтерпретування соціального феномена online релігії на підставі православної світосприйняття. З метою виявлення особливостей online релігії використано поняття нормативної і структурної солідарності (модернізовані варіанти

понять механічної та органічної солідарності Е. Дюркгейма), а також поняття церкви й секти М. Вебера. У результаті аналізу виявлено, що задля характеристики online релігії більше підходить поняття солідарності (ніж соборності) й поняття секти (ніж церкви). Online релігія є скоріше соціальним, ніж духовним феноменом комунікування кіберакторів. Зроблено висновок, що існує небезпека, що online релігія стане не доповненням, а заміником реальної релігії, а це може інтенсифікувати процес симулювання таких феноменів, як віра, духовність, соборність.

*Ключові слова:* online релігія, соборність, соціальна солідарність, церква, секта, Інтернет.

#### Аннотация

**Батаева Е. В. Социальный феномен online религии: особенности православной интерпретации. – Статья.**

В статье представлены результаты интерпретирования социального феномена online религии на основе православного мировосприятия. С целью выявления особенностей online религии были использованы понятия нормативной и структурной солидарности (модернизированные варианты понятий механической и органической солидарности Э. Дюркгейма), а также понятия церкви и секты М. Вебера. В результате проведенного анализа показано, что для характеристики online религии в большей мере подходит понятие солидарности (нежели соборности) и понятие секты (нежели церкви). Online религия представляет собой скорее социальный, а не духовный феномен коммуницирования между киберактерами. Сделан вывод, что существует опасность, что online религия станет не дополнением, а заменителем реальной религии, а это может интенсифицировать процесс симулирования таких феноменов, как вера, духовность, соборность.

*Ключевые слова:* online религия, соборность, социальная солидарность, церковь, секта, Интернет.

#### Summary

**Bataeva K. V. Social Phenomenon of Online Religion: Peculiarities of Orthodox Interpretation. – Article.**

The paper presents the results of interpreting the social phenomenon of online religion based on Orthodox viewpoint. To find peculiarities of online religion, the terms of normative and structural solidarity (modernized variants of the terms of mechanical and organic solidarity of E. Durkheim) as well as the terms of church and sect by M. Weber have been used. As the results of the performed analysis it is shown that for characterizing the online religion it is more possible to use the term solidarity than catholicity and the term of sect than church. Online religion, probably, is more social than spiritual phenomenon of communicating between cyberactors. It is concluded that there is danger that online religion will become not supplement but substitute to real religion, this might intensify the process of simulating such phenomena as belief, spirituality, catholicity.

*Key words:* online religion, social solidarity, catholicity, church, sect, Internet.