

‘THE BELIEVER’ FORMATION OF THE TERM IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The semantics of the word ‘believer’ is inseparably connected with the word ‘vera’ (Вѣра), dating back to the ancient semantics of Indo-European root ‘wēr’ (the Truth, truth), and has gained over thousands years of historical existence rich semantics. In the post-Soviet years, Russia has seen a new trend in the understanding of the word ‘believer’, which, on the one hand has become a marker of emphasizing and sometimes even an open ‘spirituality’. On the other hand, in contrast to the fact that ‘an intelligent person cannot be anyone’, is notable in the spoken language of modern blogging that the ‘characteristics of people as believers do not carry the normative aspect’. Moreover, in recent years, the concepts of ‘believer, religious, church-going’ has an association with the meaning of ‘offended’, meaning that the ‘believers’ are the people who are ‘offended, insulted, cheated, not respected’.

Keywords: believer, Russia, faith, identity, magic

1. Introduction

The term ‘believer’ present in the vast set of publications in Religious studies, Theology, History, Philology, and many other sciences, not to mention the ‘blogs’, ‘comments’, ‘Life Journal’, etc. is very popular on the Internet, where, for example, you can find 11.4 million documents (08/30/2014) on Google. Philological resource ‘Russian National Corpus’ discovers within the last 200 years only 438 documents, and 681 occurrence of the word, with the ‘peaks’ of its usage accounted for the years 1821 (1) 1882 (2) and 1992 (3) [<http://ruscorpora.ru/>]. This word can be understood in two polarized connotations recorded in the famous dictionary of V. Dal (1863), where there is not a separate article for this word, but it is contained in the articles ‘вѣра- faith’ (which is a derivative – ‘вѣрючий – believer’, that is ‘trustful, believing,

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gullible, trusting') and 'religion', which states that "a religious person who believes" is "firm in faith (вѣре)" [1]. 'Believer' stands as an identity of the person's belonging as to the exalted 'firmness in the faith', as to the understated 'trustfulness'.

In Soviet times, the word came to mark the obvious (or potential) 'enemies of the construction of communism', or 'poorly educated citizens' in need of 'atheistic education'. In the post-perestroika years in Russia (after 1991) the meaning of this word has undergone significant changes. On the one hand, it has become a symbol of belonging (oftentimes emphasized and demonstrative) to the 'authentic spirituality', 'the sublime' and 'sacred'. Thereafter the 'vera' bearer was regarded as the one who is affiliated with the whole discourse of 'Higher Forces and Supreme Power'. On the other hand, the said word referred to the total internal 'uncertainty', for "if a person meant to be a believer that didn't mean that he was imposed the duty of doing something or to be someone particular". This was a contrast to the "cultured and intellectual person who cannot be just anyone". Consequently it has suddenly come through that today the very "features of the people as believers devoid of normative dimension" [G.Y. Lyubarskiy, *Faith. Religion. Church. Continuation: Intelligent vs. Religious*, <http://polit.ru/article/2012/09/21/cogniometry/>, accessed 28.05.2014].

2. Etymological and philological aspects

The semantics of the word 'believer' is inseparably connected with the word 'faith' (Вѣра), dating back to the ancient semantics of Indo-European root 'wēr' (the Truth, truth), and has gained over thousands years of historical existence with rich semantics. Today on Google you can find only 6.67 million documents with the word 'faith', although many of them are not associated with religion, but with Vera Brezhneva, 'sex symbol' of our 'show business' (30/08/2014). Russian National Corpus discovers within the last 200 years as many as 3362 documents, and 18,085 entries, and 'peaks' of usage accounted for 1848 (1), 1980 (2) and 1866 (3) [<http://ruscorpora.ru/>].

According to the etymological studies, the word 'vera' originally referred mostly to the economic activity and not to something 'supreme' or 'heavenly'. It was more likely associated with the ideas of a belonging to a group and of a solemn compact or an oath. Furthermore it was a rather 'pragmatic' notion in the societies in which 'fidelity' to certain gods and rejectionism toward the other were an important 'bargain' and a common practice. None the less, today, every 'believer' in respect of 'his own God' must be at a certain way an 'unbeliever' in respect of 'their gods'. Both now and before this 'faithfulness' is believed to be something that will definitely be paid back. Your 'adherence' will be returned to you as 'God's help' following the principle 'quid pro quo' [2]. The word 'Вѣра – Faith' recorded in the first Russian written sources, for example, in the 'Sermon on Law and Grace' (1037-1050) by Metropolitan Hilarion [<http://www.pushkinskiydom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=4868>]. Lengthy articles about 'Faith' are presented in the modern Jewish, Catholic and Orthodox

encyclopaedias, but they do not contain articles describing the 'believer', as indeed they are not present in a number of scientific religious publications, including the encyclopaedia 'Religiovedenie – Religious studies' [3-6; *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, <http://www.eleven.co.il/?mode=article&id=10890&query=%C2%C5%D0%C0>].

Philological analysis shows that the 'believer', the word (lexical item) of the modern Russian language, became in wide use only in the XIX-XX centuries. It is represented in the Synodal Version of the Bible (1876), where it occurs 24 times, while only 1 time in a huge amount of Old Testament (Isaiah 28.16) and 23 times in the New Testament [*Believer/Symphony for the Bible*, <http://www.bible.by/symphony/word/3/639/>]. Researchers agree that the Old Testament culture "is not specific speculative and systematic thinking", appearing in the Greek and Hellenistic contexts (where the New Testament was created), but "the main emphasis is being done not on the confession of faith, but on the behaviour" [<http://www.eleven.co.il/?mode=article&id=10890&query=%C2%C5%D0%C0>]. A.F. Losev wrote that "the religious feelings of the Romans ... very careful, less trusting", because "the Roman is not believing his gods than trusts them" [7]. S.S. Averintsev also noted, that the idea of 'faith' is not applicable to the 'religion in principle', but only to 'some religious systems', in which faith acts as a "central worldview position and simultaneously psychological orientation", coinciding with the boundaries of 'Theology', unlike religions of 'Greek - Roman paganism, or Shinto', where "they are not aware of the concept of faith as the internal state of the person, and demand the observance of ritual and traditional moral regulations" [3-5, 8, <http://www.eleven.co.il/?mode=article&id=10890&query=%C2%C5%D0%C0>].

3. Historical semantics

In the above-cited dictionary of V. Dal, the word 'believer' is dual, designated as naive ('gullible') person, and as convinced 'hard' follower ('zealot'), ready to "put his own live for the Faith – Вѣры". Historically, this 'Faith – Вѣра' could be 'commitment' of Synodal Russian Church (in terms of 'Spiritual Regulation' 1721), or Orthodox Catholic Greek-Russian Church (in terms of the second half of the XIX century). These names of 'Christian community', or in terms of hieromartyr Ignatius of Antioch (I – beginning of II century), 'καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας' (Ecclesia Catholica), date back in turn, to the Eucharistic assemblies of the first followers of Jesus Christ, who, as noted by S.S. Averintsev, "were not going to 'establish' a new religion, but considered themselves the most loyal among the Jews", that are "God's people", "people of the Book" [9]. Today, these semantic horizons can be updated by politicians when, for example, we see the interview of Mertemir Shaimiev to Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspaper (04.12.2003): "We have one faith, but different religions", and in the context of a discussion of coexistence of Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Tatarstan, it is stated that "there are no hard walls between

religions ... For faith is one, but religions are different” [<http://www.rt-online.ru/articles/rubric-70/53331/>].

The biblical tradition, beginning from the Old Testament, distinguishes between ‘believers’ (committed only to the God of Scripture) and ‘magicians’ (in the context of the Torah - *קֹדֵשׁ*, Mage - priest in ancient Iran), which are not ‘confess’, but practice ‘magic’, that is “magic, witchcraft, sorcery, the actions associated with the belief in man’s ability to influence the forces of nature, the fate of individuals or entire nations through supernatural means” [*The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, <http://www.eleven.co.il/article/12558>]. The concept of magic in a number of publications is defined as: “the actions or rituals designed to influence supernaturally on the phenomena of nature, animals, humans or the spirits” or “rituals aimed to use the secret supernatural forces to achieve human goals; the ancient form of organization of collective activities and communications; the form of early beliefs; the first kind of specialized creative activity” [10, 11]. If the Romans attributed ‘magic’ to the ignorant ‘superstition’, the Greeks gave this name to special cultic practices associated with astrology, fortune telling, folk medicine and religion as wise ‘mysterious art’ (this definition is still preserved in the Gospel of Matthew 2.1, 7, 16, where the Russian translation of ‘volhvi’ is ‘magicians’), which only from the III century begin to qualify as negative assessments of ‘sorcery’ and ‘witchcraft’ [12, 13]. From the New Testament (Acts 8.4-24) is known ‘Simon Volhv’ (Simon Magus, Σίμωνόμαγος), baptized in Samaria, “corrupter of true Christianity”, pretending to be a “Supreme God” made wonders, and tried to buy gracious gift of apostolic priesthood [14].

Modern anthropologist O.B. Khristoforova, noting the presence of ‘witchcraft discourse’ in contemporary Russia, writes that “witchcraft – is a ‘floating signifier’ floating on discourse and means different things”, that “states reality through describing it in its own terms, and therefore, it so much depends on the context of the country and the period” [15]. A.V. Petrov shows that in the second half of the twentieth century, it became clear that the magic acts as a specific contextual and ‘redefining’ phenomenon in specific sociocultural circumstances, “that exists only in the context of private religious tradition; magic is not a religion only in the sense in which the species is not the kind”, acting primarily as a ‘non-normative’ (deviance), which some researchers differentiate on gradually splitting folk ‘goetia’, professional (paid) ‘magic’ and the philosophical - elitist ‘theurgy’ [16].

Almost before the beginning of the XX century, the term ‘believer’ was used in the separation rather than in the usual for today wide collective meaning, specifying in the domestic context ‘strong in faith, zealot of the state orthodoxy’, or by analogy, the adherents of a number of ‘tolerant religions’, whereas the Old Believers were called ‘dissenters’, Jews – ‘sheenies’, lamaites (Buddhists) – ‘idolaters’ and ‘pagans’, devotees of the spiritual and philosophical innovations – ‘false teachers’, ‘godless people’, ‘backsliders’, ‘atheists’, ‘sectarians’, ‘heretics’, etc. (so, for example, they called Leo Tolstoy in the infamous ‘Definition with the message of the Holy Synod No: 557 from 20-22 February

1901'). Between them there was nothing in common. M.A. Reysmer in 1905 noted that "the human personality with its moral world of spiritual freedom... still does not exist" in Russia, "with spiritual enthusiasm" and the ability to create a "religion for the own conscience", who do not satisfied with "any of existing 'Beliefs'" [17]. Moral freedom of the 'believer' appeared here as opposition to the forced 'state – owned Faith (Вѣра)' and to the 'dark superstitions'.

Legislative recognition of the principles of religious tolerance and religious freedom in the state between 1905-1917 was completed by the revolutionary semantic innovation of the 'Resolutions of All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars on Religious Associations' (from 04.08.1929), which formulated the concept of "religious association of citizens believers of all cults", and after that the word 'believer' is included in the dictionaries of the 'Soviet' Russian language, becoming a collective regulatory specified definition of adherents of any religion (of the Orthodox, Jewish, sectarian or shamanistic 'cult'). "... the believer recognizing the existence of God, is a religious man" (later the expression 'recognizing the existence of God' is changed to a broader one 'recognizing the existence of the supernatural') [18]. 'Believers' as collective category are opposed to 'atheists' as bearers of 'best scientific Marxist-Leninist world view' and 'builders of communism'. I.V. Stalin personally entered the position into questionnaire of Soviet census in 1937, which would clarify, whether a citizen considers himself a 'believer' or 'unbeliever' in contrast of previous 'natural' attribution, whereby it was found out that in the country after the 'five-year plan of atheism' and 20 years of the approval of a new ideology there were 56.7% 'believers', sparking the well known repressions of the organizers of census and a ban on the publication of the resulting data [19]. Later researchers, trying not to enter such direct questions into the questionnaire, used the term 'believer' in analytical terms, that is not a self-determination of respondents, but as an interpretation of opinion of respondents who answered that they 'believe in God' but not in 'superstitions' [20].

Numerous attempts to create a universal 'typology of believers' were expanded in the USSR, who aimed to study the similarities and differences of the adherents of different religious movements, identification of 'markers' and 'indicators' that characterize their particular features of worldview, behaviour and integration into specific communities (churches, congregations, communities, etc.), as usage of that knowledge for the successful conducting of the work on 'atheistic education' and 'overcoming religious remnants'. They would identify up to 10 types of 'attitudes to religion': from "believers active and consistent in own religious views", to "non-believers active and consistent" [20, p. 102-103]. However, it was obvious the difference of criteria of 'true zealots' as in various religious traditions, as in typologically different forms of religion (for example, in 'high' and 'folk' Christianity, in towns and villages, in Judaism or shamanism, which were seen not so much similar as obviously different for ethnographers and folklorists) or 'para-religious phenomena'

(ideology, the ‘cult of stars’, etc.). As result, in the Soviet period, they were not able to formulate a scientific definition of the term ‘believer’, and to turn the intuitive clear word of spoken language in a clear element of the conceptual system, like many other attempts to present the complex and dynamic inner world of deep feelings of the person, into a ‘clearer’ and more specific one. ‘Believer’ for the Soviet ideology - is an empirical incarnation of ‘religion’ (‘heresy’, ‘enemy of science’, ‘brake of social progress’, etc.), an obstacle on the development path of the society into communism, which requires the development of precise identification and description criteria for subsequent correction, destruction or neutralization.

4. The post-soviet forms of interpretation

In the post-Soviet years, Russia has seen a new trend in the understanding of the word ‘believer’, which, on the one hand has become a marker of emphasizing and sometimes even an open ‘spirituality’. On the other hand, in contrast to the fact that “an intelligent person cannot be anyone”, notable in the spoken language of modern blogging “characteristics of people as believers do not carry the normative aspect”. Moreover, in recent years, the concepts of “believer, religious, church-going” has an association with the meaning of ‘offended’, that is ‘believers’ are the people who are “offended, insulted, cheated, they are not respected” [<http://polit.ru/article/2012/09/21/cogniometry/>].

Logically, it would seem obvious that the ‘believer’ cannot be ‘non-believer’ or ‘doubtful’, but at least it is well known that, in practice, not only every ‘believer’ in his own ‘image of God’ is the ‘unbeliever’ in the other ‘images’. But in the history, the ‘unbelievers’ were often simply referred as ‘nonconformists’ and ‘dissidents’ (even the first Christians were publicly accused of ‘atheism’ and ‘impiety’), and even the well known Mother Teresa, according to her recently published diaries and letters, for more than 50 years “was in doubt of the existence of God” [<http://christforum.info/news-view-50.html>, accessed 28.05.2014]. Sociologists know well that up to 20% of those who called themselves in recent years as ‘Orthodox’, at the same time declare that they “do not believe in God” [21].

Today in polemical publications atheists can be called ‘believers’ (believers in the absence of God), and ‘believer’ citizens oppose ‘religious’ ones (as stricter adherents, actually ‘zealots’ of certain jurisdictions, for example Russian Orthodox Church, etc.), in contrast to those who ‘freely honour God (the Absolute, the Transcendent, the beginning of life, etc.)’ and whose ‘faith does not fit into the framework of a religion’. Thus today, the word ‘believer’ on the one hand, acquires a broad anthropological meaning, because each person believes into something. On the other hand, the semantics of the XIX century was revived, where the ‘believer’ is the ‘zealot’ of Russian Orthodox Church, that is firm personality in ‘our Faith’ who must actively demonstrate ‘disbelief’ into other ‘beliefs’, including ‘childhood beliefs’ (because growing children cease believing in Santa Claus, Baba Yaga – old witch, etc.). Those dictionaries,

however, as antonyms of the word 'believer', as in the XIX century, indicate today such words as 'unbeliever', 'atheist', 'godless person' or 'agnostic', although today there is such a paradoxical self – identification as 'Orthodox atheist' (L.N. Mitrohin, S.P. Kapitsa and others).

Today, "in complete contradiction with the 'normal' logic and direct meaning of terms in modern Russia, the concept of 'orthodox' is not part of the wider concept of 'believer', but rather the contrary, the concept of 'believer' has become part of the definition of 'orthodox'" because "people who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians in Russia are much more than those who define themselves as believers" [22]. The seemingly paradoxical prevalence of 'orthodox' respondents above 'believers' was noted by other researchers too [23, 24].

Equally problematic when considering the 'ontogenetic' formation of personal religiosity, because anyone who reads this text, as studies show, went through a very serious transformation of attitude towards the 'mysterious' (religion) in its distinction from magic, wizardry, belief in Santa Claus, etc. In 1911, K.I. Chukovsky one of the first noticed the fact that every adult 'Orthodox Christian' may become such a person on the basis of transformation of beliefs from initially 'religiously gifted' child, typologically similar to 'sorcerers' [I. Lukyanova, *Keep your tails tadpoles*, http://www.semya-rastet.ru/razd/detskaja_vera/]. Today in the world there are also active discussions that children are 'Intuitive Theists', 'Homo Religiosus', 'Born Believers', 'Intuitive Creationists', that there are 'Childhood Theism', 'Implicit Theism', etc. [25-28]

In this regard, E. Subbotsky rightly notes that at first glance, in contemporary culture "witchcraft and invocation ... turned into fairy tales and illusions". However, as studies show there are not only children but also adults, "many of whom believe in the paranormal, indulge into superstitions, and practice daily the common magic", meaning that "irrational and rational types of realities coexist in the individual consciousness in all periods of ontogenesis, and evolution of consciousness is carried out as an increasing differentiation and specialization of the alternative types of reality" [29]. Modern TV, for example the project 'The real paranormal' (premiered in Russia in July 2014) of the National Geographic Channel, and many others (including the 24 hour broadcast Russian channel TV3, which is presented in advertising as the 'first mystic' channel) quite clearly demonstrate it.

5. Conclusions

The word 'believer' in XIX century was understood in two polarized connotations, indicating the involvement of the person to the highest 'firmness in the faith' as the understated 'gullibility'.

In Soviet times, the word came to mark the obvious (or potential) 'enemies of the construction of communism' or 'poorly educated citizens', who needed 'atheistic education'.

After perestroika it started to act as a symbol, on the one hand, emphasizing involvement in the 'spirituality' and 'highness', while on the other hand, of full absence of 'normative dimension' mixing 'theological' and 'paranormal' as 'mysterious at all'.

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