
‘RELIGION’ IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT NOTION, DENOTATIONS, CONNOTATIONS

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Abstract

Following the evolution of religious concepts from the 11th century to the modern post-communist Russia and examining the self-identification of minor religious movements inside the established Orthodox mainstream, the following conclusions are drawn upon: 1) up to the beginning of the 20th century there is a permanent tendency to widen and equalize the scope of the term ‘Religion’, 2) up-to-date semantics is stretched to encompass all mysterious and weird, 3) new religious movements of the eastern origin are inclined to abandon religious identity in favour of non-religious forms of presentation of the doctrine.

Keywords: religion, faith, belief, Orthodoxy, ISKCON

1. Introduction

This text is an attempt to interpret some aspects of the debate that has lasted for 400 years, in which philosophical, theological and scientific understanding of the religion intersect, generating a variety of terms, categories and concepts of this unique phenomenon.

This complex implication in the 16-19th centuries Russian culture highlighted three typological denotata: 1) ‘confession’ (‘of the law’ and ‘of the heart’), 2) ‘the tradition of the people’ (‘high’ and ‘low’), 3) ‘mystical’ (‘supernatural’ and ‘transcendental’). Above all it has generated thousands of connotations (‘the law of faith’, ‘belief of the Palace’, ‘faith of the temple’, ‘faith of the people’, ‘the heart of faith’, ‘superstition’, ‘subculture’, ‘aspects of the personality’, etc.).

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2. Reception of the word ‘religion’ in the Russian language 15-18th centuries

Opinion polls show that the word ‘religion’ is an almost intuitively clear marker for all concepts and ideas that reflect the specific area of the relationship of the individual and perpetually unknown reality. The term has more than 1000 definitions, historically associated with the concepts of politics, Theology, Science, and Philosophy, going back to the semantics of the Latin ‘religio’ and was used in texts from the era of the founding of Rome [Project ‘1000 definitions of religion – Encyclopedia’, <http://religiousstudies.in/proekt/1000-definicij-religii-enciklopediya/>].

In the Russian literature the word ‘religion’ (‘религия’) appeared at the end of the 16th century, gradually replacing the word ‘Вѣра’ (faith). The latter was used for the first time in the text of the 11th century ‘Sermon on Law and Grace’ and denoted the royal faith that came from Byzantine (‘законъ грѣческыи’) [M. Hilarion, *Sermon on Law and Grace*, <http://lib2.pushkinskijdom.ru/tabid-4868>]. The word ‘религия’ was first mentioned in the polemical texts of the time of the Union of Brest (1596-1599), where it was said about the old Greek faith followers ‘старожитной релѣи греческой’, who have suffered harassment from ‘Римской релѣи’ (Roman religion) and demanded a liberty of worship (‘вольности набоженства’) [1].

The first denotation of the word has received a legitimate legal status of ethnic tradition of Confession (‘набоженства’) of the adherents of the ‘law of the Greek’ flanking people of ‘Roman religion’ in the geopolitical realities of a turbulent era of ‘Concilium Tridentinum’ (1545-1563) and principle ‘cuius regio, eius religio’. The term was fixed in ‘Confessio Augustana’ (1555) in the new state ‘Rzeczpospolita’ (1569), where the royal court and the majority of the Roman Catholic population first maintained a policy of toleration in the spirit of the Act ‘Konfederacja warszawska’ (1573).

Historically, these practices of coexistence of traditions were known since the establishment, for example, in the era of the iconoclastic persecution of the Greek monastery ‘Santa Mariade Grottaferrata’ (1004) near Rome.

The connotations of this status were associated with the desire to unite ‘Pax Christiana’ (‘Ecclesia Catholica Romana’) in the face of ‘Pax Islamica’ based on ‘Concilium Basiliense’ solutions (1431-1449) as ‘United Church of God’ (‘единости Kościola Bożego’, Piotr Skarga, 1577) and conclusion ‘Unia brzeska’ (1596), faced with opposition of ‘dissidents’ (Protestant ‘sects’), the eastern patriarchs, Urban ‘Bractwo cerkiewne’ and ‘His Holiness Patriarch of the reigning city of Moscow and the great Russian kingdom’ of Job (1589). Word ‘religion’ becomes polisemantic since an old Greek belief acts as: 1) the faith of the ‘United Church of God’ in the tradition of ‘Καθολικής Εκκλησίας’ (‘ἡ Μεγάλητοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησία’, ‘Rum Ortodoks Patrikhanesi’); 2) the faith of ‘minorities’ (in the spirit of early Christian ‘παροικία’, ‘itinerant communities’, diaspora of urban nuns, parishes), which separated themself as

‘brotherhoods’ from ‘paganus’ (ignorant ‘rednecks’), ‘sects’ (educated ‘heretic’, Protestants) and neighbouring Turks.

In the 17th century the word ‘рели́я’ (as the translation of the word ‘вѣра’, i.e. legitimate confession, ‘nabozhestvo’) is included in the ‘Lexicon’ of Pavma Berynda (1627, 1653) [1, p. 24; 2; 3]. At the beginning of the 18th century, a close associate of Peter the Great, Prince B.I. Kurakin (1705) used several notions ('reliya', 'relizhiya' and others) to denote 'curious faith of foreigners' (Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists) in Poland, Italy, England and other countries. On the opposite side of them was proper 'pious church' [4]. Denotatum of 'рели́я' become legitimate Christian confessions. Peter the Great claimed himself a 'Christian monarch' in 1702, invited foreigners for the benefit of the State, promising "free exercise of worship of all other sects, even if they were not in accord with our Church". He would claim: "Due to given unto us from the Supreme power human conscience we do not want to force anyone and willingly give every Christian on his responsibility to take care for the bliss of his soul", in the same manner as it is was fixed in 'Sacrum Imperium Romanum Nationis Germanicae' after 'Westfälischer Friede' (1648), that started a new cultural norm, which is "usually found in other European monarchies" [5]. In practice, this combined with the accounts of the regional authorities of "whether there is one faith in the city or whether there are different ones and what they are". It was required to "put extensive reports, without concealing anything" [6].

Local 'faith' had been recognized as an important geopolitical factor in the life of the state. Descriptions of 'faiths', 'confessions', 'laws' and 'beliefs' appear in the expedition reports of the Imperial Academy of Sciences [7, 8]. Acceptance of the 'Regulation or Charter of the Spiritual Board' set for two centuries a detailed rational official control of the state over the activities of 'All-Russian Church' [9].

In the same period, at the request of Peter the Great, the Orthodox faith 'all-vivacious defender' in 'All-Orthodox monarchy', D.K. Kantemir, published the first monograph in Russian history, where the word 'religion' appears for the first time in the title, denoting the law of Muhammedans as 'зловѣрие' (evil faith) of the Ottoman Empire, opposed to 'Orthodox faith' and 'the law of the Christian' (1722) [10]. These denotations connote with the semantics of 'Christianity', 'pious church' and 'Orthodoxy'.

New connotation of the word can be seen in the middle of the 18th century, when in 1744 the Prussian princess Sophie Auguste Friederike von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg, that later became the Empress Catherine the Great, coming from 'Evangelisch-lutherische Kirchen' in 'Greek-Russian Church' in her correspondence with her father and confessor, Archbishop Simon (S.F. Teodorskiy), who attended lectures at the 'Alma Mater Hallensis' (University of Halle, the global centre of pietism), noted a common basis 'of our holy religion' ('notre sainte religion') in these 'confessions', stating that, although the "external rituals are very different, but the Church sees itself obliged to it due to the rudeness of the people" (1744) [*Collection of the Russian Historical Society*, 1871, Vol. 7, p. 3, 6, 29-30].

The boundaries of ‘mine’ and ‘foreign’ are reinterpreted as ‘United Church of God’ (‘Church of the pious’ and ‘dominant confession’) in the eyes of the authorities of this era is becoming genuinely perceived as a ‘functional’ phenomenon of geopolitics, where ‘frank’, but simple subculture of ‘folk belief’ had to co-exist with ‘sincere’, yet philosophically sophisticated ‘belief of the Palace’ (for example, in the spirit of ‘true Christianity’ influences by the ideas of the book ‘Vomwahren Christenthum’ by Johann Arndt, 1605, translated and published by S.F. Teodorskiy in Halle in 1735, but banned in 1743 in Russia) and ‘earnest’, but dogmatically strict ‘faith of the temple’ (rules of the tradition of ‘ruling’ ecclesiastical institution), the abandonment of which until the early twentieth century (1905) was qualified as a criminal offense [11].

‘For the good of the Fatherland’ elite of the ‘Palace’ was forced to construct and maintain a complex balance of relations between the marked ‘forms of sincerity’, characterized by a kind of ‘flickering’ between attempts to homogenize the population forced ‘Christianization’ and acts of ‘religious tolerance’, that supported confessional pluralism.

The word ‘religion’ was used by M.V. Lomonosov in the ‘Draft Regulation of academic grammar school’ (1758), where he wrote about a public punishment for “offenses against religion” when “for grave crimes against religion one is incarcerated prior to judgment, expelled from college and then tried by the appropriate court” [12]. One may find in his works a direct translation of the expression ‘adherents of Orthodoxy’ as ‘Eifererin der Religion’, that means ‘Orthodoxy’ was interpreted as ‘Religion’ [12, p. 768].

At the same time we encounter for the first time in him the distinction of ‘science’, resting on serious mathematical calculations and universal ‘solid basis’ from ‘a certain religion’, i.e., commonality in which one is converted by persuasion and that actually turns out to be only ‘local’ and ‘home’, while science can and is designed to be ‘Russian’ (‘to serve for the benefit of the Fatherland’), but not ‘Greek-Russian’ as the church [13]. The word is found in the unusual spelling in Tatischev’s History of Russia, who mentions the book from Berlin, which described ‘Moskopitishe relligiya’ (1768) [13, p. 17].

Thus, in the 15–18th centuries the spelling of the word ‘рели́я’ is finally settled and it becomes a ‘religion’. It denotes not only the ‘faith of foreigners’ (‘evil faith’ and ‘heterodoxy’), but also the faith of one’s own state, ‘the pious confession’ (‘faith of the law’), that connotes a ‘refined belief of the Palace’, ‘simple but crude faith of the people’, ‘strong faith of the temple’ and a special ‘belief of the academics’.

3. Religion as ‘the basis of the elevation of the spirit’

In N.I. Novikov’s work we observe a qualitatively different approach to understanding the meaning of the word ‘religion’. For example, in his paper ‘On the education and instruction of children’ (1783), he argued that ‘religion’ per se should be regarded not so much as forced ‘institution of higher power’, in the spirit of ‘the faith of the law’ mentioned above, yet it is an immanent ‘basis’,

that forms an organic ‘good breeding’ to the personality in the spirit of religion. It is the education “in the majesty of its simplicity, remains what is ever should be, that means the soul of every virtue and solid soothing subject of the spirit”. He points out that “raising children for the state and for every particular kin is of highly importance because even with the best laws and religion, flourishing condition of sciences and arts, yet without upbringing of younger generation the state would have very emaciated members, if the government neglected this single subject, which is the ground of all in every state”, since “the most fair judicial institution does not make its ministers just, conscientious and incorruptible; even religion cannot prevent unworthy servants to sometimes cover under it the most infamous vices and to abuse it to develop bad intentions; most graceful laws of piety may have little effect, if honesty, sincerity, love of order, moderation and a true love of your fatherland are alien virtues to the citizens of the state” [N.I. Novikov, *On upbringing and instruction of children*, http://rvb.ru/18vek/novikov/01text/03hist_philos/29.htm].

The close meaning of the word ‘religion’ we find in D.I. Fonvizin, who notes that “religion elevates all our nature, proving us the Majesty of our predestination and way to reach... the religion, not only does it not deny the noble elevation of spirit, yet serves as it as his principal base, since the knowledge of oneself requires not a single taming of our pride, yet also a sense of encouragement of our abilities bestowed by God” (1785) [14].

This understanding of religion goes back to the concepts of ‘soul’, ‘personality’, ‘conscience’ and ‘heart’, that came from Greek, Latin, Biblical and ancient oriental cultures and that were attempting to ‘catch’ the immanent basis of being a person in the universe, suffering from ‘brute’ imperfections of this world, including palaces, temples and people [15, 16].

We can call this denotation, which focuses on high immanence, a ‘faith of the heart’ (‘Dobronravie’). Here, the individual confronts the eternity, he between the ‘abyss of above’ and ‘the abyss in itself’, taking the path of searching and finding truly ‘solid grounds’ in ‘virtue’, while seeking to be ‘sincere with oneself’, with one’s nature. A coming in fashion theatre played an important role in this by demonstrating the possibility of ‘masking ones nature’ in the performances displayed as ‘imaginary worlds’ and ‘philosophical theories’ with their ‘particular reality’, claiming the ‘constructed’ being with mysterious spontaneity of ‘poetic genius’ with its tragically incomprehensible ‘sincerity’ [17; 18; V.A. Revich, *Neither a true story, nor a fiction*, <http://elibra.ru/read/166582-ne-byt-no-i-ne-vydumka.html>].

Poetics of ‘personal religion’ of one’s individual creates connotations to the ‘elusive’ beyond ‘faith-based framework’ religion of ‘genius’ of J.W. Goethe [19]. Individual ‘heart belief’ of the elite combined with the ‘Francophile’, ‘Anglomania’ trends, the fashion for ‘gallantry’, ‘romanticism’, ‘mysticism’, ‘Martinism’ etc., calling the opposition of ‘zealots of antiquity’ that called it all ‘the decline of morals’, ‘free-thinking’ and ‘atheism (афеизм)’. These moods especially intensified after the turmoil of ‘Révolution française’ (1789) and

acceptance of ‘Declaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen’, that affirmed the ‘freedom of religion’ (article 10).

Power responds to the ‘novelty’ with censorship and ‘laugh’, satirical publications. In this new context, P.S. Baturin has become one of the first who tried to separate the connotation of ‘religion’ as ‘clear’, ‘intelligible’ and ‘fair’ position (‘Faith of the proper’) from ‘quackery of Martinist sect’ [P.S. Baturin, *Study of the book on errors and truth*, http://az.lib.ru/b/baturin_p_s/text_1790_issledovanie_knigi.shtml]. N.M. Karamzin reveals the connotation of ‘religion’ as proper ‘eternal values’ in comparison with the variable and diverse ‘tastes of nations’, portrayed in Europe as a symbolic sculpture of a woman, ‘holding the crown’ [N.M. Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian traveller*, http://az.lib.ru/k/karamzin_n_m/text_0320.shtml].

In Russia, for the entire 18th century there were only 5 books (4 of which were translated), where the word ‘religion’ was included in title, wherein one was devoted to Islam, another – to the Russian spiritual poetry (‘genius’) and three others – to the ‘education’ and understanding of the ‘mysteries of nature’ in the spirit of ‘Freemasons’ and ‘love of wisdom’ [10, 20-23].

Interest towards the ‘natural’ manifested itself in the emergence of a number of ethnographic descriptions of ‘faiths’, ‘confessions’, ‘laws’ and ‘beliefs’ of many nations (‘tribes’) of the Empire, including the kin of ‘rossy’. There are publications about ‘myths’, ‘poetry’, ‘fables’, ‘songs’ and ‘fairy tales’. All this, however, was not yet considered a ‘religion’ back then [24-26].

On the whole the word ‘religion’ during 17–18th centuries had several orthographic forms (‘релъя’, ‘релія’, ‘релея’, ‘лєрія’, ‘религія’, ‘религия’, ‘релігія’, ‘религія’), consolidating the lexeme. These forms have expressed a number of dynamically approved denotata, such as ‘legal religion’ together with the debated connotations of ‘legitimate’ faiths (‘faith doctrine of the law’, ‘faith of the Gentiles’, ‘belief of the Palace’, ‘faith of the majority of the people’, ‘faith of the minority’, ‘heart belief’ ‘faith of the proper’, ‘symbolic belief’, etc.), opposing not only the ‘evil faith’ of the foreigners, yet also to the complexifying life inside Russia, where in the opposition were not only traditional ‘heretics’, ‘atheists’, ‘superstitionists’ and ‘splitters’, but also new phenomena, legitimate belief of ‘academics’ (Lomonosov), ‘poets’ (Vysheslavtsev) and ‘brutes’ (‘Skotinin’ character by Fonvizin). In general, all these connotations can be differentiated as ‘demarcational’ (where only one religion is considered ‘truly life-saving’, and the rest as ‘evil faith’ and ‘superstition’) and ‘collective’ (when one’s ‘pious faith’, ‘belief of the Gentiles’ and ‘tribal beliefs’ are considered in formal or diplomatic context as close ones).

4. Semantic revolution of the 19th century

Beginning of the 19th century was marked by the signing of the ‘Act of Holy Alliance’ (09.26.1815), which was consolidated at the highest level. The winners of Napoleon were mystically united. Catholic Austria, Lutheran Prussia

and Orthodox Russia were declared ‘brothers’, ‘edinozemtsami’ (fellow countrymen) and ‘members of a single Christian nation’.

Academic Internet resource ‘Russian National Corpus’ (NKRYA) shows that avalanche increase in the use of the word ‘religion’, which starts in the nineteenth century. According to the database (on July 1, 2016) the term is included in the 248 documents. To compare: there were only 4 texts for the whole 18th century [*Russian National Corpus*, <http://ruscorpora.ru/>]. In a series of publications by the beginning of 19th century religion was understood as a collective designation of ‘folk belief’, ‘foundation of true happiness and true philosophy’, present at ‘the Patriarchs, who lived prior to the law’ [27-33]. The word ‘religion’ comes into the names of church disciplines, when, for example, Archpriest John Skvortsov started to give ‘Lectures on the philosophy of religion’ [34-37].

The term ‘religion’, however, misses the lexicon of ‘Synodal translation of the Bible’ (1817–1876). New connotations come in ‘Philosophical Letters’ of P.Ya. Chaadaev (1828), where religion has acted as a universal joint of personal “religious feelings” and “fusion of all moral forces in the world” and where he claims that it was “sublime thought of religion that has erected edifice of modern civilization as the kingdom of God and absolute universality” [38].

Other connotations are found in I.V. Kireyevski’s writings, who would tie together in the mood of Uvarov’s triad ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, People’s support’, ‘dominant confession’, ‘private foundation’ and ‘national concord’, where “religion is not only a rite and not only sole conviction”; ‘for the full development of not only real, but even false religion one needs a shared vision of the people, consecrated with vivid memories, developed in the like-minded traditions, permeated by the idea of the arrangement of the state, personified in the unambiguous and nationwide rites, brought to a single positive principle, perceptible in all civil and familial relations (1832)” [39].

In the first Russian dictionaries the word ‘religion’ is fixed in the sense of ‘law’, ‘confession’ [40, 41]. According to the ‘NKRYA’, in 1838, the word ‘religiosity’ emerges in the Russian language. It’s found up to date in 265 documents with the peak that occurs at the beginning of the twentieth century. The term refers not only to Islam; it also applies to Buddhism and shamanism as to the ‘law’ and ‘confession’ of Russian ‘small tribes’ [<http://ruscorpora.ru/>].

First denotation (‘confession’ as ‘the establishment of the authorities’) is supplemented by the second – immanent ‘tradition of the people’, that is divided into ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture of various ethnic groups and the subcultures. An opposition of ‘religion/atheism’ takes place, when, for example, A.I. Predtechenskiy would write that “at all times, people of all nations, at all levels of education, from Bacon and Newton to the most savage tribes of Samoyed, believed in the existence of the Supreme Being”, while they are all capable of ‘practical atheism’ that allowed during the ‘War of the Spanish Succession’ combined forces of Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists to defeat the army of Catholic France (August 13, 1704) not arguing with each other about the nature of ‘purgatory’ [42].

The phenomenon of the ‘soul’ becomes the object of research in Psychology, which treats it as an innate ‘sense of reverence’ (1865) [43]. V.D. Kudryavtsev-Platonov notes that “if for atheism religion acts as ‘intentional deception or self-delusion’, in fact it acts as a ‘powerful force’ that came to being before the priests and legislators, as ‘an inexplicable urge to search in nature among the natural for something supernatural, the highest (1870)’” [44]. Traditional connotation of ‘Dobronravie’ (good morals) is radically transformed by F.M. Dostoyevsky, describing the phenomenon of ‘seminarian-atheist Rakitin’ (‘The Brothers Karamazovs’, 1880).

5. Semantic revolution of the 20th century

Beginning of the twentieth century in Russia radically changes again the denotation of the word ‘religion’ by the introduction in 1903-1917 of a number of legislative acts on tolerance and religious freedom that have made compulsory personal and collective meaning of the term. Partitive connotations moved to the level of the local peculiarities of ‘native life’. Only in a narrow circle one could speak of oneself as a ‘true religion’, whereas in legal sciences the need to move from the protection of ‘confession’ (‘Orthodoxy’) to protect the ‘freedom of conscience citizen’ is recognized [45].

‘NKRYA’ shows that in the twentieth century a snowballing growth of the use of the word ‘religion’ continued. It has entered into 1155 documents between years 1900–2014 (information on July 1, 2016) with the peak values falling on the beginning of the twentieth century (1916, 1913 and 1919). The abolition of censorship leads to a set of texts where all old rules of ‘piety’, ‘good morals’ ‘religion’ and their reasoning is called into question or broken. ‘God-seekers’, ‘God-builders’, ‘Live church’ movements and philosophical rethinking of ‘religion’ as a fundamental phenomenon immanent to ‘self-assertion of personality’ in the transcendent ‘eternity’ (Losev, 1930) span in these circumstances [46].

During the Soviet Union rule, however, a completely different approach emerged, that claimed itself as finally “relieved of any religious superstition”, while the concept of “religious association of citizens believers of all worship” (1929) was formulated [*Resolution of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars on religious associations*, http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_3566.htm]. 300 years of the Romanov empire and their ‘belief of the Palace’ was contrasted with radical semantics of ‘building communism’, when all ‘religious superstition’ were expected to wither away. The term ‘religion’ enter the dictionary of the ‘Soviet’ Russian language, while remaining at the same time as a lexeme of the ‘Dictionary of Foreign Words’, designating ‘the belief in the supernatural’, ‘opiate of the masses’ and ‘one of the forms of spiritual oppression’ [47, 48].

The word acted as a normative marker signifying ‘ignorant obscurantism’ professed by the cultist (Orthodox, Jewish, sectarian, shamanistic, etc.), that in different periods of the history of the country could be viewed as intolerant

'enemies of Soviet power' and in need of re-education as 'carriers of backward outlook'. Not only they were subject to re-education, yet to isolation, psychiatric treatment or physical destruction as well. At the same time, it was S.N Bulgakov that realized that the atheist Karl Marx is a 'religious type' (1906) and Marxism itself was often called 'secular religion' [49].

At the same time it is important to note that during the seven decades of Soviet hegemony radical rhetoric of the newspaper 'Atheist' and 'Union of Militant Atheists' (1922-1947) was supplemented and sometimes even pressed by the opposite policies of familiarizing with the 'magic' in the mass editions of 'Tales for Children' (A.I. Chukovsky 'Moidodyr', 1923), the advent of the cartoons studios 'Kultkino' (1924) and 'Soyuzdetmultfilm' (1936), where the new cinema genre were created – puppet film ('The new Gulliver' A.L. Ptushko, 1935), film-tale ('by the Pikes will' A.A. Rou, 1938), attempts to create 'Orthodox Vatican in Moscow' (1943-1948), construction of academic terminology in the study period of 'scientific atheism' (1952-1989), 'native soil' (pochvennichenstvo) quest of 'village prose' ('Matryona's homestead', Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 1963), the mystique of 'The Master and Margarita' (M.A. Bulgakov, 1966), the deep revelations 'of religious cinema' A. Tarkovsky ('The Passions for Andrei', 1966), the poetics of 'nostalgia for the present' A. Voznesensky (1976), an academic discussion about the definition of 'religion' (1979-1981, 'Soviet ethnography') or 'coffin-art' by V.A. Sidur, obviously demonstrating 'supernatural indestructibility' in culture. Ironic-grotesque description of the fundamental ineffability of dynamic and polymorphic 'diversity of believers' in the late Soviet Union, requiring an infinitely increasing funding for the relevant 'supervisory authorities', was fixed in the book of M.N. Epstein [50].

In general it can be noted that the word 'religion' in the twentieth century Russia finally developed from the distinctive to the collective designation, encompassing in the denotation a vast multitude of emerging and disappearing 'communities/sects', correlated with the Russian Orthodox Church and other confessions. This collective denotation, in turn, manifested in two connotative collective groups, the first of which focused on the immanent personal 'basis' ('virtue', 'conscience', 'mystical', 'religion', 'atheistic', 'worldview'), while the second – on 'legitimate mobilization' ('Eucharist', 'liturgy', 'religious association', 'meeting of members of the Communist Party', etc.). At the same time, some members of the Communist Party or Komsomol secretly baptized their children.

6. 'Flickering semantics' of religion in 21st century

For the last 25 years, Russia has found itself in a new 'media age' when the word 'religion' has returned, as the global net shows, in the mass consciousness. The religion concept has split in two. On the one hand there is a 'pro-Orthodox consensus' in a society with a clear respect to the 'religion', 'Orthodoxy', 'Russian Orthodox Church' (ROC) and other influential 'spiritual

traditions', while, on the other hand, there is a contrast between the words 'religion' and 'belief'. The last is being associated with the designation of the intuitive experience of involvement of the person to some 'authenticity', yet not as much as 'moral', as in the 18th century but as 'mysterious' ground of being. At the same time, many respondents at the public opinion polls say that they are just 'believers', but not 'religious' people, since the media depicts the latest usually as scandalous 'actionists' ('zealots of tradition'), that require the prohibition of 'blasphemous' performances, exhibitions, concerts, films and books [Dmitry Enteo again attacked 'Manege' art gallery, <http://www.mk.ru/social/2015/08/16/dmitriy-enteo-vnov-atakovat-manezh.html>].

There are 29 536 religious organizations registered in Russia today [*Religious organizations*, Information portal of the Ministry of Justice of Russian Federation, <http://unro.moj.ru/NKOs.aspx>]. Emerged 'pro-Orthodox consensus' has led to differentiation between 'religion' ('our Orthodox') and 'sects' ('totalitarian sects', 'destructive cults', etc.) on the level of everyday communication, in certain media and even some court practice, which restores the semantics of the 'релия' of the 16th century. It is also true that the lack of respect for 'religious feelings of zealots' can be a basis for the forensic examination and persecution today [*Examination found in the works at the 'Manege' art gallery, destroyed by Enteo, signs of pornography*, <http://ren.tv/novosti/2015-09-02/ekspertiza-nashla-v-rabotah-na-manezhe-razrushennyh-enteo-priznaki-pornografii>]. In response to these scandalous actions of some fanatical followers diverse subcultures gain a foothold – from 'new Russian atheism' to 'true Orthodoxy', that oppose themselves to 'marginalized religion' [*New Russian atheism*, <http://ateism.ru/nra/>; '*Manege*' art gallery came to the prosecutor's office, https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/08/18/a_7693301.shtml].

Opinion polls show that such understanding of religiosity as a 'radical readiness to go to death the sake of faith' finds no support in collective consciousness, acting more as a marker of 'Breivik' phenomena, 'ISIS' (Daesh), etc. The society is at present predominantly tolerant towards the 'believers', 'heterodoxy', 'atheism' and 'self searching' [51]. The well-known journalist V.V. Pozner, who calls himself 'an atheist', believes that 'religious people' and 'atheist' are not so much the oppositions, yet a particular manifestations of 'people of belief' [V. Pozner, *A religious man and an atheist are people of faith*, <http://pozneronline.ru/2015/12/13336/>]. Another well-known scientist and broadcaster Professor S.P. Kapitsa described himself as a 'Russian Orthodox atheist' [S. Kapitsa, *I am Russian Orthodox atheist*, <http://rodon.org/society-090721105032>]. In the context of the constitutional freedom of conscience 'religion' and 'atheism' are coexisting 'aspects' of being not only of the various members of civil society, where 'pro-Orthodox majority' lives with 'atheists' and 'religious minorities', yet also in the 'personality' of each Russian where adherence to one's denomination, can be accompanied by 'atheism' in relation to other 'dogmatic systems' and tolerance of 'fairy tales', 'magic', 'esoteric'.

The very ‘orthodox majority’ is very non-homogeneous. It includes not only ‘actionists’, notable in the ‘media scandals’, but also representatives of the modern free ‘brothers and sisters of faith’, the carriers of living and tolerant ‘folk belief’, that are usually diffuse and practical. Sociologists define it as a ‘shimmering religion’ or situational combination of ‘esoteric’, ‘scientific’ and ‘confessional’.

Today, if we look at the Russian-speaking sector of the Google system, the word ‘religion’ can be found in 11.7 million documents (on July 1, 2016), that represent three basic understandings of religion, differentiated in Russian culture: ‘immanent’ (‘esoteric’, ‘spiritual’, ‘psychological’) and two ‘standard’ (‘confessional’ and ‘atheist’). They are supported by a number of websites with a huge library of ‘faith-based’ and ‘atheist’ publications seeking to intellectually ‘attract’ readers, or through the ‘visual images’ emotionally ‘lure’ the onlookers, that constitute a large mass of ‘electorate’.

7. ‘ISKCON’ case in the Russian context

No less complex is the identity and understanding of religion/religiosity in small groups and religious communities. As an example, let us consider Vaishnavism (Krishnaism), a bright new religious movement, that has received its institutional form in Russia first as a local (1988), and then as a centralized religious Society for Krishna Consciousness (Russian ISKCON, 1992).

The relation of ISKCON to religion in general and Hinduism in particular, is of a difficult, flexible character. The origins of these antinomies go back to the globalization process, which began with the Islamization of India and continued within the British Empire. Islamic civilization has launched into circulation the term ‘Hindu’, which denoted a conglomerate of non-Islamic practices on the east side of the river Sindhu [52]. Christian influence helped to get acquainted with the rational theology and uniform religious education, which entered to the compulsory program of British schools in India. These trends are reflected in Vaishnava self-identification of the proto-modernist period (15–18th centuries) and during the era of modernization (19–20th centuries).

In the Middle Ages the followers of Vaishnavism preferred self-names associated with key texts – ‘vaikhaanasa’, ‘pancharatrin’ or object of worship - ‘bhagavat’, ‘Vaishnava’; with the content of the practice - ‘bhakta’, ‘Alvar’ [53-55]. ‘Chaitanya-caritamrta’, the text of the Indian proto-modernism era, captures the broader identification as ‘Hindu’ (occurs 12 times) due to the fact that there is ‘Another’ in the form of Comparative Islam. Self-identification as ‘Vaishnava’ is found 176 times in the text [Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Sri Caitanya-Caritamrita*, BhaktivedantaVedabase Folio Bound Views Version 3.1].

Founder of the ISKCON Bhaktivedanta Swami fully absorbed the antinomy, on the one hand, being educated in the best British Christian College in Calcutta, and on the other – getting the initiation and training in the Gaudiya Sampradaya, Vaishnava tradition, coming from Chaitanya. Subsequently, these diverse tendencies were expressed in his preaching in the United States. On the one hand, Bhaktivedanta Swami opposed the identification of the organization with Hinduism or any religion, considering Hinduism as an artificial alien designation [Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Interview with LA Times Reporter About Moon Trip*, December 26, 1968, Los Angeles, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase Folio Bound Views Version 3.1; 56]. Moreover, he preached that Krishna consciousness is a phenomenon of supra- and non-religious order, the eternal nature of the living being (sanatana-dharma, jivera swarupa); the attempts to restrict ISKCON to national or religious framework lead to the emasculation of the main idea – devotional service of the living entity [Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Sri Caitanya-Caritamrita. Madya-lila*, 20.108, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase Folio Bound Views Version 3.1; 57]. Based on the statements of Bhaktivedanta Swami, we can conclude that he understands religion as a system of customs and formal practices (dharma) and while speaking about its overcoming, he relies on Krishna's conclusion in Bhagavad-gita (18.66) – “Abandon all varieties of dharma (religion) and just surrender unto me”. In this tradition, surrender is the opposite of external institutionalized rituals. Surrender is the personalistic outlook towards the Absolute, based on the remembrance of God and repetition of his names, hearing narrations about him.

On the other hand, founder-acarya contributed himself to the religious self-determination in hinduization of ISKKON by: 1) setting the main shrines for ISKCON in India; 2) spending substantial resources for the preaching of Krishna consciousness in India; 3) imparting ISKCON an Indian image (mandir, pooja, dhoti, sari, kichri, etc.). Today ISKCON is dependent on the Indian community almost everywhere around the world, where there is a strong Indian congregation. Taking on the role of the beneficiary of the Indian population, the organization is forced to expand the scope of services and strengthen Hindu image by conducting non common to vaishavism practises and worship [Jaya Madhava das ACBSP, *Hinduization of Iskcon?*, <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=127>].

In Russia, the main trend of the official ISKCON for the last 15 years has been self-representation as a Hindu religious organization. To this end, the Public Relations Department Russian ISKCON cultivated relations with the Association of Indians in Russia, seeking to obtain their support, as well as of the visiting Indian politicians [S.I. Ivanenko, *New trends in the life of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Russia*, http://www.keston.org.uk/_russianreview/edition63/03-Ivanenko-about-Induism.htm]. Identification of ISKCON with Hinduism places it, at best, in the line with the world religions, yet Krishna Consciousness thus dismisses its transcendental core. “We are not preaching Hindu religion. Therefore while registering the association I

purposely kept this name, ‘Krsna Consciousness’, neither Hindu religion nor Christian religion nor Buddhist religion. Krsna does not belong to any sect...” [B. Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita class*, 7.3, Bombay, February 18, 1974, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase Folio Bound Views Version 3.1].

ISKCON was conceived not only as a vehicle of spiritual knowledge, but also as a preaching organization. As a consequence of the influx of people (Hindus as well), ISKCON gets to choose how to combine mass preaching and organization with transcendental essence. At the beginning of the 20th century, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, Prabhupada’s preceptor, called organized religion a stronghold of atheism, which under the guise of theism supports rough forms of worldliness. In his article, he used ‘atheism’ in a figurative sense, as a “mechanical system that has lost its original spiritual sense”, keeping in mind that religious institutions cannot support for a long time its high standards in the face of mass followers [Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, *Organized Religion*, http://www.stephen-knapp.com/organized_religion.htm]. Gaudiya Vaishnavism in its original form (15–16th centuries) was not mass, organized and bureaucratic. Bhaktivedanta Swami, however, appreciated western rationality, technology, organization, and pointed out to Roman Catholic Church as the most successful model of management in religion.

Russian ISKCON’s tendency to remove from religious forms is directly connected with the government policy, which is the third agent of its social development, in addition to the eidetic construction of previous gurus and autopoietic self-organization of Vaishnava society. The first law of the Russian Federation in 1991 on freedom of conscience and religious organizations was the most equitable and open towards any manifestations of religiosity. The second law of 1997 distinguished some historical forms of religion in the preamble and complicated registration of religious groups. Federal Law of 2002 ‘On Counteracting Extremist Activity’ directly affected Vaishnavas whose central text ‘Bhagavad-gita As It Is’ was defended in a court of Tomsk from the attempts to acknowledge it as extremist. Finally, the Act of 2016 to restrict missionary activity is viewed by the Russian followers in ISKCON as the direct tool for limiting preaching activity of vaishnavas. In order to understand the degree of concern of the specified package of amendments to the religion law, we quote from an oral presentation of ISKCON Moscow lawyer M. Frolov (July 10, 2016): “The introduction of the concept of ‘missionary activity’ in the law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations is fraught with unprecedented since Soviet times restriction of the preaching activity of local religious organizations, and of individual followers. Especially when you consider the fact that ISKCON is the most prominent the preaching movement in Russia.” [M. Frolov, *Act on missionary activity*, address at the Centre of Indian Culture, Moscow, Kuusinenko st., 19A, July 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uy8fzSufq-E>] This concern was not just rhetoric. The first, who fell under the anti-missionary law, happened to be a Vaishnava Maxim Sibirev, who was

detained for distributing religious literature at the end of July 2016 in Cherkessk.

Taking into the consideration the monopolization of religion brand by some traditional Russian confessions, more and more followers of Bhaktivedanta Swami in Russia lean to other non-religious forms of presentation of the doctrine, such as yoga, astrology, psychology, ayurveda, philosophy, small groups of spiritual communion, vegetarian and vegan cooking classes, etc. A loss of interest towards religious discourse, namely, religion, worship, religious organizations, cult, ritual, ceremony, prayer is therefore very indicative for the Russian ISKCON. Instead of religious preaching other discourses are invented – the cultural tradition (Bhagavan, dharma, atma, samsara, bhakti, etc.), psychological (mind, attitude, mood, stereotypes, etc.), yogic (meditation, concentration, illusion, etc.). Non-confessional quotes by Bhaktivedanta Swami are gaining popularity in the Vaishnava groups on social networks, such as “Religion does not mean that you stamp some stereotype religion, ‘I am Christian’, ‘I am Hindu’, ‘I am Muslim’, ‘I am Buddhist’, and then fight. That is not religion. That is fanaticism. Religion means how one has become devoted to God.” [B. Swami Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam lecture*, 1.16.12, Los Angeles 9, 1974, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase Folio Bound Views Version 3.1]

Thus, it is possible to fix a variety of Russian ISKCON identities – religious and non-religious. Complex improvisation of these strategies and identities affects the set of missionary activities and social service programs, establishes the boundaries of the possible and desirable in the context of globalization.

8. Conclusions

The term ‘religion’ (‘релия’) entered the Russian culture in the 16–18th centuries, its denotation expanded from ‘the people of Rome and the Greek law’ to ‘Mohammedan law’ as ‘public confessions’, and had connotations as ‘refined belief of the palace’, ‘simple but crude faith of the people’, ‘strong faith of the temple’ and a ‘special belief of academics’, that are different from ‘superstition’, ‘sects’ and ‘heresies’. In the second half of the 18th century, the term ‘religion’ starts to connote with the concepts of ‘due’, ‘conscience’, ‘heart’ and ‘values’, i.e. immanent foundation of man’s existence in the universe, suffering from its imperfections and implementing one’s experiences in ‘philosophy’ and ‘poetry’, that are sometimes labelled by the conservative part of the elite as a ‘free-thinking’ and to be counteracted with censorship and satire.

In the 19th century denotation of the term ‘religion’ includes all ‘tribal beliefs’, ‘fable’, ‘shamanism’, ‘magic’, etc., connoting with ‘natural’ sense of ‘veneration of supernatural Supreme Being’ in ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms, described by the Psychology (the science of the soul), Ethnography, Anthropology and Theology. Differentiated connotations are established: ‘knowledge’ (reason, science, atheism) and ‘faith’ (motivation, confession,

theism), ‘moral’ and ‘folk’. The term ‘religion’ seeks to bring unity, sometimes unnatural (‘seminarian-atheist’). In the 21st century denotation of the term ‘religion’ is qualified in alternative connotations of ‘weird’ (unscientific)/‘transcendental’ (anthropological) in diversity of cultural and individual forms, including and ‘atheism’. In the 21st century, there is the ultimate extension of denotations and connotations of the word ‘religion’ as ‘mysterious’, up to the restoration of the semantics of 16–18th centuries in some subcultures, as well as Soviet ‘atheism’.

There is a tendency, especially for NRM of Eastern origin, to abandon religious identity for internal and external reasons. Internal causes are rooted in the untranslatability of cultures or Abrahamic roots of the religion concept as ‘faith’, ‘God’s Law’. In particular, Indian correlates such as ‘dharma’, ‘yoga’, ‘seva’, ‘bhakti’ and others do not quite fit into the Middle East religious forms. External reasons for rejection of the religious forms are directly related to government policy. The more state tries to keep the religious monopoly for its ‘own breed’, the stronger is the trend for the abandonment of religious identity and institutionalization in Orientalist movements.

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