THE INFLUENCE OF RHIZOMALITY AND TRANSGRESSIVENESS ON RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

The article aims to identify systemic factors contributing to the transformation of the religious identity of a modern person. Such factors include rhizomality and transgressiveness of modern society. Previously being a stable marker associated with ethnic identification, religious identity is separating from it and acquiring an independent transformation trajectory. The article provides an analysis of the influence of digitalization on the transformation process generating a complex local religious space currently consisting of the space of online communities of traditional religions, virtual and religious space of games.

Keywords: religiosity, transgression, rhizome, virtual space, religious landscape

1. Introduction

The 21st century society is changing so rapidly that the concepts focusing on this particular feature, such as a transforming society, a society of acceleration, and fluid modernity, are already becoming accustomed. Even stable social phenomena, such as identity, are subjected to change. Scientific discourse actively uses several terms characterizing the unstable and changeable nature of identity in the modern era: fluid [1], flickering [2], drifting [3], deformed [4], protean [5], as well as hybrid, network, and transboundary [6].

Virtually all the aforementioned terms characterize the predisposition of identity to transformation over the last fifteen years. On the one hand, this indicates the increasing complexity of the concept of "identity" [7] at least in its format and detalization. On the other hand, as rightfully noted by O. Mitroshenkov, "the situation with identities can be characterized as (to a certain degree) controlled chaos" [8]. These changes also apply to the sphere of religious identity. It ceases to be something unchanging, the basis of cultural characteristics and ethnicity, a code traditionally connecting generations. Being

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born into a religious family does not guarantee that the child will subsequently join the confession of their parents or remain religious at all. We observe how over the course of a generation, the religious landscape has become increasingly multi-confessional and unstable. This takes place due to the intensification of migration processes [9] and flexible change of worldview in individual people [10]. This, from our viewpoint, is facilitated by the rhizomality of the modern social space and the development of a virtual environment that is starting to form its religious identity [11, 12].

The emergence and sometimes kaleidoscopic change of different religions in people's close circles alter the vectors of intentionality as the close circles of modern youth are expanding from a more or less stable family circle to university friends, groups of interest and online communities that are constantly dynamic and initially multiconfessional. In a dynamically changing multiconfessional community, people are more often interested in both the phenomenon of religious identity itself and its confessional variants. The need to carry out multiconfessional communication leads them to the search and mastery of new information which can spark unexpected interest in new confessions. We believe that the presence of the virtual space assists the intensification of these processes, makes them more accessible and expands the opportunities for them. With a change in the confessional vector, for example, the transition from Christianity to Islam, a new post-transgressional identity with new Islamic identification markers is formed.

The goal of the present study is to identify the basic factors contributing to the transformation of the religious identity of a modern person in the digital era. The detection of factors contributing to such changes will allow predicting its further modifications and the vector of influence on society to a certain extent.

Our research was carried out in the postmodern paradigm where the picture of the world changes significantly. The key element of the postmodern approach is plurality rather than binarity which allows examining the processes occurring in the sphere of religious identity in their versatility and ambivalence when internal changes expand to transboundary ones. This approach makes it possible to not only highlight the main factors of the transformation of religious identity in the modern world, namely, rhizomality and transgressiveness, but also demonstrate the way they change it in real society.

2. Religious identity as a phenomenon

In scientific discourse, religious identity is traditionally believed to be the least subject to change and is often viewed as an element of another identity. The options of such interrelations are presented in Table 1 (RI - religious identity, CI - cultural identity, EI - ethnic identity).

Nevertheless, there is a range of approaches to the study and definition of religious identity the most significant of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. The interrelation of identities.

Interrelation of identities	Authors
RI is a part of CI	A.A. Mukataeva [13]
RI is a part of EI	R.Y. Kim [14]
RI is equal to EI	H. Abramson [15]
RI is different from EI	S.H. Oppong [16]

Table 2. Approaches to the study of religious identity.

Approaches	Definition of religious identity
Philosophical	RI through the prism of global existential categories [17]
Sociological	RI as a product of society [18]
Psychological	RI as a product of mental activity [19]
Anthropological	RI as an anthropic phenomenon, an element of the value system [20]
Politological	RI as a factor of political manipulation [21]
Religious studies	RI as awareness of belonging to a religious group [22]

In our understanding of religious identity, we will proceed from the religious studies approach that primarily focuses on the fact of identifying oneself with a certain confessional group or with the lack thereof.

Recently, scientific interest has been shifting towards the trajectory of the transformation of religious identity [23]. From the point of the psychological approach, this process is structured in the form of a hierarchy of statuses or stages or vectors. The staging approach is based on changes in the level of religiosity, the status approach fixates the stages of transformation as finalized and existing independently and vectors refer to the nature and components of transformation (Table 3).

Table 3. Options for structuring religious identity.

Options	Structure description	Sources
The stage structure of RI	prescribed, chosen, and declared undifferentiated view of religious affiliation, conceptualization, interiorization	L. Peek [24], L. Elkind [25]
The status structure of RI	premature RI; diffusion, moratorium, achievement unambiguity, relativity, confusion, cognitive rationalization, exploration, acceptance, integration	V.A. Karida [*Sotsialno-psikhologicheskie osobennosti samosoznaniia neofita pravoslaviia i ego religioznoi identichnosti (Socio-psychological characteristics of the self-awareness of a neophyte of Orthodoxy and their religious identity)*, http://lifecity.com.ua/maup/721/viewsection /79], S. Veerasamy [26]
The vector structure of RI	internal-external internal-external, individual-social	G. Allport [27], D. Van Camp [19, p. 5]

We believe that in the modern era, it is not so much the stages and statuses as the nature and vectors of the transformation of religious identity that are an important indicator of the stability of society. At the present stage, we consider it possible to view religious identity as an independent social phenomenon that is now less dependent on the ethnic or cultural identity set from birth and is predetermined by a combination of social and personal reasons and capabilities. It ceases to be a prescribed identity and changes into a phenomenon capable of multiple transformations considering various factors already identified by researchers, specifically:

- the intensity of contacts with the surrounding confessional communities [28],
- the specifics of the perception of religion in different age groups [29],
- the specifics of the perception of religion by individuals with non-traditional sexual orientation [30].

From our point of view, it is necessary to highlight several other important factors that affect the current state of religious identity most intensely:

- the transgressiveness of modern religious identity,
- the rhizomality of modern religious space,
- the virtualization of both religious space and religious identity.

3. Factors of the transgressiveness of religious identity and the rhizomality of the modern space

In the original version, the concept of transgression is based on the postmodern idea of going beyond the boundaries, confines, and norms generally accepted in a particular society, including the boundaries of oneself [31]. The factor of the transition from one religion to another has historical roots but was mainly associated with severe social cataclysms: conquests, missionary activities, etc. In modern society, this process shifts to the personal level and takes the form of transgression. Therefore, in our study, we will use the term 'transgression' to refer to changes in religious identity. The use of the term 'transgression' allows us to examine a wide range of identity changes, not only the transition from one confession to another but also going beyond the confessional field in general, being in a 'between' state, the transformation of the nature of identity within one confession, etc., considering both psychological and, most importantly, social aspects.

A transgressive act is viewed as an unacceptable action, refusal to obey any given conditions since the very existence of the boundaries of what is permissible presupposes their violation [32]. We believe that such an act forms a special way of treating reality as the possibility and necessity of violating boundaries which is by no means always purely destructive. It is often a positive expansion of the boundaries, both social ones and the capabilities of an individual. Moreover, one of the fundamental features of the postmodernist interpretation of transgression is considered to be going beyond the profane and access to the sphere of the sacred. In the present case, it is directly related to the

transformation of religious identity under the influence of transgressive processes that takes place during the transition of an individual from one religion to another, both traditional and non-traditional, as well as to the change of religious views to atheistic. These processes are accompanied by going beyond the usual norms.

Overall, transgressive identity changes currently manifest actively in the religious sphere. In 2015 and 2019, our research group conducted comprehensive sociological studies [33] to research the mechanisms of formation of religious identity and the vectors of its transformation under the influence of religious transgression among student youth of the South of Russia and the Caspian region. The methods used in the studies included a survey in the form of a handout questionnaire and a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews. The sample was composed of undergraduates and postgraduates of universities in the Astrakhan, Rostov, and Volgograd regions, the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya, as well as in the republics of Kalmykia and Crimea. The implemented sampling method was available nested sampling. The sample size of the quantitative study conducted in 2015 was 433 respondents and the study carried out in 2019 included 531 respondents. A comparative analysis of the data of the two studies demonstrated that the proportion of young people facing religious transgression increased from 53.3% in 2015 to 67.9% in 2019.

Another postmodern term, 'rhizome', refers to a departure from unambiguous prescription and linearity to variability. At any point in time, a rhizome "can be torn off, broken, it builds its initial or different lines up again" [34]. A rhizome allows, provokes transgression. The multivariate choice contributes to turning from the predetermined path and reaching a different one. The rhizomal variability of modern society provides the subject with a wide range of opportunities for transgression - going beyond the limit. Moreover, the vector of this transgression is not always determined by an urgent need but is often caused by several social and psychological opportunities and circumstances. The rhizomality of opportunities of an individual affects the rhizomality of the religious landscape itself. Transforming, the religious landscape leaves fewer monoreligious spaces in the world. Even the countries that have preserved their national religions from ancient times to the present day (Israel, India, Japan, China) are no longer purely monoreligious spaces at the moment [35]. This also presents a process of religious transgression, going beyond the set of confessions traditional for a given landscape.

The religious landscape can change in many different ways: due to the natural growth of the number of children in religious families, for example, Muslim [R. Wagner, *Dreaming cyborg dreams: virtual identity and religious experience*, 15.06.2009, https://religiondispatches.org/dreaming-cyborg-dreams-virtual-identity-and-religious-experience/], due to migration processes, active proselytism of some confessions, as well as free religious transgression. However, American researchers argue that this process is more intensive in more developed countries compared to more traditional [23, p. 8]. Transgressive

processes also affect the growth in the number of atheists and unaffiliated individuals [36].

Nevertheless, religious transgressiveness is manifesting more actively in modern society possibly for the primary reason of it fitting well into the modern rhizome reality, the 'fluid modernity' based on disintegration, fragility, vulnerability and transience [13]. On the one hand, space rhizomality provokes transgression. In traditional societies where it is less variable, there is also less transgression. On the other hand, transgressive processes increase the rhizomality of social space. However, another and much more significant opportunity for religious identity transformation is provided at the present stage by the virtualization of religious space.

4. The factor of virtualization of religious space

Virtual reality is a form of digital technology that involves user interaction with software through a screen interface [37]. It is a rhizome space providing a possibility of multidimensional and multipolar transgression for any individual immersed in it. The religious segment of the virtual space is diverse. On the one hand, it involves the realization of the capabilities of real religious confessions on the Internet (religion online) [38] which mainly takes the form of information sites and virtual products of educational and informational nature. On the other hand, it involves virtual cults that have arisen and found their supporters on the Internet (online religions) [39]. This space can be conditionally designated as real-virtual since the religious identity of the users of this space is real. It is realized and transgressed due to the opportunities offered by the real space. Contrarily, quick access to information, the opportunity to visit a virtual temple, and the prospect of online communication with priests in the 'religion-online' sector increase the communicative capabilities of a believer and embeds their real religious identity into the dynamically developing virtual reality. However, there is another area where virtual religious identity itself is being formed - games involving fantasy religious spaces. There are a lot of such games ranging from simple shooters (for example, Waco Resurrection in which the playing field is an actual reconstruction of the tragedy that happened to the followers of the Branch Davidians sect in 1993) to complex parallel game worlds (Second Life).

In most cases, religious worlds are only part of the virtual world of the game as the case in Second Life. However, there are also games where religious reality is the predominant one ('Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor - Martyr'). All of these games form a new virtual religious identity. Virtual identity is operationally viewed as "an extension of everyday life and an instrument of cultural change" [18, p. 235]. By virtual religious identity, we understand the method and result of identifying oneself with a certain virtual religious community for the time of its existence in the virtual space.

A virtual religious world can be extremely diverse including the use of fantasy images. Even if it has analogues in the real world, in the virtual one they are often exaggerated, veiled, and camouflaged. In most cases, it comprises fantasy polytheistic religions that often have negative connotations and extremist aspirations. In several games, the ability to use a religious avatar is one of the rhizome ways for an individual to try on a new religious identity. In the space of Second Life, a person can enter any of the existing sacred structures, put on clothes that distinguish the given cult, perform a ritual, and have a new religious experience by performing the Hajj. All of this provides a player with the opportunity to try many religious identities. The rhisomality of choice enhances the possibilities for transgression and makes this changing variable operationally constant.

It is also possible to try on a religious identity that does not exist in reality. However, any fantasy image is created from elements that, albeit hypertrophied, predominantly originate from reality. The capabilities of an avatar, a digital representation of a user corresponding to a certain virtual context, are variable as they can be modelled at one's own discretion and further improved. Depending on the virtual world, users can choose the preferred gender, body type and size, profession, and sometimes species. S. Turkle, a researcher of virtual spaces, argues that when people do not simply become who they play when they choose avatars. Rather, they play who they want to become [40]. Even old strategies like Faraon, Civilization, and Age of Empires where religion serves as a structural part of the cultural landscape a player on the playing field has to operate with elements of a new religious identity taking care of the prosperity of the religion. At that stage, the religious virtual identity dissolves in the general context of the game and is predominantly of a fantasy nature.

However, the virtual game space has outgrown the limits of the gaming sphere since the religious component has ceased to be merely a cultural element of its playing field. It becomes a new opportunity, a new way to participate in worldbuilding through imagining the sacred [37, p. 23]. The virtual identity of an inveterate gamer ceases to be a temporary mask and begins to influence the real identity [41]. Since in modern society, "the stable, heavy, 'solid' identity inherent in modernity is replaced by an unstable, light, 'fluid' identity" [36, p. 112] of postmodern culture, transgression processes are becoming an ordinary phenomenon. Moreover, they already take place in two spaces: the real and the virtual.

5. Conclusions

Thus, we have demonstrated that at the present stage, from the standpoint of the postmodern approach, the transformation of religious identity is primarily influenced by two factors - the rhizomality and transgressiveness of society. The rhizomality of the modern social space ensures a more ramified and multivariate choice of opportunities which involves the trajectory of the transformation of religious identity being, among other things, reversional. Transgression

involving going beyond the limits and breaking barriers nevertheless ceases to be perceived exclusively as a religious crime but is rather viewed as a factor of freedom in the presence of a rhizome opportunity to choose a trajectory. These factors work not only in real society but also in the virtual space of games.

Each new virtual game comprising religious content reflecting historical realities or fantasy space for a certain period offers new religious rules, a new avatar, and, consequently, a new religious identity that the player accepts for the time of the game. Getting used to easily changing their identity in the virtual world, a person starts perceiving the change of religion in real life more easily. Such a game, on the one hand, becomes a training instrument for overcoming xenophobia, cultural differences, and religious intolerance. On the other hand, it contributes to an easier change of worldview including religious and a more superficial attitude towards faith.

The processes under study are currently predominantly characteristic of the young digital generation in which traditional family ideological barriers have largely weakened. In the future, we intend to expand the field of our research on religious transgression in the youth environment including new forms of virtual religious activity, such as blogs, social network accounts, and electronic churches, as well as to consider the vectors of the influence of the current crisis on the transformation of religious identity.

Acknowledgment

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