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# THE IMAGE OF AN ORTHODOX BELIEVER IN THE MINDS OF THE RUSSIAN YOUTH

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## Abstract

The article represents the results of an investigation devoted to the study of features of the representatives' image of the main traditional confession of Russia, Orthodoxy, in the minds of the students of Primorskiy region. The study is characterized by a representative sampling and gives an understanding of ideas of young people about the largest religious confession in Russia. The study has significant novelty, since the use of the projective method of the group association experiment in order to clarify the attitude to religious phenomena has not been performed in Russia before. The obtained results indicate that young people in Russia have knowledge of Orthodoxy and, on the whole, correctly orientate themselves in the Orthodox faith. Interesting data were obtained on the categories of assessment of believers by young people. The most important categories were found to be 'negative-positive assessment', 'attractiveness' and 'kindness'.

*Keywords:* Orthodoxy, Russia, religion, free associations, image

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## 1. Introduction

Many works has been written about religion as such, about the role of religion in various aspects of society. But there is much less research on how representatives of religious traditions are perceived in society. This is especially sensitive for our country. Of course, the fact that religion has been banned here for a long time and the fact that religion is perceived to a large extent as a private sphere of human life, play a role here. But no one will argue that this topic is important.

The society of modern Russia is multiconfessional. But the main confessions that have historically a significant impact on the culture of Russia are few. Such confessions are called traditional, there are four of them: Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

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In this article, we will make an attempt to study the image of an Orthodox believer as seen by Russian youth. In this case, we proceed from the hypothesis that the image of a believer reflected an idea of the confession to which he/she belongs. We also wanted to understand in what categories young people assess representatives of confessions, what are the main signs that are significant for them.

The choice of this confession (Orthodoxy) was due to the fact that it is historically a culture forming factor for Russia. If we average the data of various all-Russian polls, then about 70% of people, when answering the question about their own religious self-determination, name Orthodoxy. The study of this topic can help to understand by what parameters Orthodoxy is familiar to modern youth and by what there is no knowledge or there are contradictions.

## 2. Methodology

At the moment, this topic is almost unexplored. Sociological studies of the population, including young people, attitude to the main ethnic groups and confessions are being conducted in Russia, but the image of these confessions and their representatives has hardly been studied.

In Primorskiy region, we conducted a small study of this kind [1]. We can also mention the works of G.S. Shirokalova, K. Kaariainen, M. Mchedlov [2-4]. Among the significant works, we can mention the study of the image of representatives of Islam, which was carried out in 2016 among college students in Yekaterinburg (a sample of about 400 people) [5]. In St. Petersburg, a study was carried out on the image of the Orthodox Church in the minds of residents. Most residents of St. Petersburg assess the role and activities of the Church positively [6]. An important study was carried out by E.A. Voronkova and T.A. Voronkova in relation to perception of representatives of Islam, in which the attitude towards Muslims of the Orthodox religious community members, Catholics, and those who called themselves atheists was studied. Interestingly, among the Orthodox community members, the authors traced the relationship between churchliness and tolerance according to the principle “the more churched, the less tolerant” [7]. Some data on the topic of interest to us can be found in Pew Research Center polls [*Being Christian in Western Europe*, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>, accessed on 23.12.2018].

In conclusion, first of all, it should be noted that there is still not enough research devoted to the idea of young people about religious phenomena. The image of representatives of confessions has practically not been studied.

It will be very interesting to consider the results of a study we conducted in the Primorskiy region in October-November 2019. Students of the Far Eastern Federal University, Maritime State University, Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service (VSUES) in Nakhodka took part in it; a total of 211 people: 107 men and 104 women aged 18 to 22 years. The sample encompasses students of technical and humanitarian specialties approximately equally.

The methodological basis of this work is the psychosemantic approach, primarily such methods as the semantic differential method and the associative method. The beginning of the use of psychosemantic methods was laid by the work of Charles Osgood [8, 9]. Osgood is also the author of the semantic differential method, which we applied in our work. This methodology was developed in the works of his followers [10, 11].

For the purpose of reflecting various components of the image of representatives of Orthodoxy, we used a reliable semantic method of free association. The method of free verbal group associative experiment makes it possible to reveal both rational representations of people and elements of nonconscious representations. The respondents were asked to name any words associated with a certain stimulus. The respondents can name any words coming to mind first. In this case, the concept of a 'typical Orthodox' was used as a stimulus. The respondents wrote down several words in the forms handed out, after which they gave them to the interviewer. As a result of survey of a group of respondents, we get many words-associations that reflect their idea of the studied object, its properties and related objects. This is called an associative field of the given stimulus.

The algorithm for applying the methods of psychosemantics is described in the works of Russian authors V.F. Petrenko and V.P. Serkin [12, 13]. According to V.F. Petrenko, psychosemantic techniques are especially effective in the study of deep, often poorly reflected representations of groups of people. They can be used in reconstruction of a system of categories used by society in assessing representatives of confessions, as well as to determine their place in such a system of categories [12].

Having received from the respondents a set of associations for each stimulus (associative field), we calculated the frequency of occurrence of each association. The list of associations was reduced (in volume) due to unification of the same or very close in meaning associations. Then, the main categories of associations were identified according to the methodology of classification the material of associations to such stimuli, developed by the authors. This methodology of classification associations has passed a peer review by three specialists in the field of Psychology and Theology, with sufficient scientific experience.

After categorizing the associative material (assigning associations to certain semantic categories), the frequency of occurrence of associations was calculated. After that, group associative universals were identified - these are repeating associations. If the association is repeated five or more times in the sample, it is not accidental for this group. In other words, this association reflects some component of young people's ideas about the subject of research. If the association occurs among dozens of respondents in the sample, this means that one of the essential (nuclear) categories of the image of this phenomenon, in this case the image of representatives of a confession, has been identified. After the group associative universals have been identified; they were analysed qualitatively.

In addition, we used the semantic differential method (SD). A semantic differential is a set of scales or descriptors reflecting possible characteristics of an object. For example, a personal semantic differential contains a list of human qualities such as 'calm', 'kind', 'aggressive', 'smart', etc. The respondents are asked to assess severity of these qualities in an object using this set of scales. Each scale can be rated from 1 point (absence of quality) to 7 points (pronounced quality).

To perform this experiment, the respondents were offered a form of a unipolar personal semantic differential developed by A.G. Shmelev [14]. The form includes 64 scales containing personal characteristics. Accordingly, the respondents had to rate the stimulus 'a typical Orthodox' using this SD. The matrix of primary data was subjected to the procedure of factor analysis by the method of principal components; rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization (Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization) using the SPSS 21 statistical computer program.

As a result of factorial processing, a large volume of assessments on the SD scales is reduced to several factors. The factors represent a group of interrelated scales and reflect categories of the respondents' thinking. In other words, a factor usually includes several scales, the estimates for which are correlated with each other. For example, the 'kind' and 'honest' scales are positively correlated with the 'attractive' scale. All together, the scales of one factor form a certain axis of the respondents' thinking. This method allows us to identify the main categories of perception and evaluation of the image of an object under study, in our case, an idea of the Orthodox Church.

### **3. Results and discussion**

According to the large volume and quality of the data obtained, the method of group associative experiment was chosen as the base for reconstruction of the image of believers in this work and the most significant conclusions are drawn on its basis. In our study, it was proposed to give 3-5 associations for the 'typical Orthodox' stimulus. A total of 800 associations were received for the 'typical Orthodox' stimulus.

The authors have developed their own method of classifying the obtained associations. The categorization logic created to evaluate the results of this study highlights the following large areas, which are represented by the associations collected (Table 1).

The first category of associations is 'Religious Concepts, Symbols and Actions', reflecting the ideas of young people about the doctrines of this confession. As we have already written, we proceeded from the assumption that the image of a believer reflected ideas about the confession to which he/she belongs. This was confirmed by the data obtained. The distribution of associations clearly shows a good knowledge of Orthodoxy. We see a greater

number of associations for key doctrinal moments of Orthodoxy and fewer for secondary ones.

**Table 1.** Categories of associations received for the stimulus ‘typical Orthodox’.

Categories of associations	‘typical Orthodox’	
	number	%
<b>1. Religious concepts, symbols, actions</b>	<b>532</b>	<b>66</b>
1.1. Deity, saints	71	13
1.2. Religious objects	204	39
1.3. Religious actions	118	23
1.4. Religious symbols	12	2
1.5. Religious representatives	36	7
1.6. Religious holidays	45	8
1.7. Commandments, instructions, texts	34	6
1.8. Other	12	2
<b>2. Human qualities</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1. Appearance	22	12
2.2. Positive qualities	95	52
2.3. Negative qualities	49	26
2.4. Neutral (undefined) qualities	18	10
<b>3. Religion and world</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1. Relations with the state and society	41	60
3.2. Family, position of a woman	10	15
3.3. Money	17	25
<b>4. Geography, nature, culture</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>5. Other</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>2</b>

For example, students give 42 associations ‘Jesus Christ’ and only 8 associations with saints and the Mother of God. But ‘church’ has 75 associations and ‘cross’ - 47. In general, Orthodoxy, in the minds of young people, is a ‘substantively active’ faith and this does not contradict the authentic understanding of Orthodoxy. In the first category ‘Religious concepts, symbols and actions’ the largest subcategory - ‘religious objects’ – has a total of 204 associations. The second place is taken by the subcategory ‘religious actions’ - 118 associations; of these, prayer - 30, baptism - 24, faith - 17, fasting - 17. And only the next in terms of the number of associations is the subcategory ‘Deity, saints’ - 71. Then is ‘religious holidays’, 42 associations in total, and 35 of them are ‘Easter’. The second is ‘Christmas’ - 7.

The second category of associations is called ‘Human qualities’. A very eloquent indicator is the balance of positive/negative human qualities. For an Orthodox believer, it was 95 against 49. At first glance, we have a pronounced contradictory assessment. But the analysis of the associations themselves shows that all negative characteristics are random: the overwhelming majority of them occur once and only three of them twice. Among the positive ones, we have 5 non-random characteristics, in the first place is the association ‘kind’, which occurs 16 times. There are also such non-random associations of positive nature

as ‘simplicity’, ‘calm’, ‘honest’. Thus, the image of an Orthodox believer in the opinion of the respondents is mostly positive.

The third category of associations ‘Religion and world’ includes a number of associations of a social and political nature, reflecting the interaction of religion and believers with society. A significant negative rating could be expected in the ‘money’ subcategory. But there were only 17 associations. And there is not a single non-random one among them - and no more than ten negative ones.

In addition, the categories ‘Geography, nature, culture’ and ‘Other’ were allocated, which included those associations that did not fit into other categories. In the category ‘Geography, Nature, Culture’, attention is drawn to the fact that despite the cultural significance of Orthodoxy for Russia, this remains beyond the understanding of the overwhelming majority of young people. Our respondents did not give a single association showing the connection between culture and Orthodoxy.

In addition to the associative technique, we used the method of semantic differential (SD). Accordingly, the respondents had to rate the stimulus ‘typical Orthodox’ using this differential. The matrix of primary data was subjected to the procedure of factor analysis by the method of principal components. 12 factor structures were obtained. The factors were given names, all identified factors are shown in Table 2.

Among the obtained factors, three are the most significant: negative-positive assessment; attractiveness and kindness. It is the prism of these characteristics through which young people look at representatives of religious confessions.

**Table 2.** Factors identified in the process of processing SD matrices data.

No.	‘Typical Orthodox’ (62.4% variance)
1.	negative-positive assessment
2.	attractiveness
3.	kindness
4.	limitedness
5.	activity-passivity
6.	simplicity
7.	carelessness-experience
8.	timidity
9.	ambition-persistency
10.	idleness-creativity
11.	openness-restraint
12.	foolishness-intellectuality

In this case, the decisive role is played by the first factor, negative-positive assessment. It collected a very significant percentage of variance (14.9% for a ‘typical Orthodox’). This factor does not tell us how positively or negatively a representative of a given confession is assessed. It draws an axis around which negative/positive characteristics are collected, which may have

different meanings. The first places in terms of factor weight are occupied by such scales as 'mean' and 'selfish', as well as 'rude' and 'unfriendly'. Such characteristic as 'honest' inversely correlates with them. It is obvious that here are two poles representing positive and negative qualities. We may say that it is extremely important for young people whether Orthodox believers are honest or, on the contrary, mean and selfish.

The second most important factor in this reconstruction is the 'attractiveness' factor. Attractiveness comes from interrelated categories such as handsome, charming, competent, erudite. This factor combines both external data and attractive intellectual characteristics. It can be concluded that the presence of these characteristics in the image of a believer makes him/her attractive to young people.

The third position in the reconstruction is the factor of 'kindness'. As part of this factor, there is a correlation of such descriptors as 'kind', 'calm', 'honest', 'open', 'benevolent'. Qualities such as honesty, openness, and benevolence affect the perception of believers as kinder. There is a noticeable connection with the first factor, where the concept of kindness is also one of the key ones. Its presence testifies to the importance for young people of such eternal value in believing people. In addition, when evaluating representatives of Orthodoxy, young people take into account such qualities as limitedness, activity, experience, and so on.

Thus, the most important factors (categories of assessment of a 'typical Orthodox') are negative-positive assessment, attractiveness and kindness. These are the main features of the moral portrait that young people want to see in representatives of the main religion of Russia.

If we make a comparison of these associations and factorial reconstruction, the presence among the group associative universals of such characteristics as 'kind', 'openness', 'calmness', 'honesty' allows us to determine that according to the factor of negative-positive assessment, and according to the factor of kindness, a representative of Orthodoxy is assessed by the respondents positively.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Thus, using the above-described semantic methods, we were able to reconstruct the image of representatives of Orthodoxy in representation of the student youth of the Primorskiy region. We managed to identify the main categories of perception and evaluation of the image of representatives of the Orthodox Church. As the reconstruction showed, the most important factors are negative-positive assessment, attractiveness and kindness.

From the point of view of young people, in assessing personal qualities of representatives of religious confessions, their moral qualities play a decisive role, forming the dichotomy of mean and selfish vs. honest. In addition, such a quality as kindness is separately present, which largely determines the

acceptance of the confession. In addition, attractiveness of the image of believers, including both external data and intellectual features, is important.

As we managed to establish, attractiveness or, conversely, unattractiveness of the given confession is determined to a large extent by the moral qualities of its representatives.

An analysis of the identified group associative universals showed that young people, despite the uncertainty of their religious and worldview orientations, are well aware of Orthodoxy. In general, perception of Orthodoxy by young people indicates a positive attitude towards them. Comparison of these associations and factorial reconstruction made it possible to determine that according to the factor of negative-positive assessment and the factor of kindness, a representative of Orthodoxy is assessed positively by the respondents. It can be assumed that the predominantly positive assessment of the Orthodox Church activities is explained, among other things, by the fact that the Orthodox in Russia constitutes the majority.

The study also allows us to conclude that modern Russian youth have an idea of the Orthodox Christianity and its foundations. The image of an Orthodox believer is mostly positive.

It can be concluded that modern Russian youth may well be a party to the dialogue with the Church, its position is not hostile to the Orthodox faith. When building dialogue and work with young people, the Church can take into account their values and peculiarities of thinking, some of which we have studied.

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