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## **RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY IN DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF MODERN RUSSIAN SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has become a serious threat to the health of people in all countries, but it has also affected all spheres of life in the world community. The use of distance learning is not any new, but the pandemic has intensified the process. Especially it has affected the sphere of religious education, which in Russia had always been very conservative. The traditional education method aimed only at obtaining knowledge is outdated. The educational paradigm itself requires transformation and change of the existing teaching approaches and methods. Religious education is also forced to actively use the distance-learning format for the implementation of its educational programs in the context of the current rapid digitalization of the educational environment in Russia and in the whole world community. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) found itself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the state's recognition of theological education made it possible to restore the historical connection between secular and spiritual education. On the other hand, the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation to the academic discipline Theology do not take into account the specifics of spiritual education. This is especially true for distance education. It is extremely important to develop new educational trajectories accounting for the relevance of distance education forms that open up learning possibilities to everyone from anywhere in Russia, as well as the availability of the ROC training courses to all members of the world Eastern Orthodox community. At the same time, it is important not to lose the main component of spiritual education - communion with God.

*Keywords:* education, religious, innovations, digital, technologies

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### **1. Introduction**

Orthodox religious education in Russia has specific features. The first feature is that after the Baptism of Rus in 988, the religious education in Russian turned into exclusively Russian Orthodox religious education, since Eastern Orthodoxy was the official state religion. The second feature is that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century took place the separation of secular education from the religious one.

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Two educational systems emerged in Russia. At the same time, spiritual educational institutions remained under the aegis of the Russian Orthodox Church. There were no theological faculties in secular universities, but there was a department of Theology, which taught Dogmatic and Moralizing theology, the interpretation of the Holy Scripture and Church history. After the 1917 revolution, by the decree on the separation of Church from state, adopted on March 18-23, 1919, the entire policy of the state was aimed at protecting secular education from religious influence. The main educational organizations were seminaries and theological academies, which were housed in Russian Orthodox monasteries. During the Soviet period of religious persecution and oppression, these educational institutions merged with monasteries and separated themselves from secular life.

In modern Russia, the adoption of the Federal Law ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations’ in 1997 restored the right of Russian citizens to receive religious education. The 2013 Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’ defined the status of religious education and its relationship with secular education.

Against this background, the intensive formation of the digital education system and developing technologies introduce an additional imbalance in the complicated restoration of Russian Orthodox religious education. The digitalization of education not only destroys the traditional classical educational canons of religious education, but increases the zone of temptation in monastic seclusion, which, as we said, was inherent in Russian Orthodox education.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1. Orthodox and scientific sources for the formation of research methodology***

In our opinion, the research methodology should be based on two components: on the official document of the Russian Orthodox Church, reflecting the concept of the relationship between the Church and the Internet; on scientific research in the field of religious education. Unlike the Catholic Church, which quickly responded to the challenges of digital technologies and presented its understanding in the document ‘Church and the Internet’ [Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet*, Vatican City, Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle, February 22, 2002, <https://The%20Church%20and%20Internet.html>, accessed on 2.03.2021], the Russian Orthodox Church has not developed such a unified view. There are scattered documents and statements of Patriarch Kirill, on which we will rely. The first document regulating the activities of educational institutions in the field of digital technologies appeared in the form of recommendations on the website of the Educational Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church only during the pandemic at the end of 2020: recommendations for organizing the distant form of parish education for children and adults [Orthodox education,

*Recommendations for organizing a remote form of parish education for children and adults*, March 30, 2020, <https://pravobraz.ru/rekomendacii-po-organizacii-distancionnoj-formy-prihodskogo-prosveshheniya-detej-i-vzroslyx/>, accessed on 7.12.2020].

As for research into Russian Orthodox religious education in digital society and the introduction of information technologies in the educational process at seminaries and theological academies, there have been practically no such studies in Russia so far. This is quite understandable in the context of the brief historical background provided above. In fact, the full-scale system of Russian Orthodox religious education in Russia began to function after 2013. It is after 2013 when appear studies, which analyse the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church representatives in the Internet [1], the existing forms and features of the Orthodox missionary presence in the information space [2], the prospects of preschool Orthodox religious education in the information society [3], introduction of distance education in religious educational institutions [4].

Western philosopher H. Dreyfus [5] drew attention to the issues related to information technology in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The role and place of technology, especially the Internet, in religion and religious education was discussed in the research by J.C. Conroy & S.J. McKinney [6], E.C. van Driel [7], T. Esselman [8], M. Hess [9], A. Hege [10], D. Hockridge [11], P.J. Palmer [12], K. Flornes [13], L.B. Resnick [14] and many other authors.

## **2.2. The concept of ‘spiritual education’**

According to Alexander Popov, the main distinguishing feature of spiritual education lies in the interpretation of the very concept of ‘theology’, which is used in two different meanings: as communion with God (spiritual experience) and as an academic discipline (‘school theology’) [*Distance Theology: stress fields and points of contact*, January 17, 2020, <https://elearn.ido.net.ru/new-17-01-2020/>, accessed on 20.04.2021].

When discussing spiritual education, it is important to note that communion with God is a key element. However, communion with God goes beyond the curriculum, it cannot be designated as competence [<https://elearn.ido.net.ru/new-17-01-2020/>]. This is the main contradiction between spiritual education and the academic discipline ‘Theology’.

## **2.3. Method**

To achieve the research objective, we will use the method of content analysis of materials presented on the Internet with a description of the experience of using information technologies by Russian Orthodox religious educational institutions.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Analysis of the ROC educational programs available at all levels of religious education in the digital environment of Russia

##### 3.1.1. Preschool education system

In 1993, ‘The Orthodox preschool education concept’ was developed: it played a constructive role in the development of the system of Orthodox-oriented preschool institutions. The main principle of organizing the life of children in a kindergarten group is to create a Church environment necessary for the formation of a child’s soul [Department of Religious Education and Catechism. The Moscow Patriarchate, *The Orthodox preschool education concept*, 1993, <https://refdb.ru/look/1948916.htm>, accessed on 20.04.2021]. The introduction of children to Russian Orthodox culture, traditions, and the Christian way of life is one of the Russian Orthodox Church priorities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, kindergartens had to conduct many classes online. The Synodic Department for Religious Education and Catechization had prepared recommendations for the organization of electronic parish education for children and adults. The main emphasis in this document is made on the fact that the process of teaching in faith is fundamentally wider and deeper than the intellectual process of transferring and assimilating information [<https://pravobraz.ru/rekomendacii-po-organizacii-distancionnoj-formy-priroda-kogo-prosveshheniya-detey-i-vzroslykh/>]. It is not about formal knowledge of the academic discipline, but the need to strive for communion with God within the framework of spiritual education. Nevertheless, E.I. Gryaznova expresses concern that as the information culture is being introduced into the value core of culture as a whole, basic values based on religious principles are leaving it [3].

##### 3.1.2. Secondary education: Orthodox schools and gymnasiums

Initially, the main challenge with the introduction of the Internet to the Russian Orthodox gymnasiums and schools was a lack of computer classes. The creation of computer classrooms not only contributed to the development of computer literacy, but, since families of many Russian Orthodox school students do not have computers, these classrooms have become the main or even the only way for them to get acquainted with information technologies in practice. The absence of a computer in a Russian Orthodox family was explained not only by a lack of finances, but also by moral rejection: the computer was perceived as a harmful toy emanating temptation.

The second challenge is to supply the educational process with online content. One of the first digital resources was the ‘Native History’ CD-ROM created in the Novosibirsk Orthodox gymnasium in the name of Saint Sergius of Radonezh in 1995. The program was written by a professional team within the framework of the 1992 all-Russian competition for writing new textbooks and

teaching aids. Unfortunately, there was no further financial support for developing curricula for Orthodox gymnasiums, and the gymnasiums and schools had to solve all the problems with their own efforts and resources.

The third challenge became clear that the bulk of teachers are not ready for such work, since they do not have the necessary technical skills. To teach online, teachers had to independently deal with a range of web portals, choose the most appropriate one for conducting classes, master the culture of communication in real time on the Internet, etc.

The fourth challenge is access to library funds. Today, the Synodic Library of the Moscow Patriarchate is issuing a series of CD-ROMs under the general title 'Library of Russian Religious-Philosophical and Church-Historical Thought: At the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'. The 'Omega' Web Centre prepared a CD-ROM 'Orthodox Projects on the Internet' with a section 'Library of Orthodox Christians' that contains more than 250 e-books on various Orthodox topics. In the Nizhny Novgorod Orthodox Brotherhood of Saint Prince Alexander Nevsky, an electronic reading room was opened through charitable support. Several computers allow its visitors to access the Russian Orthodox resources of the global network. However, all these are scattered initiatives and not all students of Russian Orthodox gymnasiums and schools have the opportunity to access the services of online libraries.

Among the Orthodox gymnasiums and schools, schools that support 'home-schooling' occupy a special place. In Russia, among Russian Orthodox Christians, family education is becoming more and more popular, and it is quite natural that for a high-quality educational process, it is necessary to contact teachers of online schools remotely.

Priest Valery Zagornov from the Moscow Region considers the possibility of distance learning to be a real gift, since you can contact the teacher at a convenient time for the child, using the video of the lesson, you can understand the complex material that was not learned right away [V. Basenkov, *Education: at home or at school?*, November 28, 2018, <https://pravoslavie.ru/117527.html>, accessed on 20.04.2021].

### *3.1.3. Catechism and adult Sunday school activity*

Sunday schools for adults are open in churches, but not all of them offer distance learning. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the organizers of Sunday schools see the main goal in the obedience (participation in religious services, singing in the choir, reading in church, helping the priests in performing the sacraments of baptism), which requires physical presence in the church. Both for the founders of adult Sunday schools and students themselves, the result of training is not a certificate (although this official side is always respected), but sincere and deep churching. However, even if distance learning is not provided, Sunday schools for adults in churches have their own webpage, on many of which one can leave comments, ask a question and get an answer.

In its recommendations for organizing the distance form of parish education for children and adults, the Russian Orthodox Church does not insist on a mandatory distance-learning format. The document makes a reservation that the introduction of such a format is possible only in those parishes that have human and technical resources. The document also underscores that the transition “to a distant format of interaction is not associated with the need to ‘keep within the curriculum’ or ‘provide a certain amount of knowledge’”. Rather, it is motivated by the need to maintain a confidential, personal contact of the parish teacher with the children, and the catechist with the adults he catechizes.” [<https://pravobraz.ru/rekomendacii-po-organizacii-distancionnoj-formy-prihodskogo-prosveshheniya-detej-i-vzroslyx/>]

#### *3.1.4. Institutions of professional theological education*

The transition to e-teaching format in the vast majority of theological educational organizations temporarily occurred in 2020, but that was a desperate measure. According to a study into the implementation of theological education in an online environment, conducted by a team of teachers from Saint Tikhon Orthodox University of Humanities in 2018 [4], the key advantage of this form of education is the ability to study from anywhere, independently form a schedule for yourself, combine studies with work and private life. This study considered theological education as an academic discipline and did not address the issues of spiritual education. Perhaps this explains the diametrically opposite views regarding the possibility of full-fledged personal communication in the distance education system: 35% of respondents believe that this is not possible, 42.5% of respondents believe that there are no problems with organizing communication. Spiritual education presupposes close spiritual contacts with teachers-priests, immersion in the life of the Church. For the academic discipline, the conclusions of the researchers are quite natural: the problem of organizing communication most likely indicates the weak methodological literacy of online teachers and the unpreparedness of students for written academic communication.

## **4. Discussion**

Information technologies have already entered the life of the Church and this is inevitable. Therefore, the strategy for using them should be aimed at achieving the main goal of spiritual education: familiarizing the student with the forms of communion with God and relationships with people around him accepted in Russian Orthodoxy.

Based on the Analysis of the ROC educational programs available at all levels of religious education in the digital environment of Russia, let us dwell on the fundamental provisions the understanding of which contributes to building a strategy for the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the new challenges of information technology.

#### **4.1. Transformation of communication principles**

Communication is one of the essential features of the Christian congregation. Reflecting on the nature of the Church communion, Met. John (Zizioulas) wrote: “The Church as communion reflects the essence of God as communion, and this communion will be fully manifested in the Kingdom” [15]. Traditionally, Russian Orthodox spiritual educational institutions (seminaries, theological academies) are a closed society with discipline, permanent residence and a full board. Sunday schools are also characterized by a certain isolation, which is expressed through the parish rules. This privacy is explained by the need to concentrate on communication with God. According to Esselman, “Pedagogy in Theology requires a kind of accompaniment or willingness to walk with students; it presupposes embodied presence, a companionship in real time” [8, p. 162]. The opinion of the Western scientist is confirmed by a Russian study by O.-O. Sidorova, according to which 80% of respondents believe that communication becomes churchly through prayer and participation in the sacraments, 61% feel the need to discuss Christian topics at an advanced level [O.-O. Sidorova, *Communion in the church: do we need it?*, August 17, 2017, <https://psmb.ru/a/obshchenie-v-tserkvi-ono-nam-nuzhno.html>, accessed on 17.04.2021].

Thus, information technologies, with their openness, diversity of cultures, scattered opinions, interpretations, and sometimes inaccurate knowledge, come into conflict with the traditional way of communication inherent in spiritual educational institutions. Therefore, among Russian Orthodox priests, the Internet is often perceived with a feeling of rejection. However, life forces all of us to accept changes, and gradually an understanding comes that information technologies do not replace the face-to-face communication of a teacher with a student, but expand the time and geographical scope of this communication. Esselman says: “Instructional technology can never replace the critical presence of faculty members as mentors and guides in the lives of their students” [8, p. 162]. However, they contribute to the intensification of the teacher’s presence in the student’s life. A new ethic of communication between the teacher and the student is being formed. The forms of presence are manifold. A.R. Hege provides the following examples: regular posting of reply messages in the forum, regular and quick replies and comments on the completed student tasks, virtual consultations according to a pre-planned schedule, placement of introductory videos in each course [10].

Nevertheless, the intensification of the Internet communication between students and teachers should not provoke the teacher to assume the functions of a confessor (this is especially true for theological seminaries and academies). Communication with the confessor takes place through the sacrament of confession, the performance of which is possible only within the walls of the church. Face-to-face communication remains essential for those preparing to be ordained for ministry. Van Driel points out: “Students are not just ecclesially formed by what happens in the classroom but also, and maybe equally

importantly, in the relationships that are being formed in the communal life on campus” [7 p. 76]. Van Driel views ecclesial education as an integral part of the theological education that shapes the spiritual experience of the future clergyman.

#### **4.2. *Specificity of the generation of believers brought up in a digital society***

In our opinion, Tom Beaudoin very accurately compared the digital culture in which the young generation is brought up with “amniotic fluid” [16]. Today, the controversial policy of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding information and communication technologies often alienates the younger generation. While in 2015 Patriarch Kirill called for more active work with the younger generation in social media [17], in 2019 he began to oppose intelligent technologies, warning of the threat of total control over the human personality [Russian Orthodox Church. Official site of the Moscow Patriarchate, *Christmas interview of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the TV channel ‘Russia’*, January 7, 2019, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5337895.html>, accessed on 20.04.2021].

However, despite the negative statements of Patriarch Kirill, judging by the research data of M.V. Fedorova [18], young people generally positively assess the use of digital technologies for the popularization and dissemination of the doctrine. Lacking a good Internet mentor represented by Russian Orthodox teachers and priests, the religious identity of young people in a digital post-secular society is being transformed, thus becoming a part of more global identification processes.

In the pedagogical environment, the attitude towards the young generation Z is also contradictory: from openly alarmist (the formation of digital dependence) to panegyric (the access to previously unseen opportunities for human development).

#### **4.3. *Flexible use of learning models***

P. Palmer distinguishes two models of learning: a model where the teacher acts as an expert and a model where the teacher creates an environment for a relationship with the subject of research [12]. Esselman interprets these two models in his own way. Esselman interprets these two models in his own way: students are not viewed as consumers of knowledge but are directly involved in the production of knowledge [8]. Russian experience has shown that despite the fact that online learning tends to follow the second model, in practice, it is better to combine the use of both models in order to achieve the most effective personal interaction [4].

However, information technology continues to evolve rapidly and in addition to feedback, they begin to offer deeper immersion in the process of interaction between the teacher and the student. L.B. Resnick et al. focus on the emergence of interactive computer tutors who are able to track student reasoning and explanation [14].



#### **4.4. Expanded understanding of the ‘educational environment’**

The expansion of the educational environment in online learning occurs by means of online resources. One of the main resources is online libraries. Today in Russia there is no unified library database. Each university, educational institution creates its own electronic library and independently establishes partnership with other library resources.

The next type of resources that complements the online learning process is Russian Orthodox portals. According to the catalogue of Orthodox Internet resources, 42381 sites are registered [A *Directory of Orthodox Internet Resources*, <http://www.hristianstvo.ru/>, accessed on 25.08.2021]. These resources serve as information sources and integrate students into the virtual environment of the Russian Orthodox community. Students are provided with the opportunity to gain a certain spiritual experience communicating with a priest or other believers. Esselman emphasizes that “distance education pedagogy is challenged to broaden its understanding of the learning community itself from the campus to the many local communities of work, family, ministry, and public life in which students live” [8, p. 164].

However, the strategy implementation will be difficult in light of the latest statement by Patriarch Kirill: “A child is formed in a family, a student is formed in a team, in communication with professors, teachers, his comrades, friends. Therefore, placing a person in artificial isolation can undoubtedly negatively affect his formation.” [The Russian Orthodox Church is becoming a hotbed of digital resistance, January 7, 2021, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2021/01/07/69682611/>, accessed on 10.01.2021]

#### **4.5. Principled approach to computer literacy policy**

As you can see, the introduction of online education in the system of spiritual education is hampered by a lack of computer literacy from all members of the educational process: teachers, priests, parents and students. The concept of ‘computer literacy’ came to Russia in the 1980s from foreign researchers and means “basic, nontechnical knowledge about computers and how to use them; familiarity and experience with computers, software and computer systems” [<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/computer-literacy>, accessed on 25.08.2021].

This concept is gradually being replaced by another concept of ‘information culture’ with the development of information technology. The concept of ‘information culture’, on the one hand, includes computer literacy, which should give a person real tools for working with audio and video information, expand the circle of communication and work more effectively with printed publications and libraries. On the other hand, information culture leads to a change in many of the prevailing socio-economic, political and spiritual ideas, introduces qualitatively new features in a person’s way of life.

## **5. Conclusions**

The key result of information technologies' impact is the disruption of the traditional Church communication practices. This created a stressful situation for the institute of spiritual education. A typical emotional reaction of rejection and a feeling of anxiety arose among the clergy, which is reflected in the statements of Patriarch Kirill and other clergymen.

The next conclusion is insufficient attention on the part of the scientific community to the problems of the influence of information technologies on spiritual education, on the ways of their use and the allocation of unacceptable sacred zones of interference from these technologies. Unlike theological education as an academic discipline, spiritual education focuses not so much on actual knowledge as on the phenomenon of 'communion with God'. If the expansion of the educational environment allows you to get a spiritual experience from online communication with priests, then the question arises how deep can such communication be immersed in the sacred?

The third conclusion can be the fact that due to a number of objective reasons already listed, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, believers, teachers, were not ready to use the opportunities provided by information technologies in the field of spiritual education. This concerns not so much their computer illiteracy as their lack of understanding in what ways to implement the specifics of spiritual education in the context of distance education. There is a need to prepare clergymen to work online with the flock, to spiritually accompany students. Perhaps the time has come to think about the status of a spiritual mentor in online formats, whose duties would include pastoral care of the creators of sites and their spiritual condition.

Any stressful situation can have a destructive effect on a social institution, in this case, on the institution of spiritual education. In this context, it is very important to create a strategy for the Russian Orthodox Church to use the achievements of information technology not only in teaching the academic discipline Theology, but also in the field of spiritual education. In conclusion, we would like to note that, a positive understanding is ripening among the clergy actively using the possibilities of information technologies that these technologies are capable of helping to fight against modern temptations [<https://pravoslavie.ru/117527.html>]. This understanding gives hope in finding answers to the questions posed in this article.

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