

**SCTMG 2020****International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the  
Context of Modern Globalism»****PECULIARITIES OF VIRTUALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS  
ACTIVITY OF MODERN OLD BELIEVERS**

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***Abstract***

The article is devoted to the research of the Old Believer creeds activities in the space of virtual networks. The Old Believer movement is rather conservative, selectively adopting modern technologies and new means of media communication. They vary from the official websites of religious organizations to community members' groups and pages on various social networks. A separate aspect of the study is the analysis of various communication channels between Old Believers in virtual space. The main methodology of this research aspect is the content analysis of thematic sites (both official and unofficial), and pages and groups on social networks. In the course of the study of the Old Believers' activities in the space of virtual networks, we came to the conclusion that the cultural and religious identification of the Old Believers is carried out according to a scheme that has not practically changed since the 17th century. However, under the influence of new media, the Old Believer institute of prohibitions, which allowed them to maintain their religious and cultural identity all this time, undergoes various modifications. For Old Believer communities scattered throughout the world, the transition to virtual space means the formation of a new structure of cultural and religious identity. Due to this, there is a continuity of the material accumulated by generations through virtual communication channels that are new for them. The future couples are increasingly finding each other through online dating services. Clergy have the opportunity to conduct their prosergetic activity in the space of virtual networks.

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**Keywords:** Old Believers, virtual space, cultural identity, religious identity, family, transformation.



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## **1. Introduction**

The accelerated change in the environment of objects surrounding a person is one of the reasons for the transformation of traditional religious consciousness. In particular, new vehicles, communications, household appliances, and other technical innovations emerge. The traditional forms of media are dynamically developing. The modern technologies (satellite, digital, etc.) are explosively spreading. All these show a typical reflection of growing globalization and inevitably lead to the formation of a single information space unified for the entire post-industrial society (Rogozina, 2006). However, “new global realities” radically change the most conservative structures of social consciousness and behavior: traditions, customs, religious, and ritual practices (Zhvitashvili, 2003). In this regard, the problem of what is happening in modern conditions with a culture oriented towards the preservation of traditions is becoming especially urgent.

The issue of cultural change is complex, especially within the framework of religious attitudes and practices. In short, cultural change means redefining the knowledge that is used to shape new social behavior (Spradley & McCurdy, 1975). For cultural change to take place, people need to rethink their current knowledge and create new ways of understanding experience. Cultural change is not just the study of new information, but the adoption of new forms of social behavior and the world realities. Frequently, when people get access to new information they either do not understand its meaning or refuse to believe its content or they cannot use this knowledge to reorganize their behavior. Sometimes, new information conflicts with deep-rooted values. Although people acquire new knowledge they cannot change their traditional cultural patterns. An example is isolated religious communities or individual religiously-oriented groups that are often completely static in terms of cultural changes (Hostetler, 1965). One of these communities is the movement of the Old Believers (in various sources there are "Old Ritualists", "Old Orthodox", "schismatics", "bearded men"). They are quite closed from outsiders and live mostly away from the "laical". Recently, the Old Believers have become increasingly discussed both by journalists (the frequent appearance of news stories about the Old Believers) and in the scientific community.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Everything that we understand by the word "Old Believers" is a kind of alloy of various religious, social, and cultural phenomena. The Old Believers during their formation had various intra-church premises. They were non-acceptance of changes in the books, denial of the corrected ritual system, etc. Some scholars explain this as the spiritual and psychological state of Russian people as well as internal church disagreements. From the moment of its formation the Old Believer movement was divided into two confessional directions: priests and supporters of a priestless sect who subsequently divided into many rumors or consents. Each creed considers Orthodoxy its religion (sometimes called Old Orthodoxy, “alternative” Orthodoxy). A number of creeds represent numerous groups with a wide network of religious communities. Among the largest organizations it is worth noting: the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (ROCC), the Old Orthodox Church and the Russian Council of the Old Orthodox

Pomeranian Church. Each creed (separated by a confessional group) is disputed or there is an irreconcilable conflict in the interpretation of religious texts and practices.

In Soviet times, the main goal of researchers was a profound analysis of the phenomenon of schism from the historical, cultural, and archaeographic views but not statistical accounting. At the same time, it is worth noting the wide scale of expeditions to various parts of our state. However, the vast territories of the Old Believers have remained insufficiently explored (the Volga region, the Urals, Siberia, the Far East, the central and southern regions of Russia). The problems that researchers have encountered in the past have remained unresolved. Among them are multiple divisions into different creeds and sects, a small amount of available materials for study, and the geographical distribution of Old Believers.

### **3. Research Questions**

Thus, there were no reliable statistics of the Old Believers. Consequently, there is not a complete idea of the occurrence of the schism in its entire history till now. Despite the emergence of new research methods and technical capabilities no confessional census is conducted in Russia and such a question is not included in the general census. Information on three million Old Believers is widespread, of which two million live in Russia (Taevskij, 1998).

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main goal of this study is to analyze how strongly and quickly an isolated society integrates its cultural values and attitudes into virtual space. This problem will be clarified by the example of the movement of the Old Believers who over the past 10 years have been actively conducting their religious and social activities on the Internet. This movement is rather conservative. It selectively adopts modern technologies and new media communication tools. However, it is forced to use them to communicate with relatives and friends from other countries, as well as to find a partner to create marriage and family relations (for Old Believers marriage is possible exclusively between members of their religious movement). A separate aspect of the research is the study of communication channels between Old Believers in virtual space. The main methodology of this research aspect is the content analysis of thematic sites (both official and unofficial), pages, and groups in social networks.

### **5. Research Methods**

Due to the fact that the Old Believer communities are rather closed, a periodic analysis was carried out using the research method from 07/20/2019, to 09/23/2019. The choice of group was made on the basis of religious orientation, which presents 7 groups of sites, 7 groups in social VKontakte networks and 3 groups in the Odnoklassniki social network. The choice of a method for the analysis of derivatives based on their religious affiliation, devoted to study and study, based on many different Old Russian consents, as well as certain keywords: God, faith, ancient Orthodox, Christ, Old Believers, Old Believers. As a result, 187 posts on the VKontakte social network and 34 posts on the Odnoklassniki social network, published between July 20, 2019 and September 23, 2019, were analyzed.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Old Believers as a special phenomenon in Russian spiritual life

The appearance of the Old Believers as a “special phenomenon in Russian spiritual life” (Molzinskij, 2011) dates from the middle of the 17th century. The main reasons for the church schism were the process of “book reform”. It implied the reform and correction of most of the liturgical texts as well as the rejection by some of the country's population of church reforms carried out by Patriarch Nikon. The reason for the non-recognition of church reforms according to historians was a strong fear that “the antichrist has already reigned in the world and that Russia would not fall away from true Orthodoxy” (Apanasenok, 2005, p. 54). Therefore, such an “extreme” arose, as the schismatics said, “we will die for a single az”. That meant “we will die for the letter changed in the church books”. However, those changes that were introduced into the spiritual life of the Russian people during these reforms were not so significant. Nevertheless, this caused a fierce rejection among part of the population. Nikon himself did not consider it necessary to introduce these “innovations” so harshly, although, in itself, these were not innovations but a return to the old (Gagarin, 1973, p. 35).

Even the Patriarch of Constantinople himself, in fact, denied correcting the minor differences that had appeared in the rites of local churches over time. He said that Russians can be baptized with two fingers as well as Greeks by three ones: “It is not proper for a servant of the Lord to make strife especially in things that are not among the main and essential” (Bogdanov, 2006, para. 05). Realizing this Nikon allowed publishing books with old readings. He said that old and new books are equivalent and it is possible to use both of them. However, opposition in society increased.

Those who did not accept the correction of church books were anathematized in church charges in 1666–1667. and were persecuted. Later they began to be called schismatics, and the phenomenon itself was called the schism. People themselves who did not accept the innovations, instead of the name of the schismatics, preferred to be called Old Ritualists or Old Believers (Osipov et al., 2017).

Fearing persecution many schismatics fled to sparsely populated and inaccessible areas mainly to Siberia. There the structure and Old Believers begin to take shape dividing into creeds. An extreme trend such as the "supporters of a priestless sect" rejecting the priesthood arises. This was often a necessary measure due to the absence of a priest. But the main idea was that the schismatics believed "since the Antichrist came to the world, the priesthood is no longer real" (Shcheglov, 2006, para. 04). There is up to 70 creeds of supporters of a priestless sect. Among them the most extreme is the consent of unmarried people who deny the sacrament of marriage because “since the Antichrist came, then there is nothing to bring up children for his need” (Shcheglov, 2006, para. 06). And this celibacy led to the most common depravity and fornication, because it is impossible to resist human nature. What was previously sanctified by the sacrament of marriage is now not sanctified by this. Another extreme expression of the schismatics was “burnts”, the so-called “self-immolation” which occurred in the South of Russia, the Don and the North (Romanova, 2012).

Some researchers are of the opinion that the main reason for the split was “the fear of Russia's loss of God's chosen people, despair and the search for salvation” (Ustyugov, 1975, p. 66). According to the researcher S. V. Kushchenko, the schismatics who opposed Nikon’s reforms did not in fact defend the old, but in many respects the well-established a new capitalist way of life (as cited in Ustyugov, 1975). It

traced the principles of the dominance of the material because by a weird coincidence we call them "Old Believers" and they call themselves the Old Orthodox Church. But in fact the "book reform" just had the goal of returning to the original texts, to correcting liturgical texts, returning to the old, and therefore, the Old Believers maintained a new capitalist order.

## **6.2. Place of the Old Believers in the confessional landscape of Russia and the world**

Thus, there were no reliable statistics of the Old Believers. Consequently, there is no a complete idea of the occurrence of the schism in its entire history till now. Despite the emergence of new research methods and technical capabilities no confessional census is conducted in Russia and such a question is not included in the general census. Information on three million Old Believers is widespread, of which two million live in Russia (Taevskij, 1998).

According to the sociological study of the Atlas of Religions and Nationalities of the Russian Federation, in 79 constituent entities of the Russian Federation (information obtained during the survey, sample of 56,900 respondents, coverage of 98.8% of the population of the Russian Federation), the share of Old Believers is less than 0,5% of the total population (Arena. Atlas religij).

It is widely believed that adherents of the Old Believers fled from persecution and hid in the Siberian forests or they were deported by the authorities there. So, Siberia became the main settlement area of the Old Believers. However, the geography of distribution of the Old Believers goes far beyond Siberia. The dead places in which the Old Believers took refuge were found in the Moscow Region, in the North, in the Volga Region, in the Urals and abroad. The largest center for the spread of Old Believers from the first years of its emergence was the Upper Volga Region (Nizhny Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, as well as partially Moscow and Vladimir provinces). The existence of the split was facilitated by the activity of its adherents. Also, the northern lands (Arkhangelsk, Vologda and Olonets (the province had been existed from 1801 till 1922 with the provincial capital in Petrozavodsk.) provinces) where the most radical opponents of reform conducted propaganda can be considered centers of Old Believers. Somewhat later, the Old Believers began to spread to the south (here, its influence in Kaluga province was especially strong) and to the Urals. The schism began to penetrate into Siberia with the first exiles, including Protopop Avvakum revered in the Old Believers. However, already in 1722, Peter I forbade the exile of schismatics to Siberia (Zen'kovskij, 2008).

Today, there are no evident of Old Believer settlements and areas. The statistics of the above sociological study show the following picture of the ratio of the share of Old Believers to the total population: Smolensk region – 2 %; Altai Republic, Mari El Republic, Magadan Region, Kirov Region, Udmurt Republic, Moscow, Oryol Region, Ulyanovsk Region, Kaluga Region, Republic of Mordovia, Leningrad Region, Komi Republic, Pskov Region, Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District, Vologda Region, Perm Territory – 1 %; in other constituent entities of the Russian Federation, the share of Old Believers is insignificant (Arena. Atlas religij). Old Believer communities spread around the world as a result of emigration during the time of persecution. Representatives of various Old Believer consents live in Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Moldova, Romania, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Ukraine and other countries. Moreover, in a number of countries their number is significant, for example, in Romania, a group called Lipovan has 105–107 thousand (Serov, 2015).

In the above countries, the Old Believers population is represented by the descendants of believers from Russia emigrated at different times. Interesting is the modern experience of joining the Christian communities of Uganda, which were adopted in the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result of several official visits, in May 2012, the Council of the Metropolis decided to admit Proto-Presbyter Joakim Kiyimba, who leads the African Christian community (numbering several hundred people), to the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church "as the second rank in the existing rank" (ROOBC, 2017). In April 2017, the Russian Orthodox Church delegation again visited a community in Uganda, which in an official press release represents both "Ugandan Old Believers" and "African Old Believers" (ROOBC, 2017).

### **6.3. Virtualization of Old Believer Religious Organizations**

Technological progress did not bypass the Old Believers. So the young generation of Old Believers actively use various virtual social networks due to the huge remoteness of their communities from each other: in the Americas, Canada, Australia, Coast Land and Siberia. At the same time, the use of communication means is selective among the Old Believers. Contrary to the belief that Old Believers do not accept all the blessings of the modern world but adhere to centuries-old traditions and foundations they are active users of the Internet. In particular, they use many social networks (Vkontakte.ru, Odnoklassniki.ru, Facebook.com, etc.), and therefore the couples are increasingly finding each other through online dating services.

Therefore, today, there is an extensive religious content of the Old Believers in the virtual space: from the official websites of religious organizations to groups and pages in various social networks of community members themselves. So, for example, large Old Believer organizations have their own websites: the Russian Orthodox Old Believers Church, the Russian Old Orthodox Church and the Old Orthodox Pomeranian Church. Since the theme and content of the sites of all the Old Believer religious organizations are almost the same, for a more detailed understanding of the religious content of the Old Believers, we will consider the virtual activity of the Old Orthodox Pomeranian Church.

The site "Old Believers – Pomeranians" was created in June 2017 and was originally conceived as an Internet source that tells about the life of the Saratov Old Belief, which retains all the dogmas and provisions of the Orthodox Church until the 17th century. In June 2019, the site changed its former name "Old Believers – Pomeranians" to "Old Believers – Pomeranians", the design of the site changed, it tells about the life of the whole Pomor Old Belief in Russia. The main forms of activity of the Pomeranian Church are:

- conducting divine services and requirements in religious buildings and premises, state institutions and residential premises and other places in the manner prescribed by law;
- preaching and peacekeeping;
- foundation (restoration) of temples and houses of worship;
- organization of educational institutions, training courses for mentors, readers, singers, setters and others;
- publication and distribution of official, spiritual and educational literature.

The pages of the site often host articles about the history of the Church and its dogmas, about the life of communities and the entire Pomor Old Belief, and about famous figures of Old Belief. Any user on this site can look at the Old Believers strips of bast with prints and read stories about Christ's ascetics, listen to audio recordings (poems, songs, prayers, etc.) and watch videos (interviews with religious figures of the Old Believers, recordings of round tables, lectures, processions, etc.). The section "Library" is constantly updated. It is possible to find there not only read the necessary prayers, canons, and books in the public domain, but also save them (Starovery-pomorcy).

Another Internet resource dedicated to the theme of the Old Believers is the news portal Russian Faith created in 2013. This resource, according to the comments of the developers, is focused on "creating an inter-Old Believer cultural, scientific and media space, while refraining from proselytism and inter-Old Believer polemics". The pages of this site publish materials on the life and customs of all Old Believers' consents including the smallest ones. Also there are articles by heterodox (not Old Believer) authors still "interesting to readers who are familiar with the themes of ancient Russian culture, church tradition, public life and, in general, the fate of the Russian world" on the site. In addition to the daily news covering the activities of the Old Believers in Russia and the world as well as articles on the history of the Old Believers the portal has two separate sections that deserve special attention – this is the "Map of the Old Believers" and "Question to the Priest".

The "Old Believers Map" is a large-scale section that shows the location of all Old Believer communities and churches in the world, and also indicates to which consent this community or church belongs and basic information. This section appeared as the developers claimed after a lot of user appeals on the search for the nearest Old Believer church or contact with the local priest. To make it easier for users to find answers to such questions a separate section was added to the site which later grew into a large-scale "Map of the Old Believers". The Question to the Priest section has existed since 2014 and is very popular among Old Believers (about 400-450 views and 250-300 visits per month). The subjects of questions from believers are very diverse: from the observance of religious dogmas to social issues. Due to the fact that there are quite a few questions, the answer to one question takes several days. In order to ask a question, it is necessary to fill in several fields: name, city, email, title of the question, subject (proposed in the list) and the question itself. The choice of the topic of the question divides the appeals into thematic rubrics, and then they are sent to the clergy who are competent in this topic, thereby automating and speeding up the response process.

In addition to the official sites of churches and consents of the Old Believers, as well as news sites and portals, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church with the blessing of Metropolitan Korniliy launched the official online store of church utensils Ismaragd. According to the founders of the store, "Although this project sells literature, it is not commercial. We plan to spend almost all the proceeds on education, charity. We also want to give our compatriots the opportunity to read life-saving literature".

The assortment of this store is quite wide: books and magazines on religious subjects; icons and crosses, some of which are made to order; discs with music and videos; sets for weddings, discos, censers, crosses, kitshki (a female headdress), sets for a christening, sets for an icon lamp, incense, an icon lamp, a miter, the press and many other things. Moreover, the range is constantly updated. Payment is made by online transfer, and delivery of goods throughout the country is carried out by mail.

Another service created specifically for representatives of the Old Believers is the “Starover” site, launched in 2009. Its main task, according to the developers, was to simplify the search for a partner for creating a family, due to the remoteness of the Old Believer communities from each other: “... this site is not for flirting and fornication: we made every effort to help those who are morally mature to create family, was able to do this with the assistance of modern technical means”.

At the registration stage, a person will be asked to indicate personal data, which will be checked by moderators, who will check the entered data for relevance and expediency and subsequently decide whether to approve the questionnaire or not. Only after its approval will it be possible to access the dating service.

In the search options for a suitable profile, a person can specify the age, region of residence, education, as well as consent. Almost every week on the site there are new profiles of both men and women. Over a thousand people visit this site per month. If we analyze the content of the questionnaires, we can say that not only young, but also mature users who are single for various reasons want to find a “soul mate”. In our opinion, the vast majority of profiles look "not fake" but quite real.

Along with Orthodox, Islamic, Buddhist, Protestant and other religious content on the Internet, several applications for mobile devices have also been developed for Old Believers. Analysis of one of the leading services for the sale and distribution of applications for mobile devices “Google Play” allowed distinguishing two mobile applications: “Titlo” and “Drevlekalendar”. The first allows quickly translating Slavic numbers into Arabic and vice versa. The same can be done with the letters.

The second application “Drevleklendar” is an Old Believer calendar. The basis of this application is the old printed Hourglass and the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church. It allows calculating all the moving and motionless holidays, the beginning and end of fasting, the days of remembrance of the dead, and the Sighted Easter and much more. It is also possible to search for the names of all the names of the saints for any year.

## **7. Conclusion**

Thus, during the study of the Old Believers activities in the space of virtual networks we came to the conclusion that the cultural and religious identification of the Old Believers is carried out according to a scheme that has not practically changed since the 17th century. However, under the influence of new media the Old Believer institute of prohibitions which allowed them to maintain their religious and cultural identity all this time undergoes various modifications. Until the end of the 19th – the beginning of the 20th centuries, most Old Believers categorically rejected various innovations in their lives, considered them sinful, and tried in every possible way to protect both themselves and the young generation of Old Believers from them. However, closer to the 50s of the XX century, when new technologies of that time gradually filled not only social and cultural but also religious space, the heads of Old Believer explanations and consents made the first attempts to rethink their attitude to these technologies (Shahov, 2002), as well as their coordination with the Old Believer religious teachings. As a result, the use of various means of technological progress gradually began to adapt to their traditional way of life, thereby transforming their cultural identity.

For Old Believer communities scattered throughout the world the transition to virtual space means the formation of a new structure of cultural and religious identity. Due to this, there is a continuity of the material accumulated by generations through virtual communication channels that are new for them. The couples are increasingly finding each other through online dating services. The Old Believers clergy have the opportunity to conduct their proseletic activity in the space of virtual networks. Therefore, today, in the virtual space there is an extensive religious content of the Old Believers: from the official websites of religious organizations to groups and pages in various social networks of community members themselves.

The modern generations of Old Believers, of course, understand that it is impossible to completely isolate themselves from the outside world, but they do not want to mix with them, accepting various cultural and technical benefits. Therefore, in some cases, Old Believers make a compromise: obtaining a passport, military service, vaccination, etc. But at the same time, they do not receive any government payments and benefits, do not purchase products with a barcode considering it an “anti-Christ seal” (Smilyanskaya, 2000), etc. More mature generations of the Old Believers understand that the young generation is completely different from them, but all the Old Believers, without exception, unshakably believe in the truthfulness, correctness and eternity of their old faith.

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