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#### RELIGIOUS IDENTITY TRANSGRESSION IN STUDENTS' COMMUNITY OF CASPIAN REGION AND SOUTHERN RUSSIA

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#### *Abstract*

The article is devoted to the study of the main vectors of religious transgression peculiar to Southern Russia and the Caspian Sea region. The analysis of the level of awareness of students about religious transitions and the degree of possible influence of these processes on the transformation of religious identity of young people living in these territories, on the religious landscape as a whole is made. The transgression of religious identity is understood as a change, religion and relationship to the sacred. The main research methods include a complex of sociological quantitative methods. This all is supplemented with data from focus-group studies. Units of the sample were student youth, mainly in the Caspian regions: Astrakhan Oblast, the Republics of Kalmykia, Dagestan, etc. Comparative analysis of data obtained as a result of sociological research conducted by the authors in 2015 and 2019 allows us to speak about clearly traced dynamics of the influence of processes associated with religious transgression on the transformation of religious identity of young people in the region under study. Firstly, among young people there is an increase in the number of people informed about the facts of religious transgression. Secondly, there is a decrease in the percentage of negative attitudes towards a change of faith and transitions from a state of faith to indifferentism and atheism. Thirdly, there is a certain awareness of the presence of virtual religious cults and the nascent interest in them, especially from the most active representatives of Digital culture.

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**Keywords:** Religion, religious identity, transgression, youth, Caspian Region.



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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, identity research has become increasingly relevant in Russian and foreign science. It is associated with many factors and above all with the fact that in recent times the traditional patterns of cultural life are changing under the influence of globalization processes and the entry into the Digital era. In the globalization epoch the tendency to form some kind of universal levelled identity is counterbalanced by glocalization processes aimed at preserving the cultural characteristics of the regions. The diversity and complexity of the mutual existence and interaction of identities, their fluidity and ability to transform are noted by many researchers. Some of them believe that only the formation of a universal identity in combination with local cultural characteristics is able to preserve the existing civilization (Sanjoy, 2019).

In connection with the above-mentioned processes there is a particular interest of religious identity, its place in the cultural processes of different countries (Różycka-Tran, 2017), (Bilalia, Iqbala, & Çelikb, 2018) and different groups of the population (Thumma, 1991), including age (Kim & Wilcox, 2014) and its impact on various forms of behavior (Benjamin, Choi, & Fisher, 2010). A special place in these studies is occupied by the process of transformation of religious identity (Jones & Cox, 2017). In our study we will use the term “transgression” due to the fact that we are not investigating changes in the religious landscape as a whole, as was done by our American colleagues, but we study the processes related to the attitude to these changes in the youth community of a multicultural region. Moreover, the term “transgression” is widely used in modern socio-humanitarian science. He entered into an active scientific revolution and theoretically understood in the philosophy of postmodernism J. Bataille, M. Foucault, M. Blancheau, J. Derrida, etc. Despite the fact that this category is mainly used in epistemological reasoning as a discursive it has general philosophical and metaphysical sense. The transgression of postmodernism classics was defined as “going beyond”, crossing certain boundaries, “experience-limit”, opening new horizons “presented after the realization of all possible possibilities that overthrow all previous ones and quietly eliminate them” (Maurice, 1962, p. 579). This is “the edge of the possible,” “burning experience,” which “does not attach importance to the boundaries established from outside” (Bataille, 1957, p. 91). “This is a gesture that faces the limit ... The limit and the transgression are obliged to each other by the density of their being” (Foucault, 1963). Thus, we see that in the original version the idea of going beyond the limits, boundaries, and norms generally accepted in a given society lies at the heart of the concept of transgression.

We will not touch upon the fundamental philosophical understanding of transgression as going beyond our animal biological nature (Kashtanova, 2016), we are interested in the social aspect of this phenomenon as a process of violation of traditional norms. This is a refusal to comply with any given conditions which forms a special way of treating reality as a possibility and necessity of trespassing. The presence of the boundaries of what is permitted implies its violation, but this is far from always a purely destructive act. Often this is a positive expansion of the boundaries of both society and the capabilities of the individual. Moreover, one of the fundamental features of the postmodern interpretation of transgression is going beyond the profane and access to the sacred sphere. In this case, it is directly related to the transformation of religious identity under the influence of transgression processes. This process occurs during transitions of an individual from one religion to another, both traditional and non-traditional one, or the change of religious views to atheistic ones. Both in the first and in the second cases the processes characterized by going beyond the limits of the usual norms are observed.

## 2. Problem Statement

The youth student environment has always been the most progressive and at the same time susceptible to all kinds of ideological influences. It is most unstable since it is in the stage of formation and constant changes. The lability, flexibility, and susceptibility of young people are also due to the social instability of post-Soviet society (Golovchin & Mkoyan, 2018). The formation of post-Soviet youth was influenced by traditional human values such as family, love, and health which gradually supplanted communist ideals. The religious sphere is also beginning to exert a significant influence on it. The modern student community is already formed by a completely post-Soviet space, on the one hand, free of ideological dictates and violent atheization, but subject to the active influence of digital culture. Representatives of the modern generation of Russian youth for the most part are active users of the global network which naturally cannot but reflect on the peculiarities of the formation of their value picture of the world, the form and style of communication, perception, acquisition, and assimilation of information. Any modern user of electronic media has the opportunity to be in two worlds. One world is its physical existence where everything is mundane: everyday affairs, traditional values, and conventional norms. The other world is virtual one. There are no restrictions and prohibitions. You can enjoy freedom under the guise of a fictitious name (nickname), create and join like-minded groups, get understanding, support, and electronic signs of attention (likes). That is why the modern young generation is characterized by the active creation and promotion of its digital profile (not always an exact copy of the reflection of reality) in social networks. It is a rather time-consuming process and can lead to voluntary isolation and rejection of physical communication with friends, parents, and society in general. That means a decrease in social activity in the real world. It is the susceptibility of the little-studied forms of virtual social activity that allows modern young people to be classified as representatives of the Digital culture and sets many new tasks for researchers. One of them is the problem of studying the formation of identity among young people, as such, and religious, in particular. Since the youth community is the most unstable due to the fact that it is in the stage of formation and constant changes, the formation of the identity of young people is associated with various transgressive processes. It is dictated by youthful nihilism due to the lack of life and social experience even if the desire to be different from others is considered to be deviant and contrary to social norms and values. This leads to the fact that young people always strive to go beyond the established norms, to violate them, thereby creating new own boundaries. So, the religious transgression makes it possible to change the status of a virtual profile, changing religion in the real world (especially when choosing alternative nontraditional versions) or go into complete denial of religion, and join a whole host of virtual peers. That is why it is perceived by the modern generation as just one of the ways to violate established social traditions and borders and thereby declare its uniqueness both in the real world and in virtual space. The problem is that active users of virtual networks who have made a religious transition are beginning to blur the boundaries established by religions in the real world and form a new image of virtual religiosity. But the last one has little to do with the canonical requirements imposed on this concept by the world's leading religions. The authors of the project put forward the following hypothesis. Such transitions become actively discussed in social networks, and today's young people are representatives of Digital culture. So they should not only be well informed about cases of religious transgression but also have some formed opinion about this social phenomenon. In this regard, the authors of the article set the task to analyze the

level of awareness of student youth about cases of religious transgression and to determine the vectors of religious transgression characteristic of a multicultural region of southern Russia.

In this study we specify the postmodern understanding of transgression and expand our interpretation of religious transgression in relation to our earlier studies (Topchiev, Dryagalov, & Yakushenkova, 2016). By religious transgression we mean not only the transition from knowing nothing to sacredness or the change of religions but also the loss of faith as well as its acquisition and the transition to new forms of religiosity in the digital space. Religious transgression will be understood as the process of changing the religious identity of any vector of orientation since it is always going beyond the existing limits.

For analysis we have identified the following areas of religious transgression:

- a. Change of non-religious (secular) identity to a religious one.
- b. Transition from religiosity to unbelief and atheism
- c. Change of religion (presented in tabular form).
- d. The use of virtual religious forms.

A research group conducted a sociological survey in 2015 and in 2019. A cumulative sample of the first survey was presented by 433 respondents, the second by 531 respondents. The 2015 study covered only students from Astrakhan State University. In 2019, the survey was supplemented by an on-line survey which allowed in addition to the Astrakhan region to cover the region of the Russian Caspian: united under the general term “Caucasus” respondents from Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, as well as students of Kalmykia, Rostov, Volgograd regions, and Crimea.

### **3. Research Questions**

The problem statement leads us to the following research questions. We assume that there is a certain dynamics of the transgression of religious processes and our research will help us to figure out how, in what way, and in what direction these processes change. The fact that the step between the studies was about five years gives us an opportunity to talk about the generational difference between the respondents of the first and second surveys. In the latter case this is a generation of the post-Soviet space fully formed by the digital culture and affordable gadgets. It has grown in the environment of a steady state influence of religion on everyday life. Therefore, one of the working questions was the following: how do new social and cultural and “digital” realities influence the level of religiosity of young people, on the intensification of transgressive processes in the sphere of religious identity. Do the flows of religious transitions and attitudes of young people towards them change quantitatively and qualitatively? Another important research issue is the following – how much is the Digital generation informed about religious content in networks and how it relates to new virtual forms of religious cults.

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

The main goal of the research is to study the mechanisms of formation of religious identity and the vectors of the dynamics of its transformation under the influence of religious transgression in the student community of young people in southern Russia and the Caspian Sea.

In accordance with the goal the following research tasks were solved:

- determination of the level of religiosity of students of the Caspian;
- analysis of the attitude to the facts of religious transgression among students of the territory of the Caspian region;
- consideration of the level of respondents' awareness about the formation of religious content in the virtual space.

## 5. Research Methods

The main research methods are mainly of a sociological nature. These are collecting and analyzing empirical research data: questioning, analyzing one-dimensional and two-dimensional distributions, grouping data, comparative analysis, analyzing central tendency measures, correlation analysis, analysis of variance, and t-tests. Mathematical data analysis was performed using a professional computer program designed for statistical data processing: IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0.

The study was conducted in three stages:

- development of research design, sampling, tools;
- conducting field work to collect primary information;
- analysis of primary information, writing an analytical report.

The units of the sample were students, undergraduates and graduate students of universities in Astrakhan, Rostov, Volgograd regions and republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and the Crimean Autonomous Republic.

An available cluster selection has been applied. The volume of the sample of the quantitative study numbered 433 respondents in 2015 and 531 respondents in 2019.

## 6. Findings

We carried out a comparative analysis of the results of the 2015 and 2019 surveys to track changes in the level of religiosity of students, change the confessional structure of the student population of the region. We also studied the level of awareness of the facts of religious transgression and attitudes to transitions from one religious system to another.

To understand the original picture we analyzed the level of students' religiosity. He exceeded the threshold level of 50%. In 2015, the level of religiosity of young Astrakhan citizens was 65.3% and in 2019 it was 54.5%, i.e. there is a decrease in religiosity of almost 10% due to an uncertainty factor, since a large number of students have not made a choice. The results of the focus-groups obtained in the research process confirmed the results of the survey. Participants expressed the opinion that religion had recently become too active and began to interfere in the social life of people which in their opinion was an annoying factor. Informants believe that young people are less religious than the older generation. It is possible that the great indifference of young people is associated with increased information flows and the lack of flexibility of domestic religious institutions and their inability to adapt to changing virtual space to attract young adepts. If we take into account the regional factor, the level of religiosity in the Caucasus is much higher than that of the multicultural Astrakhan region – 80.8%. The Caucasus is overwhelmingly Muslim – 84.6% and in

the multicultural Astrakhan 41.3% of respondents attributed themselves to Christians, 29.1% to Muslims and 0.5% to Buddhists.

To clarify the specifics of transgressive processes we had to clarify the peculiarities of understanding religiosity among the young people surveyed. For this respondents were asked the question “What means to be a religious person for you first of all?” with a given scale of answers and a free option. In general, the results are distributed as follows: the option “Comply with human and moral and ethical norms” was noted by 66% of respondents (351 people), 38% (202 people) – “Firmly adhere to the norms and rules of sacred scriptures (Quran, Bible, Torah and etc.)”, 36.1% of respondents (192 people) believe that being a religious person is first of all “Praying and visiting religious places (mosques, churches, temples, khuruls, synagogues, etc.)”

An interesting answer for us was “To feel like a representative of a particular religious group” which was chosen by only 22.4% of respondents (119 people). It can be assumed that religion and religious institutions have a relatively weak influence on student youth in the formation of a collective religious identity and are often of a formal nature. Researchers from Adygea (Lyausheva & Shkhachemukova, 2017) expressed this assumption in their work “Religious Identity as the Basis for Countering Religious Extremism”. In 2016, they conducted a similar sociological survey among students of the republic of Adygea (580 respondents). These studies allowed them to conclude that “the influence of religion on students despite the pronounced tendencies of increasing religiosity among its separate parts cannot also be called decisive in the daily life of students in their value field. This influence is most often of a formal nature and is associated with traditional ethnic stereotypes” (Lyausheva & Shkhachemukova, 2017, p. 581). When answering this question 5.1% of respondents (27 people) also noted the option “to wear religious clothes”, 7.1% of respondents (38 people) found it difficult to answer this question. In addition to the answers offered by the researchers some respondents in the “other” column have entered such options as: “to know that God will help you in a difficult moment”, “not to violate spiritual laws”, “to believe in what does not exist”, “to believe in God”, “Just to believe,” “to manifest with your life and actions what you believe in”, and “faith in God within yourself.”

Interesting is the regional alignment. The influence of religious norms and institutions in the multicultural Astrakhan is much higher than in the predominantly multi-religious environment of the Caucasus (Table 01).

**Table 01.** Survey region\* 4. What means to be a religious person for you first of all? (%) (multivariate question)

<b>Variant of answer</b>	<b>Astrakhan region</b>	<b>Caucasus</b>
Comply with human and moral and ethical norms	38,6%	33,7%
Firmly adhere to the norms and rules of sacred scriptures (Quran, Bible, Torah and etc.)	20,3%	4,7%
Praying and visiting religious places (mosques, churches, temples, khuruls, synagogues, etc.)	20,8%	2,2%
To feel like a representative of a particular religious group	13,2%	1,6%
To wear religious clothes	3,0%	0,5%
Difficult to answer	4,2%	0,3%

A comparative analysis of research has shown that the facts of religious transgression are known to more than half of the students surveyed, and there is an increase in their awareness from 53.3% in 2015 to 67.9% in 2019. Moreover, it should be taken into account that in 2015 we considered religious transgression mainly a change of religion. It can be assumed that this is due to the peculiarities of the multi-confessional environment changes in the value system of young people, the influence of the virtual network, an increase in the general level of knowledge about religious systems, etc. The researchers did not affect the study of sources of awareness of such facts of transition and its causes. However, in the Caucasus in a more monoconfessional community the level of awareness was also almost as high – 61.5%.

The dominant transgression continues to be the transition from Christianity to Islam, 70.4% in 2015 and 66.2% in 2019. Then the transition from Islam to Christianity comes respectively 27.7% and 27.2%.

**Table 02.** What kind of transition from one system of religion to another one have you had to observe? (%) (multivariate question)

Variant of answer*		Per cent (%) of respondents' answers	Percentage (%) from the sum of answers (the sum = 100%)	2015 (%)
1.	From Christianity to Islam	66,2	31,1	70,4
2.	From Islam to Christianity	27,2	12,8	27,7
3.	From Christianity to non-traditional religions	10,2	4,8	6,6
4.	From Christianity to Buddhism	11,3	5,3	2,8
5.	From Islam to Buddhism	2,2	1,0	2,8
6.	From Buddhism to Christianity	3,0	1,4	2,3
7.	From Buddhism to Islam	1,9	0,9	0,5
8.	From Christianity to Judaism	1,6	0,8	1,4
9.	From Islam to non-traditional religions	4,7	2,2	1,4
10.	From non-traditional religions to Christianity	3,3	1,5	1,4
11.	From Judaism to Christianity	1,1	0,5	0,5
12.	From believer to atheists	52,5	24,6	-
13.	From atheist to believers	23,9	11,2	-
14.	I do not remember / difficult to answer	4,1	1,9	1,1

Note: \* from those faced with the situation of transition from one system of religion to another  
 \* the options “from believer to atheists” and “from atheist to believers” were not used in the 2015 study

We see that in most cases awareness of the different directions of transgression either remained at the same level or increased. The second position in the table is atheistic transgression, i.e. disappointment of youth in any religious system.

In general, the tolerance of Astrakhan students in 2015 in relation to the religious transgression was quite high (Table 02). Moreover, loyalty was differentiated depending on the transgression vector.

In general, the loyalty rates from 90 to 60%.

The most loyal attitude towards the transition from non-traditional to traditional religion (respondents understood the terms non-traditional and traditional religion based on their own ideas):

– 62.7% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;

- 22.8% – positive;
- 10.3% – negative.

The following loyalty is the transition from one traditional to another traditional religion:

- 70.5% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 9.4% – positive;
- 15% – negative.

Then the transition from one religion or another to atheism follows:

- 58.7% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 10.5% – positive;
- 28.1% – negative.

The respondents are least loyal to the transition from traditional to non-traditional religion:

- 56.7% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 3.2% – positive;
- 36% – negative.

In 2019, the level of loyalty to these processes increased slightly. Considering the attitude of the respondents to different types of transition orientation, it can be noted that the majority of research participants are neutral towards such phenomena. The most loyal attitude to the transition from a state of disbelief to faith:

- 47.4% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 41.7% – positively;
- 5.5% – negative.

The next loyalty is the transition from non-Traditional to traditional religion:

- 54.7% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 31.3% – positive;
- 5.7% – negative.

Then the transition from traditional to unconventional religion follows:

- 58.7% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 24.5% – positive;
- 8.1% – negative.

The transition from one traditional to another traditional religion causes less loyalty among respondents:

- 57.9% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 13.9% – positive;
- 19.4% – negative.

The respondents are least loyal to the transition from one religion or another to atheism:

- 50.8% of respondents treat this transition as neutral;
- 22.3% – positive;
- 20.4% – negative.

In 2015 the highest level of disloyalty was 36%, but in 2019 it reaches only 20.4%. This process is almost identical both in the Caucasus and in Astrakhan region.



The obtained data was confirmed by a comparative analysis of focus groups. Compared to the 2015 survey, the focus group study of 2019 showed that respondents became more informed about the facts of the religious transition. In 2015 most of the informants knew about transitions from one traditional to another traditional religion, but in 2019 the transition from the traditional to the unconventional or virtual, as well as disappointment in religion and the adoption of an atheistic worldview were cited. The attitude to such transitions has not changed. It is neutral positive. Almost all respondents believe that changing religion is a personal choice of everyone and, often, is just a formality. This indicates the mobility of the worldview of young people, their readiness for transgressive processes, and a change in their identity. The most important thing in transgressive processes according to the participants of the focus groups is the need to avoid extremist forms. Therefore, it is desirable that such processes take place not at a teenager, but at a more sustainable age.

Another vector of transgression of religious identity that is still in its infancy in Russia is the transition to a virtual, digital form of religiosity. Such kind of studies was conducted by us in 2019. 69.1% of the student audience almost completely using the virtual space is informed about the existence of Internet resources of religious content. 14,3% of them are informed about the existence of "virtual religious cults". Only 12% use Internet resources. Among those who use the Internet the Muslims are two times more than the Christians (22.7% – 10.5%) Perhaps this is due to the fact that a whole series of ritual applications has been created in Islam, for example, determining the direction to Mecca.

## **7. Conclusion**

So, initially assuming that the youth is subject to transgressive processes associated with the transformation of religious identity, this study confirmed our assumptions. An analysis of changes in statistical indicators over the past 5 years suggests that there is a certain dynamics of transgressive processes of religious identity characteristic of young people in southern Russia.

There are several vectors of religious transgression. The first vector is associated with the influence of religious transgression on reducing the level of religiosity and the transition from a state of faith to indifference and atheism. Studies show that the youth of the Astrakhan region has become less religious. The second vector shows the dynamics of the increase in the number of people informed about the facts of religious transgression. It can be assumed that this is due to the increase in religious transitions and the free discussion of this issue. The number of those who have a positive or neutral attitude to changes in the religious identity of any orientation has increased. The only thing that is subject to censure is the extremist transgression vector. Another vector of religious transgression is an interest in religious content among young people, although these processes are still in embryonic form. Also, the authors of the article managed to find out that about 5% of respondents in 2019 showed a good awareness of the presence of virtual religious cults. This question requires more detailed study since in 2015 almost none of the respondents knew about the existence of such virtual religious tumors.

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