

CSIS 2019
**11th International Scientific and Theoretical Conference “Communicative
Strategies of Information Society”**

**CYBER LAUGHTER AS NEW RELIGIOSITY COMPONENT IN
DIGITAL SOCIETY**

Marina V. Fedorova (a), Mira B. Rotanova (b)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod, Genkinoy St. 61-119, Nizhny Novgorod, 603024, Russia,
marafed2204@mail.ru

(b) Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod, Dolzhanskaja 1a-32, Nizhny Novgorod, 603086, Russia
miraborisovna@gmail.com

Abstract

The authors tackle the evolutionary development of laughter culture in society and the interrelation between religious and laughter practices. It is underlined that laughter used to fulfill the function of sacralization in archaic and medieval cultures. Nowadays laughter culture exists in the form of cyber laughter culture. The authors focus on laughter culture peculiarities within the process of religiosity genesis among Russian youths. The authors provide the analysis of Russian young people's moral values evolution, study laughter culture realization in the Internet space. Special attention is paid to Internet memes analysis as the major objects of laughter culture. Internet memes represent by themselves the main part of the content provided by religious groups. Based on the conducted study related to the Russian younger generation's moral values, it is possible to state that cyber laughter fulfills, firstly, the function of desacralization concerning traditional religions. Secondly, though, it also contributes to sacralization objects. Foremost it touches upon the modern computer games sphere. One of the contemporary functions of cyber laughter can be referred to as the punitive one revealed through trolling and cyberbullying. Digital society's laughter culture manifests itself not only through games, anti-behavior and various Internet objects. The authors review other types of laughter culture manifestations within the framework of new religiosity. These are something comic in portraying the supernatural in cinematography and the parody religions phenomenon.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Laughter culture, cyber laughter, new religiosity, Internet meme, parody religions.



1. Introduction

The interrelation between such phenomena as laughter and religiosity has been repeatedly emphasized by the scientists researching the genesis of sociocultural phenomena. It is to be underlined that cultural laughter is in the center of research rather than a biological one. Biological or physiological laughter can be traced in many animal species, whereas cultural laughter acts uniquely as anthropogenic culture phenomenon. The primary known to us form of cultural laughter (the archaic one) is closely linked with mythology and archaic forms of religion. Ritual laughter researchers (I. S. Gilhus, O.R. Arans, S. Halliwell, D.S. Likhachev, M.M. Bakhtin, B.A. Uspensky, O.M. Freidenberg, V.Ya. Propp, M.T. Ryumina and etc.), in their turn, provide a different evaluation of the essence and the role of archaic (ritual) laughter within human culture (Gilhus, 2004; Golozubov, 2014; Chaniotis, 2018). However, they unanimously agree that it used to accompany a person in any life-threatening situation. This fact gives grounds to put forward the idea that archaic laughter is closely connected with death, violence, sex and orgic customs. Laughter in this context acts as a religious experience phenomenon, a type of hierophany (according to M.Eliade) and can be reviewed simultaneously with such metacategories as the sacral, the Absolute, the nominee, the transcendental.

With the development of human society and social structure complexity there arise an array of cultural laughter manifestations. The differentiation of play behavior (as a laughter culture element) and a ritual (as a constituent part of religious practices) into two independent forms of conditional behavior is observed. Ritual laughter manifestations can still be observed within the play space of dionysiacs, saturnalia, and carnivals. The clash of two different worldviews (the pagan and the Christian ones) was specifically revealed in the culture of folk humor during the medieval period and the Renaissance. This fact allowed for distinguishing such a characteristic peculiar to laughter culture as antibehaviour (M.M. Bakhtin, B.A. Uspensky, etc.) that is revealed in a conscious rejection of the established norms and contributing to preserving archaic consciousness (Bakhtin, 1990).

Within the early modern period and with the development of secular tendencies laughter and religious practices got drastically separated. This tradition found its realization in the early days of mass culture. Laughter and religiosity used to be perceived for a long time as something completely unlinkable. The dialectic of the interrelation between laughter culture and religiosity in this period existed in the form of 'laughter round a cult'. To clarify, religion (together with its constituent elements) was mocked at (jokes ranging from well-intentioned ones to insults or malicious satire). Thus, the ritual function of laughter, the sacralization of space and objects, ceased to exist. From the early modern period on, the function of desacralization started to hold the leading position among those referring to laughter during the rise of religiosity. It is to be underlined, though, this refers particularly to Abraham's traditional religions, primarily to Christianity. As for oriental religions, laughter there remained a part of their religious tradition. As far as western society is concerned, laughter started fulfilling a different scope of functions (besides that of desacralization), like entertaining, communicative and adaptive.

The present-day stage of civilizational development is characterized by the aim to integrate into the unified global system. There are, however, two ambivalent tendencies: on the one hand, the general distribution of the unified mass culture model with a number of subcultural manifestations, whereas, on the other hand, the search for national cultural identifications. Postmodernism and after-postmodernism have

established a peculiar world outlook, in which game, irony and the focus on entertainment hold the main positions. There is a marked interest in religion (post-secular society). New digital technologies are being actively and widely spread together with the establishment of global digital space.

Cyberspace development has led to the situation when all the sociocultural reality phenomena (including laughter culture and religiosity) are subjected to digitalization. The question of the correlation between religiosity and laughter culture has acquired a special relevance within the framework of a new sociocultural situation for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the topic is poorly studied and requires further research. Secondly, it makes us evaluate the place of man with his demands within the fast-changing reality of modern society. Thirdly, based on our investigation, the research of digital society laughter culture influence on modern man religiosity establishment phenomenon allows for a prognosis regarding the perspective of definite social phenomena development in the future.

2. Problem Statement

Within the mass culture of global society the orientation towards the entertaining character and game is regarded as the domineering one, while society itself acquires the status of being 'humorous'. Gamification is becoming the key technology tackling all the scope of socio-cultural phenomena of the contemporary world, including such a conservative form of public consciousness as religion. Within the framework of the article under consideration, we bear in mind the assumption that religious sentiment is intrinsic to all human beings. It is often latent, subconscious, sometimes even denied by an individual. This approach is reflected in the idea of cryptoreligiosity of the phenomenology of religion put forward by Eliade (1994).

It is relevant to remark that the given approach does not contradict the theory of evolution. Evolutionary religious studies define religiosity as the result of human reasoning evolution, while neurotheology has proved the fact that predisposition to religious experience may occur due to the work of the whole brain of an individual, not only its separate parts. In other words, a human is a religious creature. The religious character of contemporary people is determined on a large scale by modern society realia. One of the leading factors determining modern paradigms is the laughter culture of the digital epoche. It is rather obvious that the dialectical relationship between laughter and religiosity within digital society has acquired a new stage in its development. This topic has its own peculiarities in Russia due to the particular characteristics concerning both laughter culture (laughter culture is often exposed to various forms of prosecution and prohibition as opposing in its sharp form the officially established one) and religiosity (the merging of religious and national identities).

3. Research Questions

The following questions are fundamental for the research under consideration:

3.1. What are the forms through which laughter behavior and gamification are revealed within the scope of the outlined religious issues?

3.2. What are the functions peculiar to cyber laughter culture in modern society?

3.3. What influence does laughter culture impose on the religious identification process of contemporary Russian young people?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research paper under consideration is the urge to analyze the importance of digital society laughter culture within the process of establishing religiosity among Russian young people.

5. Research Methods

Considering laughter a religious phenomenon is based on phenomenology, taking the hermeneutic-phenomenological method put forward by M. Eliade as the basic one: the concept of cryptoreligiosity and homo religious.

The results provided by the large-scale investigation of the moral values evolution within the period of 2006 till 2018 (more than 10000 people) inherent to the younger generation living in the Nizhny Novgorod Region (the RF model region) served the main source of empiric data. Being integral of this research, we managed to clarify several points owing to the focused interviewing of some representatives of the youth (those holding the leading positions within the social groups). All in all, there were 510 respondents. The data provided by such organizations as All-Russia Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), Levada-Center and the Research Service 'Sreda' were employed in this investigation as well. We also resorted to the data provided by various religious organization sites as a source of deriving the empiric material, as well as their communities in social networks (VKontakte, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), a number of messenger channels (Telegram Messenger) and on YouTube. We paid special attention to analyzing young people's communities, public and groups in social networks and messengers.

6. Findings

Within the framework of the genesis and development of digital society laughter culture, it has entered a new stage of its development that can be defined as cyber laughter. Digital society by itself carries play nature: it's plastic, dynamic, characterized by carnivality, grotesque and biworldness. Thus, digital technologies used to serve as a powerful driving force for laughter culture development on a global scale. One of the domineering characteristics peculiar to contemporary cyber laughter is its punitive function revealing itself in anti behavior over-the-topness. Laughter anti behavior within cyberspace acquires the forms of trolling, astroturfing and cyberbullying.

The conducted by us on Facebook and VKontakte atheistic and religious groups content research, as well as the analysis of the commentaries of their participants, has demonstrated the fact that being religiously oriented serves one of the leading reasons to engage in cyberbullying. In compliance with the data provided by Intel Security (McAfee) agency, every 4th teenager in Russia has ever been subjected to cyberbullying during the period of adolescence due to his religious views (Kopovaja, 2016). This number does not decrease with age, more so, as noted by us, any attempt to openly state your religiosity in social networks is sure to result, in the majority of cases (98%), in negative feedback. This situation can be linked

both to the marked increase in deviant behavior within cyberspace and the fact that human religiosity has undergone a number of changes.

Due to paradigm alteration (the basic points were established in postmodern ethics) the borderline between the sacral and mundane has got shifted. People divinify the previously mundane, profane, ordinary and, alternatively, understate something that used to be sacred. Such an approach is revealed in active mythmaking peculiar to modern mass culture. These processes have led to the emergence of the term 'new religiosity' to denote the contemporary religious character, views. The given notion is rather conventional, though is regarded as important with the aim to describe the spectrum of various religious phenomena (to be more exact, the religionlike ones) based on the idea of spiritual pluralism and freedom of worldview choice. These phenomena are eclectic, amorphous and resist any classification. Play behavior is regarded as the fundamental characteristic of new religiosity. Ritual and game used to be interconnected, as it has already been underlined, in the integrated picture of the world. However, later they drifted apart.

The influence of games is ever-increasing within new religiosity. This fact comes into sharp focus through the activity of various religious movements, for instance, jeditism. The growth of religious symbols is also witnessed in the example of games, primarily computer ones. In fact, games do not carry any religious or sacral sense as they are generally employed to create a certain entourage. Still, a different perception of player space is formed on the subconscious level, in which religious images and mythology are resorted to. There are few games based on some religious topic or plot (e.g. Binding of Isaac that centres round the myth referring to Isaac's sacrifice, Dragon Age is based on the history of Christianity and catholic church in the Middle Ages). In addition, there are some games that are worth noting individually, in which a person gets an opportunity to create his own religions or be entrusted with responsibilities of God almighty (Bible Rising, Black & White).

Thus, there is no denying the fact that digital technologies alter the character of religiosity. The term cyberreligion is more often used nowadays. There is no unambiguous approach to its definition. On the one hand, it describes the activity of different organisations within digital space. Information technologies, undoubtedly, have become a really powerful tool to influence people's emotions. This idea is recognized by the majority of conventional religions, many of which aim at resorting to these technologies pursuing their own purposes. To start with, these are Islam, Protestantism, Judaism, Catholic religion. Orthodox religion and Buddhism demonstrate less interest in digital technologies (Fedorova & Rotanova, 2019). However, the second approach defining cyber religion as a religious formation dominates in modern science, in which 'computer technologies are granted with the status of supervalue, the qualities characteristic of sacral objects and godheads attributes; virtual reality is announced the highest level reality, supervaluable otherness dominating the world of human opportunities' (Zabijako, Voronkova, Lapin, & Pratyina, 2012).

Sociological findings referring to cyber religion phenomenon have revealed the fact that religionmakers very often (those consciously creating the ideology of a newly established religion) perceive their participation in cyber religion development as some game, a gripping provocative act, trolling.

It would be wrong to assume, though, that new religiosity carries only play character. Studying the dynamics of young people's religious values since 2014 to present day we can confidently define several characteristics common for Russian youths' religiosity. Thus, the vast majority of youngsters (about 70%)

consider themselves 'religious'. Alongside this, Muslims, protestants and churchless followers totally dominate (their number reaches 16% at present).

Within the 5-year period, there has been a dramatic increase in churchless areligiosity, atheism and a negative attitude to church. Orthodoxy is mostly perceived as an integral component of the Russian national character among the majority of young people identifying themselves as orthodox Christians (about 70%). There is a rise of the interest in mysticism, nonconventional forms of religion and esoteric teachings. Young people are sometimes not aware of their religious sentiment as they oppose mysticism to religion (Rotanova & Fedorova, 2017).

According to the focused interviewing data, there is no link between religion and laughter based on the feedback received from the vast majority of the respondents. The only admissible form of laughter within religion is 'laughter round a cult' revealed in ridiculing religious beliefs and traditions. Thus, as evidence provides, the laughter continues to fulfill the function of desacralization in digital society. The analysis of the content referring to the main youth communities in social networks has provided us with additional evidence of the above given assumption. The comparative analysis of the most popular Internet atheistic publics and groups has revealed the fact that their content mainly carries entertaining nature. The tiny 30% of the content is of educational character. Various groups of faithful youths demonstrate their serious religious conviction, thus proving the thesis regarding incompatibility of laughter and religion.

Modern cyber laughter culture is studied through the prism of Internet memes as its major objects (Blackmore..., (n.d); Rotanova & Fedorova, 2019; Alhadjj & Rokne, 2018; Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & Van Wijk, 2007) An Internet meme is defined in the considered article as a certain media object (verbal, visual, mixed, etc.), receiving socio-emotional feedback, which contributes to its faster distribution via the Internet. Approximately 35% of Internet memes referring to religion can be defined as text memes imitating correspondence (or representing real correspondence) between the religious and atheists. This type of memes vividly demonstrates the peculiar features of trolling and cyberbullying. The vast majority of memes (65%) are creolized (advice, demotivational memes, photoshopped images, etc.). Ridiculing religious views and conventional religions are becoming their main topic. There has been a marked increase in the cases of mocking at not only religious but also state establishments. This phenomenon can be treated as a consequence of the opinion shaped among the population, especially among the younger generation, that the relationship between political and religious elites carries a symbiotic character. Both religious figures, representing various confessions, and mythical, legendary persons (Noah, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad) are becoming subjected to satire. The 'Happy birthday, Jesus' topic serves, for instance, the main one for memes in January.

Thus, modern culture laughter is becoming a significant element of new religiosity, transforming the perception of people with reference to the sacral. This fact has impacted the new image of the divine (God in particular) as well as the idea of the supernatural. The images of God, devil, angels and demons within the framework of contemporary media space are referred to as anthropomorphous, sensual. They are often portrayed as comic personages (for instance in films like 'Dogma', 'The Newest Testament' etc.), which makes them human, accessible for communication, personalities. The question 'if Jesus Christ could laugh or not?' remains one of the debatable issues within laughter philosophy in Christian ethic and esthetic. This issue addresses the intricate point tackling the question of what 'characteristics dominate in God-man:

sacred or human' (Karasev, 1996; Gondim & Thomas, 2019). New religiosity responds to this question in favor of human anthropic characteristics.

The phenomenon of parody religions may be definitely named the pinnacle of laughter manifestation within new religiosity, pastafarianism being the best known out of them. Emerged to prove the unfoundedness of the religious picture of the world in comparison with the science-oriented world outlook, these quasi-religious quickly took their niche within the contemporary eclectic religious mindset acquiring their own disciples. Whereas in Russia Pastafarian church (abbreviated to RPCh) has been officially recognized on the legislative level as a religious group. This case testifies the vivid manifestation of the postmodern phenomenon 'irony playing' when the borderline between the real and the virtual becomes blurry (Fedorova, 2017).

7. Conclusion

Summing up, it is worthwhile to highlight the idea that laughter culture has entered a new phase of its development defined by us as cyber laughter culture. The correlation between laughter and religiosity has undergone dialectical changes starting from ritual laughter up to modern cyber laughter. There are obvious modifications regarding the correlation between the sacral and the secular within new religiosity that is shaped in global digital space dominated by mass culture. The previously sacred phenomena get desacralized. The role of cyber laughter culture in this process is rather important. The trivial, vice versa, is becoming sacralized (for instance, the merging cults of different brands, prominent persons and the emergence of parody religions).

Laughter culture here exercises its influence through the play component and the gamification of consciousness sacralizing player space. The scope of functions typical of laughter is not limited to purely desacralization/sacralization. Laughter in modern digital society fulfills compensational, adaptive, integrating, communicative and entertaining functions. However, it also is responsible for the punitive function, which finds its realization through various forms of cyber deviation. The above-outlined function is clearly pronounced in the religious sphere. Laughter and game provide a large-scale influence on developing young people's religious identity.

References

- Alhajj, R., & Rokne, J. (2018). Analysis of Social Relations. In *Encyclopedia of Social Network Analysis and Mining*. Springer: New York. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/referencework/10.1007/978-1-4939-7131-2>
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1990). *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa (Rabelais and His World)*. Moscow: Hudozhestvennaja Literatura. [in Rus.]
- Blackmore, S. Memes and "temes" (n.d.) Retrieved from: https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_blackmore_on_memes_and_temes/footnotes?language=en
- Chaniotis, A. (2018). The social construction of emotion: a view ancient Greece. *Current Optional in Behavioral Sciences*, 24, 56-61.
- Dobele, A., Lindgreen, A., Beverland, M., Vanhamme, J., & Van Wijk, R. (2007). Why pass on viral messages? Because they connect emotionally. *Business Horizons*, 50(4), 291–304.
- Eliade, M. (1994). *Svjashhenoe i mirskoe [The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion]*. Moscow: Lomonosov Moscow State University. [in Rus.]

- Fedorova, M. (2017). Laughter in the Religious Experience of Man. *4 International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference of Social Sciences and Art*. Vol. 2. Bk. 2. Sofia: Albena Co., 487-492. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5593/sgemsocial2017/22>
- Fedorova, M. V., & Rotanova, M. B. (2019). Communication Strategies of Professional Communication of Religious Organizations in Modern Digital Society. *Proceedings of the 2019 IEEE Communication Strategies in Digital Society Workshop (2019 ComSDS)* (April 10, 2019), St. Petersburg Russia 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1109/COMSDS.2019.8709646>
- Gilhus, I. S. (2004). *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins. Laughter in the History of Religion*, New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library
- Golozubov, O. (2014). Concepts of Laughter and Humor in the Sociolgy of Religion. *Procedia – Social and Behavior Sciences*, 140, 528-534.
- Gondim, F. de A. A., & Thomas, F. P. (2019). Patalogical Laughter and Crying in Patient with Brainstem Tumors. *Word Neurosurgery*, 126, 699.
- Karasev, L. V. (1996). *Filosofija smeha [The philosophy of laughter]*, Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities. [in Rus.].
- Kopovaja, O. V. (2016). Novye formy deviantnogo povedenija podrostkov v sovremennom informacionnom obshhestve [New forms of adolescent deviant behavior in the modern information society] *Electronic scientific journal "Penza Psychological Bulletin"*, 6: Retrieved from: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/novye-formy-deviantnogo-povedeniya-podrostkov-v-sovremennom-informatsionnom-obschestve> [in Rus.]
- Rotanova, M. B., & Fedorova, M. V. (2017). The culture of understanding in the practice of social communication. *4 International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference of Social Sciences and Art*. Vol. 2. Bk. 2. Sofia: Albena Co., 617-624 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5593/sgemsocial2017/22>
- Rotanova, M. B., & Fedorova, M. V. (2019). Internet meme as the Cyber Laughter Culture Phenomenon in Modern Russian Digital Society Phenomenon. *Proceedings of the 2019 IEEE Communication Strategies in Digital Society Workshop (2019 ComSDS)* (April 10, 2019, St. Petersburg Russia). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1109/COMSDS.2019.8709650>
- Zabijako, A. P., Voronkova, E. A., Lapin, A. V., & Pratyina, D. A. (2012). Kiberreligija: nauka kak faktor religioznyh transformacij [Cyberreligion: science as a factor in religious transformations]. *Blagoveshensk: Amurskij gos. un-t, biblioteka zhurnala «Religiovedenie»*. [in Rus.]