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Interconnections of Religion and Ethnicity in Russia.

During the post-soviet period we witnessed the returning of religion into the public sphere and private life of people in Russia. But it appears that it returns in close conjunction with ethnicity, engrained in culture and traditions.

In 2013, according to a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, 64 percent of Russia's population identified itself as Eastern Orthodox (including Old Believers), and 25 percent as nonbelievers¹. Other surveys have similar data. For example, the 2017 Pew Foundation survey shows 71 percent of Russia's population professing Orthodoxy and 75 percent believing in God².

On the other hand, most of the surveys about the religious makeup of Russia's population, show a big gap between the number of those who consider themselves to be believers and those who actually practice their religious beliefs (that is, attend religious services, pray, and observe religious doctrine and direction). Only 5 to 7 percent of respondents reported that they were actively involved in institutionalized religious activities³. Moreover, there are also those who do not call themselves believers but associate with a specific denomination. For example, out of those who call themselves Orthodox, only some 60 percent call themselves believers. How could these figures be interpreted? From the anthropological

¹ ФОМ МЕДИА. Ценности: религиозность. Сколько россиян верят в Бога, посещают храм и молятся своими молитвами? 2013 (<http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10953>).

² "Индекс веры": сколько на самом деле в России православных (<https://ria.ru/religion/20170823/1500891796.html>).

³ Залужный А.Г. и др. Многонациональная Россия. Диалог религий и культур. Роль религиозных объединений в миротворческой деятельности, укреплении межрелигиозного согласия и дружбы народов. М.: Готика, 2002. С. 45.

perspective (opposite to the sociological perspective with its challenge to measure religiosity) it is not a question, how many of those who call themselves Orthodox are real Orthodox. Anthropologists recognize the identity based on the self-identification but are challenged to explain such self-identification and understand the type of identity. The paradoxical gap between the numbers of those who associate and those who believe, the relatively low number of non-believers, and high number of those who call themselves Orthodox, are rooted in the close connection between religious identity and other types of collective cultural identities, first of all ethnic identity and then national identity.

Relatively low figures of non-believers in a society where atheism had been official policy for over seventy years, are also influenced by the interconnections of religious and ethnic affiliations. Due to the ethnization of religion the atheism was superficial. And although the Soviet society was very secular, because of the fact that religion was rooted in ethnic culture, people wanted to have their kids baptized and to perform religious rituals on their deceased relatives.

This connection between religion and ethnicity prevented the soviet state from removing religious practice and rituals from the life of soviet citizens, because religious practice was part of cultural tradition. On the other hand, the strong connection between religion and ethnicity resulted in the formation of so-called folk Orthodoxy (or popular Orthodoxy) with the lack of religious rigorism, neglect to dogmatic teaching, incorporation of the elements of pre-Christian belief systems, selection of most favorite, beloved saints protecting certain spheres of life and activities, re-interpretation and ethnization of religious holidays. This folk Orthodoxy, latent and mixed with ethnic traditions, helped to preserve the Orthodox faith during the atheistic soviet period and eased the return of the official church into the public sphere and life of population. However, this popular type of religiosity also contributed to the growing gap between official Orthodoxy and folk Orthodoxy, and the gap between those who believe and practice and those who associate themselves and observe certain ethnicized religious rituals. This folk Orthodoxy can be a resource for the Church. But at the same time, some kinds of

folk Orthodoxy tend toward superstition. For example, when that happens, venerated holy things and places look for a practical payoff and their religiosity is very different from the practice of religion in the correspondence with the Church teaching.⁴ The re-imagination of religious attributes and symbols and incorporation of them into the scope of cultural tradition secularized some of them (not without the help of the Soviet state). Thus, a Christmas tree happened to be converted into a New Year tree in Russia and became a New Year attribute in the homes of Christians, Muslims, Jews, believers and non-believers alike.

In Russia religion is often considered more a part of cultural heritage than it is an opportunity to develop a relationship with God. The cultural component of religion is most understandable for those who have grown up in a highly secular society. For many of Russia's citizens, Orthodox Christianity has cultural meaning, rather than theological meaning (although those taking a more theological view are increasing in numbers), and, thus, is seen as a symbol of ethnic and national identity. For ethnic Russians in particular, the religious component, more precisely its cultural dimension, is very meaningful with respect to their ethnic identity. When one asks, "What is your religion?" the response frequently will be, "I am Russian, hence I am Orthodox." A historical faith of Russia is deeply incorporated in Russian culture, traditions, and common memory. It is even an important element of identity for nonbelievers. That is why one can hear some ethnic Russians say, "Ia neveruiushchii iz pravoslavnykh," which may be roughly translated as "I am a nonbeliever of Orthodox heritage" or "I am non-believer but know what faith is true."⁵ The close connection of religious and ethnic identities explains inconsistent and even irrational behavior of some non-believers when they observe religious holidays, sometimes attend church services or even participate in religious rituals. Doing all these things they consider them as a part of cultural and ethnic tradition, as a cultural norm of their ethnic group, religious rituals are

⁴ Burgess, John. *Holy Rus'. The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. P. 212.

⁵ Davis, Nathaniel A. *A Long Walk to the Church. A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995. P. 222-223.

considered as ethnic rituals or even as part of national tradition.

It has been typical for many of Russia's population to understand religion not primarily as a theistic world-view but first of all as part of a cultural tradition. And here we have to be aware about various dimensions of religion. There are many ways connecting a person with religion, there are various facets of religion and religiosity. For the purpose of this presentation, I will use a very simple scheme, suggested by T. Jeremy Gunn: religion as belief, religion as identity, and religion as way of life.⁶ According to it, religion as belief pertains to the convictions of a person regarding religious teaching. It emphasizes doctrines. In the contrary, religion as identity makes an accent on the affiliation with a group. Religion as identity means the connection with a certain group, kind of kinship. The mechanism is similar with the affiliation with an ethnic group. In this case a person believes in his or her belonging to religion based on the facts of his or her birth into a certain group, his or her connection to this cultural milieu and often does not think about religious teaching of his or her religion. A person knows that was born into a traditionally Orthodox milieu, was baptized as a baby, and it may seem enough to call himself/herself Orthodox. In such case the fact of the belonging to a group does not require personal convictions about religious dogmata. It is similar with the affiliation himself/herself with an ethnic group: a person is not necessarily familiar with many elements of ethnic traditional culture. In such case it is more important not that a person has the same perceptions of the religious teaching as other members of a group, but that all the members of the group are bound by common history, culture, ethnicity and traditions. In such case, a person considers him/herself to be Orthodox on the base of shared ethnicity and culture, and despite the fact that he/she rarely goes to church, does not remember the Nicene Creed, does not know the Bible well. Because of such type of associating some of those who are non-believers, hence do not accept religion as belief system, call themselves Orthodox. To be truly Russians for them is to be adherent or at least

⁶ Gunn, T. Jeremy. The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of "Religion" in International Law // Harvard Human Rights Journal. 2003, spring. Vol. 16 P. 200-205.

sympathetic to Orthodoxy. In this identification facet religion is immediately mixed with ethnicity what produces statements like "I am Russian, hence I am Orthodox."

Religion as a way of life is "associated with actions, rituals, customs, and traditions."⁷ It is typically tied to one of the previous facets: religion as belief or religion as identity. This facet can be derived from either belief system or identity or from both of them. Religion as a way of life requires to accomplish certain rituals and other actions. A person can do all this because of accepting the teaching (and then he or she is a practicing believer) or because of the belonging to a group where they do like this or because of the both reasons. Religion as a way of life, when it derives from identity would be manifested on big holidays and special occasions. In the case of the Russian Orthodoxy such person would have an Easter cake and colored eggs (even in the Soviet times they sold so-called "Spring cake" - *keks vesennii* - before Easter), may go to the Easter service (or only to venerate the cake and eggs), would want to have their babies baptized and the like. The religiosity would be occasional and the observed rituals and rules very selected.

There is another consequence of religion as identity. In societies where religion is first of all viewed as belief system, like in Western Christianity, there is tendency to privatization of religion, it is first of all viewed as private affair of a person. To the contrary, when the facet "religion as identity" is typical for population, religion tends to be viewed not as private affair but as collective matter, part of cultural tradition, historical heritage and the like. The interconnection with ethnicity cements such views. Even in the Soviet Union under the politics of severe secularization and atheisation it was viewed on the collective level - as hostile ideology, vestige, but not as private matter. The perception of religion on public level leads to close connections between state and church (whatever protective, friendly or hostile). Hence, the interconnection of religion and ethnicity prevents from privatization of religion and contributes to the understanding of figures reflecting weak personal ties with the denomination

⁷ Ibid. P. 204.

which a person associate himself/herself. In Russia religion is traditionally and historically perceived first of all on the collective/public level. There is practically no tradition to view religion as private affair. Actually, only the 1990 Law "On Freedom of Beliefs" suggested to view religion as private affair. The philosophy of this law was based on the ideas of individual religious choice and state neutrality towards religion. This philosophy neglected the close connection of religion and ethnicity and went contrary to the perception of religion on collective, not private level. It was one of the reasons why that law did not exist long and was substituted by more traditionalistic and restrictive law of 1997.

There is another contradiction or paradox in the data reflecting the religious make-up. The conjoining of "Russian ethnic identity" and "Eastern Orthodox faith" is very strong. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church is not strictly an ethnic church. Its adherents include many who are not ethnic Russians. To certain extent it is the result of intensive missionary activity of the Church. The attitudes to this missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church are ambivalent. On the one hand, missionaries developed written languages of some Siberian ethnic groups, translates religious texts into these languages, and provides services in those languages. On the other hand, the conversion into Orthodoxy was a step towards russification. Interestingly that now the The Missionary Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (2007) is aimed mostly on the people already identifying themselves as Orthodox, but who are not churched yet. They are the Church's first pastoral responsibility.

There is another consequence of the interconnection of religion and ethnicity. As I have already told, because of this connection religion is viewed not merely as a private affair but rather a force of cultural tradition. In its turn, it led to the state involvement into framing religious ideology, connection of religious identity not only with ethnic but also with national identity, and to the perception of the so-called "traditional religions", and "non-traditional religions" as opposed to them. Since 1993 the Russian Orthodox Church holds the World Russian People's Councils with the urgent social issues on their agenda, which also reflects the

connection of religion and ethnicity and the importance of this connection for the church. The ideas of the "Russian world" and "particular Russian civilization" also reflect the meaningfulness for the Church of the interconnections of religious identity with ethnic and national identity. Here is the tendency of homogeneity of the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox nation and the Russian culture, a genre that is being called "ethnotheology" as suggested by Aristotle Papanikolaou⁸ The 18th World Russian People's Council showed an example of such ethnotheology when it adopted the "Declaration of Russian Identity"⁹ in November 2014. It formulates the concept of Russianness and its connection to the Christian Orthodox faith.¹⁰ Because of the strong connection between religious and ethnic identities, other denominations came to be assessed by the Russian Orthodox Church through the prism of ethnicity. Often in post-Soviet period it had better relations with other so-called "traditional religions" of Russia (referred to as "our neighbors") than with non-Orthodox Christian denominations (referred to as "others," "aliens," and in 1990s as "proselytizers" or "competitors"). The very issue of proselytism, which was so hot in 1990s, cannot be deeply comprehended without taking into consideration the interconnection of religious and ethnic identities.

The interconnection of religion and ethnicity, which produces the gap between those associating and those believing and practicing is not only the paradox and challenge but also the resource and tool for the Church. The Church gives great importance to cultural dimension of religiosity and to its connection with ethnicity. In one of his interviews Patriarch Kirill said that the Church faced enormous task, i.e. to return to people their heritage – Orthodox culture. He reminded that during the decades of the state atheism people were artificially isolated from their spiritual and, to major extent, cultural tradition.¹¹ Exactly in the cultural dimension of religion the Church sees the tool with which people can come to practical

⁸ Papanikolaou, Aristotle. *The Mystical as Political. Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. Notre Dame (Indiana): University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. P. 44.

⁹ *Deklaratsia Russkoi Identichnosti* [Declaration of Russian identity]. <http://www.vrns.ru/news/3398>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview of Patriarch Kirill to the Greek newspaper "VIMA". 05.23.2010 – <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1165090.html> (06.28.2010).

religiosity. And this heritage is returning which is seen in pilgrimage, adoration of saints and relics but again in close connection with ethnicity. In May-June 2017, according to the ROC estimates, 2.5 million people venerated the relics of St. Nicolas brought from Bari to Moscow and then St. Petersburg. They stood in line for 6 to 12 hours to do this. And here we see again interconnection of religion and ethnicity. St. Nicolas is a very ethnicized Saint in the Russian Orthodox Church, or more precisely in Russian folk Orthodoxy. It is the manifestation of ethnotheology, isn't it?