

MEDIA AND RELIGION IN RUSSIA

СМИ И РЕЛИГИЯ В РОССИИ

*Victor M. Khroul, PhD, Associate Professor,
Chair of Media Sociology,
Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University,
Moscow, Russia
amen@mail.ru*

*Виктор Михайлович Хруль, кандидат филологических наук, доцент,
кафедра социологии журналистики,
факультет журналистики МГУ имени М. В. Ломоносова,
Москва, Россия
amen@mail.ru*

The author puts the relations and interactions of two social sub-systems – media and religion – into the context of the contemporary Russian public sphere. Based on several case studies and the analysis of a value dialogue in society, the paper underlines the role of mass media in mediatization of religions, shows dysfunctions and “system errors” in the process. The author suggests that religions are to become active and transparent actors in public debates with their moral monitoring of public sphere and mass media in order to achieve a minimal constructive value consensus in a poly-normative society.

Key words: *media; religion; value dialogue; dysfunctions; consensus.*

Статья рассматривает вопросы взаимоотношений и взаимодействия двух социальных подсистем – СМИ и религии – в контексте современной российской публичной сферы. Основываясь на нескольких исследованиях и анализе особенностей ценностного диалога в обществе, автор подчеркивает особую роль средств массовой информации в медиатизация религии, показывает дисфункции и «системные ошибки» в этом процессе. Нормативная модель, которой придерживается автор, предполагает актив-

ное участие религиозных объединений в общественном диалоге как субъектов ценностного мониторинга средств массовой информации и публичной сферы для достижения аксиологического консенсуса в поликонфессиональном обществе.

Ключевые слова: СМИ; религия; ценностный диалог; дис-функции; консенсус.

It seems evident that we can not understand religion as a social subsystem without media context. The process of *mediatization* with its conditions, reasons, effects must be taken into consideration in order to comprehend the role of religion in society. Religions are actualized not only in the modes of practice and worship, but they also have manifestations in the public sphere of a certain society, and they have become a subject of research with a long history (Religion and Media, 2001; Meyer, Moors, 2006; Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media, 2006; Taylor, 2007).

Moreover, in some religions communication ontologically belongs to the very sacrum of the faith (as the Holy Trinity mystery in Christianity, based on “*communio*” between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) or the constituent fundamental process of transmitting religious origins and fundamentals to believers (Prophet Mohammed in Islam).

Looking at media-religion relations from the opposite point of view, we have to raise another question: can we understand media without religious context?

From a secular perspective the answer is positive: yes, we do not need any invocation of transcendental being to explain the nature of media. Yes, there are sacred objects in all religions (e.g., the Holy of Holies, Sacraments, Mecca’s Kaa’ba, Buddha’s statue, etc.), most religions have Holy Scriptures, some religions have holy persons. Since objects are praised by believers, they are to be respected by non-believers as well, especially journalists. But, nevertheless, they are not necessary for the understanding of media.

Does it mean that we can precisely describe media as a social sub-system not taking into consideration religion as another influent sub-system? The answer is rather negative in retrospective of so-called “cartoon scandals”, persecutions of Christians in some countries and other events, which had implicitly or even explicitly “religious factor” in background. “The increasing presence of religion in public life has provoked an ambivalent response from contemporary scholars trying to understand what the nature of religion is, what its proper role should be, and what its efflorescence means for our understanding of the nature of politics and society”, – point out Charles Hirschkind and Brian Larkin (Hirschkind, Larkin, 2008).

When religion appears outside the private sphere, it sometimes becomes an effective tool of social mobilization and solidarity (like in the USSR during World War II) and sometimes – an instrument for manipulation with mass consciousness (like wrongly and aggressively interpreted “jihad”, which caused some terrorists attacks).

“We live in a world where media, the political, and the religious cannot be seen as distinct phenomena but, rather, as mutually constitutive” (ibid).

Religion is continuously in need of comprehension not only by theologians, but also from the outside in the rich and complex context of its external relations – by experts in social philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, and – journalism studies and communications.

In order to avoid dysfunctions and conflicts in practice it is highly recommended to study media-religion relations by journalists (Hoover, 2006).

Religions in Russia

Russia is a multi-confessional country, and it must be taken into consideration from the very beginning. After many decades of atheistic persecutions all religions were in a very difficult position before so-called perestroika started.

Last two decades were the time of a rapid development of religions in Russia.

What is the Russian religious landscape now? What does it look like?

Russian Constitution is considered by experts to be liberal and democratic (The Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993). It provides equal rights: “The state shall guarantee the equality of rights and liberties regardless of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, property or employment status, residence, attitude to religion, convictions, membership of public associations or any other circumstance. Any restrictions of the rights of citizens on social, racial, national, linguistic or religious grounds shall be forbidden” (ibid, Article 19); and also the freedom of religion: “Everyone shall be guaranteed the right to freedom of conscience, to freedom of religious worship, including the right to profess, individually or jointly with others, any religion, or to profess no religion, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and to act in conformity with them” (ibid, Article 28).

The Government generally respects this right in practice; however, in some cases authorities impose restrictions on certain groups.

In practice, only a minority of citizens actively participates in any religion. Many of those who identified themselves as members of a religious group participate in religious life rarely, or do not participate at all. There is not a single set of reliable statistics that breaks down the population by denomination, and the statistics below are compiled from government, polling, and religious group sources.

Recent Levada-Center public opinion poll conducted in November, 2012 confirmed that 74% of the respondents called themselves Orthodox believers, while 7% said they were Muslims. Less than 1% professed other religions (Catholics, Protestants, Jews and others). The center polled 1,600 people in 130 towns and cities in 45 regions (Number of Orthodox Church Members Shrinking in Russia, Islam on the Rise – Poll, 2012).

The share of Orthodox believers in the country has dropped by 6%, from 80% in 2009, while the share of Muslims has grown by 3% to 7% in the same period. 61% of the respondents said they had never opened the Bible. Of those who did, 24% read the Gospel, 16% read the Old Testament and 11% read the New Testament.

Expert poll dedicated to spirituality in Russian society indicates that unquestionable surge of interest to religion and the surge of faith have its place. But in many cases it is a serious problem to obtain valid and authentic information about religious life.

Religions and media

And now, having in mind the religious map of Russia, let us focus on media-religion relations.

Religions and mass media are among most influential social institutions in Russia. Such a role for media – “Fourth Power” – is traditional for at least last century, while religions as influent agents appeared on the Russian public scene in last two decades.

The relations between religions and mass media – their tensions, conflicts, mutual understanding, and “modus vivendi” – make a significant factor for social stability and modernization of post-Soviet Russia in the perspective of the civil society. That is why they are becoming more attractive for research – from phenomenological description to structural and functional analysis.

Lack of experience of two freedoms – of media and religion – in Russia and the principle difference between secular and religions’ understanding of the limits of communications’ freedom give us an interesting material for analysis.

Table 1 shows mutual correlations of freedom and religion with public opinion, institutional media, and state/local authorities.

Table 1

| | Freedom | Religion |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Public opinion | Lack of experience Civic society crisis Demand of “strong order” | Country of “non-believers” Spiritual hunger Lack of information in public sphere and interactivity |
| Institutional media | No will to fight for freedom Political and economical dependence Law and ethical problems | Interest – sensational but not essential Marginal place of religion in “hierarchy of attention” No experts/no formation, poor coverage as a consequence |
| State/Local authorities | Law implementation Lack of responsibility | Formal and informal preferences “De iure” and “de facto” Cases of suppression |

The Interreligious Council of Russia drew leaders of Russia’s largest denominations as well as international religious leaders together to work for “interreligious peace”.

Media facing religions

There are three main ways of mediatization of religions:

1. Media allow, enable and contribute to self-presentation of religions, observe their activity in public interest keeping religious formats (broadcasting services, funerals, weddings, etc.);
2. Media cover religious life using media formats (news reports, feature stories, etc.) and having critical approach towards some social activity or religious institutions;
3. Media use religion for their own aims, selectively importing well-known religious symbols into entertainment, keeping out sacral

meanings and secularizing the essence of religion. This process is out of the control of religious authorities and therefore causes many complains and conflicts.

The first way of mediatization is more or less understandable and depends more or less on media institutions' good will and the audience's demands. In most cases it keeps religious format "untouched", and the media are used more as a channel of transmission rather than active subject of interaction.

The second and the third ways presume a more active role of journalists covering religion. The process is becoming more important, and at the same time more problematic. Conflict and scandals are rooted in misunderstanding or even in bad reporting on religious issues.

Pointing out some neglecting and ignorance of our colleagues, expected to serve the public interest, *Detroit Free Press* columnist David Crumm in his article "Why Write About Religion?" says: "Because faith has shaped our world – for good or ill – and we cannot fully understand the world around us without understanding faith" (Crumm, 2006).

The lack of knowledge and experience in religious life among journalists gives much more space for myths and stereotypes in the public opinion. There is an evident temptation for journalists to feed the audience not with what is happening in reality but with what fits into people expectations, based on myths and stereotypes. The explanations of such a style of journalism may be different – from understandable desire to become more popular and to get a higher position in rating to political manipulation laziness and low professionalism of journalists without any particular aims.

The current state of mass media in terms of correctness and validity of information is a permanent source of concern for many religious organizations in Russia.

How wide this "stereotyped-oriented" journalism in the coverage of religion is spread?

The research of such kind has been being conducted at the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University since 2007. Some pre-

liminary results give a possibility to put up several hypotheses for proving them with methods of qualitative and also quantitative analysis.

One of the possible answers could be given, thanks to new Internet-based technologies and also new research design for mechanisms of seeking, rewriting, and spreading of information, which we called “*trace-study*” (Khroul, 2009).

The research conducted in the field of Russian media clarifies functioning of mass information spreading mechanisms – “*media flows*”.

A “*trace-study*” as a research design could be applied for easily fixed in on from the moment of their birth or creation “*comets*” of media reality which “*trajectory*” researchers could follow and search due to the modern “optics” of high quality – computer indexed news data bases and searching systems (such as world well-known *Google*, *Yahoo* and Russian leaders *Yandex*, *Integrum*, etc.).

For the “*trace-study*” of religion coverage we chose a media flow about “*seven new mortal sins declared by Vatican*”. Most of news on this subject was published in Russian media during one week – from 10 to 16 March, 2008.

We analyzed 233 texts about “*seven new mortal sins*”, published in Russian media (news agencies, newspapers, weeklies, radio, TV and Internet). We analyzed texts using several categories – time, region, type of media, genre of the text, reliability, and correctness of links and sources, grade of distortion of the original publication, etc.

The main conclusions are the following:

- Authentic sense and reliability seem to be secondary criteria for spreading the information on religious topics through mass media. The primary one is the sensational character of the news, its correspondence with mass myths and stereotypes. Even after appearing in Russian mass media the authentic and truthful information stressing the fact that Vatican did not announce any “new seven mortal sins” during the next several days this topic was developed as “snow-ball”, misinforming the audience;
- Quite often mass media invite as experts in diverse problems people who are not competent ones. In the searched story just in

3 cases Catholic priests were the experts, in 5 other texts experts were priests of Russian Orthodox Church. In most cases journalists did not apply for the comment at all;

- Very often journalists do not have critical attitude to the religious news from abroad. They do not intend to check the information with the help of independent information sources. Just reading the initial article in *L'Osservatore Romano* could be enough to understand the aberrations and mistakes made in *La Repubblica*, that “created” this “sensation”, transmitted later on by *BBC*, *Reuters* and *The Times*;
- Having the Internet as a powerful tool for obtaining information and checking it, Russian journalists instead of it use it for further immediate spreading of unproved facts and opinions.

Uncritical media become the space for birth, growth, and support of myth and stereotypes regarding religious life – very delicate and sensitive sphere. Such practices have already caused and may cause many problems in future.

The results of the “trace-study” makes us concern about the role of a journalist in the dialogue between religions and society. Among three main roles of journalists – peacemaker, mediator, and provocateur – the last one, with “sharpening” the picture and making it more “scandalous” becomes the leading one. Our research results show exactly the crisis of professionalism and responsibility.

The results of the research confirm some empirically fixed facts and trends of dysfunction and corruption in the religious life coverage in Russia almost ten years ago (Religiya v informacionnom pole rossiiskikh SMI, 2002):

- biased approach among journalists, tolerated by their colleagues;
- lack of education in religious issues and therefore lack of understanding of what is really going on;
- urgent need of specialized media focused on religious life;
- secular media dependence on political and influential Russian Orthodox Church elites;

- and, therefore, religious minorities are underexposed in the public sphere.

In order to describe this very sensitive aspect, we made a survey on Catholic minority (1% of Russian population) as an example illustrating general situation with the religious minorities' media coverage in Russia.

We conducted the survey of news agencies materials about religious life. The main conclusion is that media appear to be the instrument of marginalization of “*strangers*” (e.g., they describe Catholics just as Western phenomenon).

Media texts represent Catholic Church as the Church of foreigners. Journalists systematically use words adopted from foreign languages, despite masses are held in Russian, the majority of Catholics are ethnic Russians using Russian in everyday life; Russian is used in Catholic publications and documents. This creates stereotype that Catholics in Russia are foreigners who do not want to integrate into local culture.

Media strengthen opposition of “*our faith*” and “*faith of outsiders*”. Ethnical and geographical determinism takes place, myths and stereotypes of mass consciousness dominate in agencies.

There exists a dependence on the state policy in religious sphere. It is not strongly articulated, but could be seen in signs of attention to the religious organizations (to the so-called “*traditional*” religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism).

Russian media formed the image of the “*Church-stranger*” in mind of ordinary audience and in the perception of decision-making officials.

The analysis of the Russian media system, focused on religious life coverage, qualitative analysis of the religious content of the press, quantitative analysis of representation of religious topics in Russian news agencies; “*trace-study*” of religious news in Russian information space give us a strong argument to suppose that mass media play rather a negative role for both religion organizations and for audience.

Covering religion, journalists in Russia with widely developed “*copy-pasting*” practice, without checking the facts in independent sources, are still far from these principles.

Such behavior has impact on the audience: Catholicism is still seen as “invasive religion”. Let us take a look at *religare.ru* visitors’ voting results, published on April 12, 2004:

Table 1

“Do you think Mel Gibson’s film *“Passion of the Christ”* will cause spread of Catholicism in Russia?”

| | |
|---------------------|--------|
| Yes | 49,7 % |
| No | 39,8 % |
| Difficult to answer | 10,4 % |

Reproaching journalists for the spread of myths and stereotypes, we have to be objective and look at religions in Russia themselves: are they transparent and active enough? Are they ready to supply journalists with sufficient information that is to be transmitted to audience? There is a set of problems which seems to be a significant context for religious life coverage.

Not only mass media but also religions themselves have to contribute to agenda setting and to the elaboration of mediatization mechanisms in this very sensitive sphere.

Apart from difficulties of translation from an old-fashioned “dogmatic” language to the modern Russian, and also problems with understanding of internal functionality of Churches and other religious organizations, there are some expectations from the Russian society that religions do not fulfill. And this causes a lack of confidence to religions.

In the case of minorities it sometimes looks even like “*self-silencing*”. For example, during the last years previously open and outspoken position of the Russian Catholic community towards both external world and domestic issues has changed into “*no comments*” style and “*conspiracy*” mentality without any explanations. Most of Catholic media (newspapers, radio, TV, web portals) were closed and not a single one was opened.

If someone (e.g., a journalist, a scholar, a politician) would like to obtain some very basic official information regarding Catholic Church in Russia (e.g., number of parishes, believers, priests, bishops, structures, institutions) he/she would fail – at the moment there is no open sources.

Openness and transparency in terms of values presumes also moral voices of different religious organizations. But in fact religious “*ethos*” actually is visible and heard in the Russian public sphere just from time to time.

Religions facing media

1. Religions traditionally use media in religious formats: for spreading religious texts, transmitting events, ceremonies, etc. In the Russian context, for example, public TV transmits Christmas and Easter Orthodox celebrations;
2. Religions use media formats in religious media of their own (papers, radio, TV, Internet-based media). They are developing rapidly in Russia in order to ensure the influence of religion on the audience and to compete secular media in order to minimize its “negative” impact. The problem of “translation” from religious language to secular makes this usage difficult for religion;
3. Religions use media formats in secular media, demanding more space in the press, more time in public radio and TV, insisting the positive religious life coverage to be a must for secular media;
4. Religions use media’s activity for PR purposes – for promoting some big events which need support of media (Patriarch visits, Youth days, social and charitable service of Russian Orthodox Church, educational initiatives, property restitution);
5. Religions observe media in moral discourses (sermons, letters, official documents, etc.), giving evaluation from the normative point of view, deriving from the “creed” of each particular faith. Religious media criticism recognizes competition between Reli-

gion and Media, and is focused mostly on ethical issues, on moral impact of media to the audience. “Ad hoc” protests against some films, TV shows (*Dom, Za Steklom*, erotic movies) and concerts of controversial pop-stars (Madonna, Satanists groups) appear in Russia as well (Khroul, 2012).

The last point is becoming more visible during the last years: religious initiatives on moral control towards media are a part of hot public debate.

Public Council on Morality for TV was proposed by the Club of Orthodox Journalists in November 2007, with support from Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia. “The major portion of society, politicians, pedagogues, artists, and journalists agree that no one is happy with destructive immorality and thoughtless entertainment portrayed on TV, for it only brings harm”. — Alexy II noted.

VTsIOM’s (All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion) data from December 2008 show that 58% of respondents agree that *Russian media need state censorship*. However, 26% of them are not sure that this is necessary. One-fourth (24%) object to censorship (8% strongly object). One-fifth, or 18% of respondents, found it difficult to answer (VTsIOM, 2008).

The following sections present the sides of the current debate on the subject, including supporters and opponents of social control.

One of the most respected men in Russian Orthodox Church, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin (Head of the Synodal Church and Society Department), believes that “the Council must not forbid anything, but should formulate a reason which will be brought to the viewers’ notice as to why something should be prohibited”.

Another position belongs to the Orthodox public circles. “The Council will not be involved in any kind of censorship. The moral Council should give its judgment on TV administration’s actions instead of censoring.” — said Alexander Schipkov, chairman of the Orthodox Journalists Club and councilor to the Chairman of the Council of Federation. “Society has lost control over TV channels. As a result, the norms of

public morality have been violated and have led to the defilement of children.” – the Orthodox Journalists Club’s chairman stressed.

In addition to the general complaints about immorality on TV, religious organizations always have the right permanently to monitor TV programs or movies from their point of view. But religious leaders and journalists have failed to react against the most controversial cases, placing their hopes instead in the establishment of the new council.

The Head of the Ministry for Culture of the Russian Federation, Alexander Avdeev, described Russian TV products as “low-grade”, “immoral”, and “harmful”. While saying this, minister Avdeev recognized that additional regulation from the Parliament and government is needed for television and mass media.

Vladimir Pozner, a famous Russian TV journalist, warned about the danger of “black” or “behind the curtain” regulation.

The main point of voices “contra” is a “phobia” of the renewal or rebirth of strong ideological control over media endured in the USSR. The contra voices who have invested into “immoral” business on TV very often claim that any attempt to regulate media is an offensive step against freedom of speech. They hide their interest and profit behind the slogan, “*Glasnost must be defended*”. At the same time, the Glasnost Defense Foundation’s president, Alexei Simonov, is in favor of the new Council for Morality on TV.

The evolution of the civic attention to Russian television means that its participants are moving from the opportunity of participation in the agenda-setting process, or at least influencing this agenda setting and the media contents, to the necessity of control. Systematic ignoring of citizens as active subjects in the information process, the imitation of their participation in TV activity (as crowd scenes at talk-shows), and arrogant reluctance to work with audience have led to a situation where the most active citizens and public institutions that have expressed desire for social control cannot participate in it.

There is a set of problems in regards to the Public Council for Morality on TV project which seem significant to us as we consider the possibility for this project to be realized.

The *first* significant problem is *the absence of a value consensus in Russian society*.

In a multi-normative society with coexisting different values and normative models caused by poly-confessional and poly-ethnic social structure, and with other factors of diversity, the activity of any council for morality would be successful only if there is a critical level of agreement about what is “good” and what is “bad”.

Moreover, reaching the “zone of accordance”, a minimum of “axiological unity” seems to be moving away more and more at present.

The modern world offers a great variety and variability of ethical norms and ideas about what is moral and what is not, linked to important world view categories of a person – the attitude to death, the idea of a family, the understanding of social justice, etc. Relativist occasional ethics in pluralist conditions destroyed the fragile social unity in the Soviet Union very quickly (if we assume that this unity actually existed).

Under conditions of increasing diversity, the elaboration of a joint and united idea of *good* and *evil* becomes more and more problematic. For instance, a television program, in which polygamy is represented in a positive way could be acceptable for some Muslims but would provoke protests among Orthodox believers. A TV show supporting family status for homosexual couples would become a reason for indignation from traditional religions followers, but fits well within the frames of liberal world-views of modern youth. Public discussion about euthanasia has already divided several European countries. A list of examples could be continued. It is hard to imagine them as subjects for discussion at the meeting of the Public Council for Morality on TV, and it is even more difficult to think about the possibility of elaborating one united judgment from its members. It would be more feasible in mono-confessional, mono-ethnic, and theocratic countries.

That is why it is not surprising that two “trial” sittings of the Council were held in an atmosphere of intense discussions, and that the opinions of participants were divided. This is quite understandable in the context described above.

The main obstacle in assessing the initiative is the problem of the fundamental possibility of the value consensus, an issue rarely mentioned in Russian mass media. It is the main obstacle but not the only barrier.

The *second* significant problem for the Public Council for Morality on TV is the absence of a system for moral monitoring in mass media and public sphere from value-defined, axiological, homogeneous social institutions and groups. The highest level for aggregate judgments in the moral sphere will not be the society of the whole country, but a morally united, monolithically homogeneous community, in which members are in consensus about *good* and *bad*. Shared opinions about morals unify such communities. That is why they could be named “crystallization centers” of the society, if we use ethical indicators; they could also be also called the “magnets” or “leading lights”. Religious organizations and other institutions which evidently express a moral “credo” should be put in this group.

They should be the main participants in social dialogue in the moral sphere, accumulating and articulating value judgments rooted in fundamental normative models (one of Torah, the Bible, Koran, the book of Mormon, the oath of Hippocrates, etc.) as worked out in different situations of modern practice and activity. Total weight of these voices in polyphonic choir would be admittedly louder than voices of particular followers of some exotic ethical system.

Political parties, trade unions, clubs and other organizations, in which the uniting factor is directed outwards (as in the struggle for power, assertion of professional interests, getting income, love for football or sauna, etc.) are not and fundamentally cannot be morally homogeneous social institutions. As maximum, it is possible to discover their conventional professional ethics. The idea of *good* and *evil*, apart from official activity, is sidelined from the discussion to the private autonomous sphere of members’ lives.

The problem is that there is no system of “moral monitoring” of events and phenomena of social life in the media and public sphere by active and value-defined communities. The light of “moral leading

lights” is not seen, they are poorly visible, poorly evident at the horizon of public consciousness. In this context the moral navigation of citizens is hardly probable. Being confused in the conditions of value diversity, quite often Russians are not able to make sensible choices; they are liable to normative pressure of different forces.

Even the most powerful voice in sources, opportunities and theoretically the most united community in modern Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, is not heard regularly and systematically. The Church gives estimations in “ad hoc” manner, when a scandalous and extremely immoral thing happens. This is evident through the controversy around “The Last Temptation of Christ” movie release and with the concert of pop-singer Madonna crucifying herself on a cross, etc.

In ordinary life there is no regular producing and distribution of morally evaluated judgments of TV production and wider address to diverse socially significant problems and situations made by the Church. Moreover, as the press officer of the Russian Orthodox Church, priest Vladimir Viglyansky said, the Moscow Patriarchate does not plan to establish the structures for regular moral estimation of cinema and TV production like those created by the Roman Catholic Church (RPC MP poka ne planiruet sozdat’ sobstvenniy sovet po etike v SMI, zayavil svyaschennik Vladimir Viglyansky, 2008). Meanwhile, at the Catholic Bishops Conference in the USA and in several other Catholic countries, there are special institutions engaged in constant monitoring of cultural life (in the first order, monitoring the movie and television industries) and publishing lists of the main events and news of this or that sphere, with reviews every week. From time to time Muslim leaders also publish texts of normative and value contents, *fatva* actualizing dogma in the social sphere. The purpose of such activity in the field of TV consumption is to support believers in making decisions about what is worth seeing and what is not. These cases might be found in other religions.

It is important that even within the same institution estimations should come with moral authority of society, not from some impersonal subject representing the institution in general. Otherwise, there would be

a risk of harsh assessments of people behavior and consciousness. Moral authorities should give guidelines, but not rule people.

The *third* significant problem for the Public Council for Morality on TV activity is *the absence of a well-articulated dialogue of value systems*. If the moral monitoring of current events and facts takes place, if the “leading light” works in a proper way, it would be possible to speak about the articulated dialogue of value systems within the frames of constructing a normative model. In particular, communication about moral norms and their implementation for communicating facts and events in the society, to our mind, is a fundamental and necessary condition for the formation of a balanced broadcasting policy.

Naturally, this communication of value systems in the public sphere might be problematic, difficult, and disputed, but it would contribute to agenda setting and to the elaboration of media controls in the sphere of moral values.

Moral dialogue in the society is seen more naturally as a polyphony of voices mutually respecting axiological homogeneous social institutions, than as a dissonant choir of the Public Council members’ voices composed of the leaders of the society, all singing in different tones. The case of the Public Council for Morality on TV shows that the position of unique “moral tuning fork” in poly-normative society is vulnerable and hard to implement.

Recent controversies

Two recent hot debates – on the so-called *Pussy Riot* punk rock band “prayer” on February 21, 2012, and doomsday on December 21, 2012 – show the complexity and diversity of the relations between media and religion in Russia. Both cases were widely mediatized and had social implications provoked and covered by mass media.

Masked *Pussy Riot* punk group singers staged what they called “an anti-Putin punk prayer” at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow

on February 21, 2012. Three *Pussy Riot* members were detained and tried for disorderly conduct. They claimed innocence and insisted that their action was political rather than anti-religious, but court found them guilty and sentenced them to two years in a penal colony on August 17, 2012. On October 10, the Moscow City Court suspended sentence for one singer and upheld for two others.

According to Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, *Pussy Riot* case has somewhat radicalized views in Russia. “I think opinions have somewhat radicalized. It is true because action always provokes counter-action. If someone tries to trample on the foundations of religion, this always provokes a very strong reaction from believers, and it is not because they are fundamentalists or radicals, but because such is human nature.” – he said (Medvedev Doesn’t Believe in Threat of Religious Fundamentalism to Russia, 2012).

Pussy Riot case impact to Russian society would be impossible without the use of media – from YouTube (first video publication place) to the most influential TV channels – widely used both for advocacy of the singers and for their condemnation.

The involvement of the media, which reproduce and distribute various kinds of rumors, legends, myths, provoking the audience into the strange and irrational behavior, has been explicitly showed by another case dealing with the impact of mass media and also ignorance of their accountability.

Characteristic plot could be seen recently in the context of rumors about the upcoming end-date, doomsday according to the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012. The most influential (according to the circulation) regional newspaper *Omutninskije Vesti* (Omutninsk, Kirov region) published an article about the prophecy of a Buddhist monk from Tibet. The essence of the prophecy was the following: on December 21, 2012 the darkness “will last about three to four days accompanied by flashes of space, illusory flashes of light” resulting in a “loss up to 10% of the world population”. *Omutninskije Vesti*, with a reference to the Tibetan monk, advised people to buy much food, to leave the city and meditate in order to survive.

The social consequences of this publication described Maria Eismont in *Vedmosti* newspaper, published on November, 29: “Omutninsk people for the past week have been actively preparing for the end of the world, hundreds of people were buying matches, candles, salt, oil lamps, and canned food” (Eismont, 2012). The editor received hundreds of phone calls from parents with complains that babies were crying and saying: “Mom, I do not want to die!” Many retired people panicked and asked journalists what they had to do.

Colleagues from *Omutninskie Vesti* said they published the story “by accident”, simply because there was a blank space on the last page with anecdotes and crossword puzzles, and they had to put something there. Journalists took the news as a joke and expected the same reaction from the audience.

Social responsibility of journalism presumes that media are not disseminating information that might provoke such inadequate reaction from the audience. Obviously distorted, mythological picture of the world painted by mass media reveals the crisis of the journalists’ responsibility, and a serious ethical problem arises again, which leads to dysfunctions in the whole media system in Russia.

References

Crumm, D. (2006). Covering Religion on Any Beat. *Detroit Free Press*, July 29. URL: <http://www.concernedjournalists.org/covering-religion-any-beat>

Eismont, M. (2012). Mrakobesie rulit. Celyi gorod gotovitsya k koncu sveta. [Obscurantism Rules. The Whole City Is Preparing for the End of the World]. *Vedomosti*, November, 29. URL: http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/6597961/mrakobesie_rulit

Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media. (2006). Stout, D. A. (Ed.). New York: Routledge.

Hirschkind, Ch., Larkin, B. (2008). Media and the Political Forms of Religion. *Social Text* 96, Vol. 26, No. 3. Duke University Press.

- Hoover, S. M. (2006). *Religion in the Media Age*. Taylor & Francis.
- Khroul, V. (2009). Covering Religion Life: Searching for the Truth or Following Stereotypes? *Journalism Research in the Public Interest*. Winterthur, Switzerland.
- Khroul, V. (2012). *Religion and Media in Russia: Functional and Ethical Perspectives*. Saarbrücken, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Mediating Religion. Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. (2003). Mitchell, J., Marriage, S. (Eds.). London: T&T Clark, Continuum.
- Medvedev Doesn't Believe in Threat of Religious Fundamentalism to Russia*. (2012). URL: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=10142>
- Meyer, B., Moors, A. (2006). *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Number of Orthodox Church Members Shrinking in Russia, Islam on the Rise – Poll*. (2012). URL: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=10160>
- Nuzhen li obschestvennyy sovet po npravstvennosti na rossiskom TV?* [Is the Public Council for Morality on TV needed in Russia?]. (2008). URL: <http://religare.ru/poll49.htm>
- Religion and Media*. (2001). De Vries, H., Weber, S. (Eds.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Religiya v informacionnom pole rossiiskikh SMI* [Religion in Russian Information Space]. (2002). Kashinskaya, L. V., Lukina, M. M., Resnyanskaya, L. L. (Eds.). Moscow: MGU.
- RPC MP poka ne planiruet sozdat' sobstvennyy sovet po etike v SMI, zayavil svyaschennik Vladimir Viglyansky* [At the Moment Russian Orthodox Church Does not Plan to Establish Orthodox Council for Media, Said Priest Vladimir Viglyansky]. (2008). URL: <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=59756&type=view>
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- The Constitution of the Russian Federation*. (1993). URL: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>
- VTsIOM. (2008). *Press-vypusk № 980*. URL: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskie-arkhiv/item/single/10282.html?no_cache=1&cHash=465e3435dc