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Methodological Problems in the Research of New Religious Studies

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Several methodological problems in the research of new religious movements (NRM) are studied in the article: the problem of their terminological justification and definition, the specific character of their doctrinal and organizational sides, the peculiarities of social doctrines and the main tendencies of their evolution in the modern world. How NRMs function may cause ambiguous attitude in the contemporary Russian society. Some negative stereotypes surrounding NRMs have been formed as well. The research of NRMs' specific functions and the process of their evolution can show perspectives and tendencies of their future existence and development.

Keywords: study of religion, history of religion, new religious movements, sect, cult.

The pluralistic religious situation (sometimes called “religious kaleidoscope”) formed in the contemporary Russia is in many regards caused by the appearance and growth of new religious movements. The establishment of new religious movements is indicative of changes in the religious perception of a modern man all over the world. Sociological research of modern religiousness reveals “incredible eclecticism in religious perception of the majority if not all peoples in Russia” (Filatov, 2002). E. T. Babushkin (2009) explains this peculiarity of the contemporary religious mind by discreteness of the religious space, which is not only characteristic of any society, some peoples in a particular historical period (for example, belief in two gods in Rus), but it is also characteristic of separate individuals (today it is Christians-Heathens, Christians-Roerich followers etc.)

Religion can give answers to new questions and life's requests within the existing religious tradition. As a rule this leads to the appearance of new schools, movements and sects, which do not aspire to completely break off from this or that religious system they belong to. This internal process of changes in religious system does not lead to the appearance of new religions. The establishment of new religions is possible only if the whole system is reduced to one idea which is not always central, or if an idea (for example, the apocalyptical one) separates from the old religious system. And the explanation of the world matched with the new reality is based on such idea. It often happens when old religious systems are not capable to give answers to the new requests of the time.

The problems of the external world, which push to form new religions, can be different:

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political, economical and ideological. Or they can be influenced by other religious systems. That is why a new term “new religious movements” (NRM) has been accepted in the contemporary religious studies in order to distinguish this process of changes in a religion from the internal process of change.

The definition and characteristics of new religious movements are far away from being complete, which is quite explainable, as they are still being formed. The religious doctrines are mainly vague and not well formed.

Attempts to define NRM can be reduced to the following:

In I. S. Yablokov’s textbook (History..., 2004) it is noted: “New religious movements are called new as the majority of them appeared after the Second World War in the USA, West European countries and Eastern states. They are marked by the radical novelty of doctrine, which changes or rejects religious beliefs of traditional religions or proclaims the unique character of the doctrine”. The authors of this edition systemize new religions and make a well known classification of NRM according to the contents of religious doctrines.

The authors of a four-volume edition “Modern religious life in Russia” claim: “New religious movements is a term that doesn’t belong to different sides of religious life, which do not fit the classifications of religion set at the beginning of the 20th century...The term NRM itself does not have any content characteristics, besides the fact that something “new” is supposed to be there. That’s why religious phenomena that are described by this term have little in common” (Contemporary..., 2006). Observing the peculiarities, eclecticism and changeability of such phenomenon, the authors do not state any classification of NRM. They rank many of them to the religious environment they appeared in, for instance Deiparous centre to the Orthodox

church, Aum Shinrikyo to Buddhism etc. Only independent and original doctrines are referred to NRM. They are notable not only for their similarity with other religious systems but for the novelty as well, for example, the Unification Church, the Scientology Church, the Church of the Last Testament and others.

There are some attempts to relate the time of appearance of NRM to an earlier historical epoch. Reiner Flashe writes that the concept “new religions” is related to all religious movements that appear in New Time, approximately the middle of the 19th century. They separated as heresies or sects and have been developing independently, opposing themselves to the old religions as “new movements” (Flashe, 2001).

Therefore, all the authors note novelty as the main characteristic of these movements, which manifests itself in the whole structural complex of such movements. It includes a new belief, often not formulated as a doctrine, and new doctrinal texts (“The divine principle”, “The Last Testament”, “Live ethics” etc.), rituals, kinds of communities (clubs, centres, associations) that do not fit well known typologies of religious groups.

There have been attempts to systemize all the diversity of NRM in theological literature, not only by their classification but by revealing specific characteristics of new religiousness. Thus, B. Falikov notes in his article “NRM: problems of religious status (exemplified by Scientology)” such specific trait as duality, deviant behavior. Scientology functions as secular psycho-technique and a religion at the same time. You can be a scientologist without breaking away from the religion of the ancestors. Scientology is a rationalistic and technological system, but it is directed at achieving the super-rational aim – a man’s realization of his transcendental spiritual nature. In this sense, it functions in the edge of the religious and secular areas (Falikov, 2001). This particularity is indeed revealed in all spheres

of NRM functioning. It is inevitable because they are created in the secular epoch.

At the same time religious sociologists write that the functioning of traditional confessions (e.g. Russian Orthodox Church) has the same peculiarity. Russian Orthodox Church's social and political activity in the post-Soviet period reached a very high level. Thanks to peace-making, patriotic and educational activities the church garnered more trust and respect in comparison with other social organizations. However, the number of practicing believers is not rising, neither is the belief in the main Orthodox dogmas. The domination of social-cultural component over the religious one gives the Orthodox Church a secular tinge. As S. B. Filatov (2002) says about it: "The Russian Orthodox Church itself promotes non-religious perception of religion in the last twelve years", which strengthens the ROC's prestige in the society.

In this connection, as Falikov observes, the fight with totalitarian sects (like NRMs are often called by the media) "turns into a fight with ghosts". The lightest repressions are – the sects are disbanded with only a small group of followers remaining. The fight against the beliefs carried out not only by the government and the society, but by the ROC, turns into a fight with one's own shadow, because they also contain non-traditional religiousness" (Contemporary..., 2006).

In this way, such duplicity of functioning on the edge between secular and religious spheres is characteristic of both traditional and non-traditional religions in our secular time.

Researches often point to alternativeness and radical novelty of religious postulates as a specific trait of NRMs.

At first sight doctrinal beliefs of many NRMs are perceived as strange, extravagant, absurd or incapable to provoke strong religious feelings. So the question arises: what makes people adhere

to such movements, believe in the fact that their leader is the reincarnation of God or God's word? As a rule, the reasons for this are the following: crises in the society, the loss of spiritual guidance, the crisis of traditional religions etc.

Some kind of answer to this question can be found in M. Eliade's works. For him the main factor of growth of new religious movements is the anthropological crisis of the western civilization. Under externally frivolous doctrines and strange rituals we can discover cultural archetypes that are important for religious life. (M. Eliade, *The Myth of eternal return*, Saint-Petersburg: Alateya, 1998). For example, sacralization of nature or the cult of female deities in fact reproduces ancient chthonic cults in new conditions.

So, new religious movements are not so much the alternative for traditional religions as they are "a certain addition that reproduces the well known components of religion in a new form, but which rarely (if ever) appear in contemporary western culture". (E.E. Egilskiy, A. V. Mateskaya, S. I. Samiygin, *Textbook "New religious movements"*.-Moscow, 2011, p. 175).

In the modern secular society a man practically does not show his religiousness in his everyday life. While many NRMs demand much of their followers regarding their lifestyle, for instance, for the followers of the Society for Krishna Consciousness religion is a life path, lifestyle which gives sacral meaning to all parts of life: food preparation, hygiene, clothes etc. This refers not only to the societies of eastern origin but also to the communities that appeared as a result of religious innovation, for example, the Community of Vissarion. Here not only is faith important but the life path requiring colossal efforts from a man.

Thus, we see a paradox here: on one hand NRMs try to break away from the tradition and the alternative, on the other hand they recreate it in a new intricate form trying to restore the

traditional lifestyle when religion encompassed all spheres of human life forming his sacral space. It turns out that the new in doctrines of new religious movements is the well forgotten old.

Such paradox can be also found when researching other specific traits in NRMs.

In contemporary publications that analyze social programs of some NRMs there is a very justified question about the necessity of research into the evolution and changes of social programs in different new religious movements (Pismanik, 2010; Zabolotneva, 2010). Underestimating the changes in NRM activity is not only a theoretical mistake but can also be a serious hindrance in attaining an objective estimation of state the religious situation is in and in making adequate decisions.

Let us examine the process of NRM's evolution exemplified by the latest public speeches made by Vissarion, the founder of the Church of the Last Testament. It can help not only reveal the direction and character of the changes that happened in the activity of new religious movements but also give an objective assessment of the doctrine, free from the ideological and confessional biases as well as from the "demonic" image created by the media.

It is necessary to briefly describe the history of creation of this movement and its specific character of doctrine.

The creator of the movement Sergey Torop (sacral name Vissarion) was born on January 14th, 1961 in Krasnodar. In 1968 he moved with his parents to a town called Minuinsk in the Krasnoyarsk Territory. In May 1990 as he claimed Torop was baptized by the heavenly Father who gave him his blessing to advocate the Unified Religion. He held his first sermon on August 18th, 1991. Since that time he has been travelling around Russia and former Soviet republics to advocate his doctrine. He has followers not only

in Russia but in Kazakhstan, Baltic countries and Germany. From 1994 his followers have started to move to Kuraginsky district of the Krasnodar Territory where a new religious community was formed. In 1994 "Community of Unified Faith" was registered (first name "The Church of the Last Testament") and creation of an experimental environmental settlement begins. The modern name of the Spiritual-creative environmental community is "Abode of Dawn". Its main aim is to build a society on the spiritual basis. This aim is reached with the help of two principles and directions: the creation of a unified aspiration; unified understanding; unified action (The main..., 2008). The main aim of life in the community is the creation of relationships between people that are based on understanding each other, being helpful and useful to each other, being able to put other people's interests above their own. The aims, objectives and main principles of the commune as a social community are based on the doctrines of the new religion. If not touching upon all the areas of this doctrine, the main guidelines can be grouped in the following way:

- 1) The universe was formed by the will of the Great creative power – the Unified power. The creator of nature is unified with everything concerning it – information, energy, substance. He is the creator of flesh and mind. The Unified One is indifferent to life and death, happiness and suffering, good and bad.
- 2) Besides the creator of the world there is another creative source called "the Heavenly Father". This second creative source appeared due to the merging of the energy of the Unified One and the energy of Earth. "The Heavenly Father" is the creator of the human soul. If the Unified One creates the world with the help of his material power – Spirit of Life, then "the Heavenly Father" creates the human soul

with the help of his spiritual life power – the Holy Spirit (Kapysh, Kolchinin, 2006).

So there are two principalities in a human. His flesh is developed basing on the laws of the material Universe and his soul development is based on the laws of love.

- 3) There is harmony in the Universe. Nothing happens randomly, any event is the result of many cause-effect relationships. The Universe develops basing on the law of reasonability manifested through the law of karma.
- 4) In our time on Earth there is a complicated and important process of the humanity's transition into a new qualitative state. People must get in harmony with the Universe, which comes with the blossom of the soul and achievement of total harmlessness. In his missionary trips Vissarion explains this statement in the following way: "If we simplify it... We need to learn not to think about anything in a bad way. We shouldn't have negative thoughts anymore... A complex aggressive experience prevents man from love. We need to break free from this experience, which means to change our life experience completely" (Promised..., 2010).
- 5) "The Heavenly Father" gives the rules and dates of the humanity's transition into a new state through the chosen flesh, the guide of the Holy Spirit – a new teacher of love – Vissarion. His doctrine is aimed to unite all the religions and Spiritual doctrines into one unified religion, the religion of Unified Faith, to form the world perception of the people in the New Epoch.

In its religious doctrines the Church of the Last Testament can be ascribed to the movement

"New Age", than to the Christian tradition. There are all the characteristics of such diverse movement as New Age: the impersonal absolute (the Unified), the idea of the Universe's energetic nature, the synthesis of different religious doctrines. The Church of the Last Testament has no confrontations with the representatives of other confessions, because it admits different ways and levels of approximating the truth. Vissarion explains it in the following way: "On Earth there are many different phenomena which in one way or another reveal the truth. In some ways it is more obvious, in others less. Such event on Earth can be described as some kind of ladder that leads higher and higher but each stair is characterized by some extent of the truth. The higher the stair is the more open the truth is, the more responsibility is on those standing on the stair" (Promised..., 2010).

From the point of view of traditional religions, especially Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) where faith is important and you can believe in only one doctrine, such position is a manifestation of a deviant behavior.

The proof of social adaptation of the movement is retreating from radicalism which is very characteristic at the early stage, as well as specification and explanation of many questions. For instance, Vissarion explains the reserved character of the commune as a social community saying that it does not completely break away from the external world because all the settlements around with which it contacts actively, the original rejection of the commune by the local population is overcome. At the same time, distancing from the world full of hostility is important in order to create a community based on the opposite principles. It is not a deviation, not "abnormality" of such movement but it is a conscious rejection of the non-spiritual world. Among the accusations of the Church of the Last Testament put forward by the media

are the following: when entering the commune people are deceived, the mind is controlled, followers are forced to stay when they want to leave the commune etc. Vissarion explains that the Church's position on these questions is defined by the purpose of the community: "No one watches anyone. Nobody knows how many people there are. Nobody controls them, people live independently and choose where to live...There are many of them but they can move around freely and live how they want... it'd be stupid to try to trap a person into doing what only mature people can do...the purpose in Siberia requires a certain amount of wisdom and maturity...you need to be able to understand a lot not only to believe" (Promised..., 2010).

He says that it is absurd of the people to come to hide there by the year 2012, thinking that such people are there temporarily and they will leave. "A new society is being built there. And people are required to make gigantic efforts, practical work of changing oneself. It is untrue to just come and save oneself by being there. It is impossible to be saved like this" (Promised..., 2010).

According to the community's regulations, the movement has to obey the law of the Russian Federation. With some social programs they are supposed to build temples, children's recreational centres, playgrounds, and workshops, to reconstruct villages, roads, bridges, to take care of forests as well as to have

international and inter-confessional projects (Promised..., 2008).

The manifestation of adaptation in such movement is less harsh alternativeness in the form of predictions of the imminent death of the "sinful world". "...salvation cannot come with thunder and lightning, so that you suddenly grab it in fear and run off to save yourself. It is an incorrect expectation. It is a lazy person's expectation who thinks that someone has to push him somewhere to be saved. It won't happen. You will encounter clues that will be simple, peaceful and calm...each person's salvation depends solely on himself". When asked about the imminent Apocalypse Vissarion sometimes answers in the following way: "It is none of my business to tell you what lies in store for you. It is my business to teach you how to live today" (Promised..., 2010).

Several decades have passed since the appearance of NRMs. It is appropriate to put a question of the evolution, essential changes and specifications of both religious doctrines and NRMs' social programs.

Thus, we have put forward only some problems and difficulties in the research of such phenomenon as NRM. They require further research. Besides, the ever changing religious life needs constant rethinking of the set definitions, characteristics and assessment of NRMs' activity.

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Методологические проблемы изучения новых религиозных учений

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В статье рассматривается ряд методологических проблем в исследовании новых религиозных движений (НРД): проблема их терминологического обоснования и определения, выявления их специфики как вероучительного, так и организационного плана, особенности социальных доктрин и основные тенденции их эволюционирования в современном мире. Деятельность НРД вызывает неоднозначную оценку в современном российском обществе, сформировались негативные стереотипы восприятия НРД. Изучение особенностей функционирования НРД, процесса их эволюции позволит выявить перспективы, тенденции их дальнейшего существования и развития.

Ключевые слова: религиоведение, история религии, новые религиозные движения, секта, культ.
