The Medium for Demonic Energies: 'Digital Anxiety' in the Russian Orthodox Church

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Abstract: The Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) discourses about the internet are centered on the idea that digital technology is an ethically neutral instrument. At the same time, however, both the highest clerics and rank-and-file priests continuously express disquietude or overtly negative attitudes toward the internet. Even those actively involved in blogging have paradoxically developed this 'digital anxiety', expressing it through a slew of negative metaphors around the internet ranging from drug addiction, to meaningless chattering, to a swamp in which they are drowning to a vanity fair. In their defense, the internet has become associated with moral corruption, and a threat to the society and its core values, to such an extent that it is legitimate to speak about the 'moral panic' around the internet in the Orthodox discourses. The discrepancy between the officially accepted 'instrumentalization' interpretation of the internet, and widespread 'digital anxiety', however, signals that the internet *is* the issue for the ROC, in spite of its claim that it is not.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, digital religion, religious media, moral panics

In the last two decades religions around the globe successfully expanded into the internet, thereby questioning basic tenets of the secularism theory.[1] New ways have been uncovered in which digital technology could be and is being integrated with religious tradition. Digital technology has been increasingly seen as a new platform for the Church's mission, as well as a new communicative environment, in which people can build up religious communality, establish their religious identities, obtain religious experience (Campbell 2010b; Stout

2012) and develop 'cybertheology' (e.g. Spadaro 2014[2]). In some religions, including Eastern Orthodox Christianity, communication lies in the center of their theological reasoning. For example, Orthodox Trinitarian theology conceives of God as a communion of three hypostases. Metropolitan of Pergamon Ioannis Zizioulas, one of the most influential Orthodox theologians of our time, argues that the mystery of the Trinity 'points to a way of being which precludes individualism and separation… The "one" not only does not precede – logically or otherwise – the "many", but, on the contrary, requires the "many" from the very start in order to exist' (Zizioulas 2006: 159). Communication from this perspective is fundamental for the development of religious identity (see also: Zizioulas 1985: 110; cf. Baab 2012: 277-291). This theological insight exhibits one of the possible ways for the Church to make sense of new media as a game-changer in human communication. One scholar has expressed this idea, that different media in religious life are like different translations of the Bible (Hipps 2009: 24). They are essentially about one and the same thing, but small differences can result in tectonic shifts, similarly to how the revision of liturgical books in the mid-17th century led to the schism in the Russian Church. More than this, religion itself is a kind of medium, and its manifestations are always mediated: by the written word, oral speech, icons or liturgy as a synthesis of many media (Engelke 2010: 371-379; Khroul 2012: 8-9; Vries 2001). So media are by no means irrelevant to the ROC and its doctrine, nor are they unimportant for shaping one's religious identity, and for struggling for its recognition.

Possibilities, which computer-mediated communication (thereafter CMC) has created for the Russian Orthodoxy, are gigantic and historically unique; CMC gives voice to a subculture, which was almost voiceless during the Soviet period, and provides an instrument for limitless missionary activity.[3] Keeping the debates on (post-) secularism in due consideration, this paper argues that Russian Orthodoxy's uneasy co-existence with the internet is anchored in the incongruity between the regime of post-secularism, in which today's 'digital religion' exists, and the ROC's striving to restore pre-secular conditions. Following Habermas' line of thinking about prerequisites for post-secularism (quoted in Ziebertz and Riegel 2009: 300): acceptance of plurality, rational reasoning as a communicative strategy and acknowledgement of human rights as the fundamental value, we can suggest that the ROC is trying to instrumentalize the internet as a medium for exactly the opposite messages: the monopoly on moral judgment, the privileging of faith over reason and the relativisation of the human rights' doctrine.

New media, however, have their own communicative logic and political agenda, which may or may not facilitate democratization of the public sphere (e.g. Gorham 2014; Paulsen and Zvereva 2014; Roesen and Zvereva 2014; Schmidt and Teubiner 2009; Uffelmann 2014). They do definitely spur grassroots activism as well as 'cynical reason' (Sloterdijk 1987) and 'liquid' forms of social sensibility (Bauman 2000). The deepest irony here is that providing unlimited access to the discourse, the internet seems to undermine something dear to the hearts of the Orthodox Christians, namely the hierarchy of knowledge, and the underlying hierarchy of power. To just have access to the discourse is not important for them, because they believe that they *already* have an exclusive access to the 'real' and the only important knowl-

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[2] See Viktor Khroul's review on this book in this issue of *Digital Icons,* pp. 195-198.
[3] On the history of the ROC's engagement with the internet see Ksenia Luchenko's essay 'Orthodox Online Media in Runet: History of Development and Current State of Affairs' in this issue of *Digital Icons,* pp. 123-132.

edge – about God. This means that the internet devalues their treasure and refashions their authority (cf. Hjarvard 2008). Russian Orthodoxy shares these premonitions with some fundamentalist religions, fearing that digital technologies could profane sacral truths and belittle the religious authority of the Church hierarchy (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005: 25-40; Howard 2011).

At this juncture we can see the mechanism of the 'digital anxiety', powered by the fear of losing control over the identity of the self and the (collective and individual) other, on the one hand, and the attempt to 'securitize' the religious identity, many of whose aspects are being perceived as endangered in the age of new media. The logic of securitization produces a series of moral panics about CMC in order to reinforce the grid of values of this seemingly vulnerable religious 'self'.

The supporting primary sources for this research come mostly from qualitative analysis of the blogs of Orthodox priests and activists, official documents of ROC and statements of the Church highest clerics as well as several open-ended questionnaires.[4] The ROC has no official policy document on the internet, so opinions may vary greatly among the Orthodox clergy. This article tries not to focus too much on the extremes of positive or negative (prevailing) attitudes towards the internet, but rather – through the close reading of the blogs – it uncovers discursive structures which made those opinions possible.

Methodology

This research is based on reflections, obtained from the internet users, mostly bloggers, who are either priests or religious activists. These reflections are contextualized in official statements about the internet from highest clerics of the Moscow Patriarchate. This means that this research is not an ethnographic study of what Orthodox believers *do* in digital environment. It is rather an examination of the Church's recent intellectual history, which revolves around questions such as: Which notions and metaphors do they employ in order to make sense of the digital world? From which intellectual layers and legacies do they borrow them? How do they recombine those ideas in order to adjust to today's reality?

In order to approach these questions, I draw on the 'social construction of technology' theory (e.g. Bijker 1987; Klein and Kleinman 2002), as it has been adapted to the studies of media and religion by Heidi Campbell (e.g. Campbell 2005). According to this coneptualization, technical innovations become meaningful for users only when they are framed mentally and emotionally. In other words, success or failure in mastering technologies depends not on their innate qualities but on the way in which people construct them, leaning on their previous experience, cultural traditions, basic values and other discursive practices (Campbell 2012: 84). However, our interpretation of technology should be fine-tuned in order to take into account hegemonic articulation of meanings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), because the digital environment is thoroughly intersected by lines of political force. The ROC, which in defiance of the post-secularism paradigm, reclaims the role of the sole gatekeeper of culture

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[4] In August and September 2014 questionnaires about Orthodoxy and digital technologies were sent to 28 blogging priests and Church activists; 11 of them responded, 7 of them finally submitted their answers. The essay '"Ortho-Blogging" from Inside: A Virtual Roundtable' by Irina Kotkina and Mikhail Suslov in this issue of *Digital Icons,* pp. 165-174, is based on those answers.

and spirituality in Russian society, struggles to arrest the flow of many possible interpretations of CMC and thereby to (partially) fixate the religious identity of users. In this sense, moral panics (e.g. Molloy 2013: 194-201; Smith and Cole 2013: 207-223) around and about the ROC's engagement with CMC, function as dress-rehearsals of performing ROC's cultural hegemony in Russia.

The analysis of religious discourses online always faces the problem of motive, intention and the discrepancy between what is said and what is thought. To be sure, the ROC is a hierarchical authoritarian institution, which always tries to monitor and censor presbyters' writings online. For example, rabid anti-Ukrainian posts of deacon Pavel Shul'zhenko on his vk.com page caused him to be banned from service on account of discrediting the Church (Shul'zhenko 2015), whereas hieromonk Nikolai Savchenko, who, by contrast, reproached Russia for its involvement in the war in Donbass and its annexation of Crimea, was punitively reassigned from St. Petersburg to a monastery in Strel'na (Vol'tskaia 2015). However, censorship and auto-censorship online should not be exaggerated because the Church simply has no means to follow every single blog or page on social networks, and barely reacts to the most virally spread scandals.

So for the majority of blogging priests, this activity is not an exercise in Aesopian language, but rather a missionary outreach, or more often than not, a struggle for recognition (e.g. Honneth 1995), and particularly a self-cultivation technique (Lee 2009: 97-114; Bakardjieva and Gaden 2012: 399-413). CMC, thus, became the single most important platform on which recognition, status and identity are being debated, nurtured and negotiated, and in so doing, compensates for disfunctionalities in many other social spheres in Russia, from legislation to family life, and from the press to grassroots' organizations.

The paradox of cyber-skepticism

Patriarch Kirill ironically remarks that his attitude towards the internet is similar to his relation to electricity, or to an automobile. One can use the internet for good or for evil, because as a tool, the internet is ethically neutral (Kirill 2009: 113; Kirill 2010; Krug 2007). And yet – contrary to this 'official' instrumentalization thesis – in the eyes of Orthodox intellectuals, the internet designates a space of insecurity and discomfort, incongruent with the ROC's 'socio-religious construction' of other technologies. Patriarch Kirill employs the 'geopolitical' metaphor to express the Orthodox 'digital anxiety': the internet is the battleground, where forces of good and evil fight for human souls. Elsewhere he mentions: 'The theme of the mediasphere… is what I am thinking about now most of all, and what I am praying for, because here is the place where the devil struggles with God' (Kirill 2012a; Kirill 2008: 119). Archpriest Sergii Lepin extended the 'geopolitical' metaphor by Patriarch Kirill, stating 'we are "fighting" not against the internet, but for the internet' (Lepin 2014; cf. Kirill 2012c; Legoida 2012). Thus, contrary to the opinion that blogging is an unimportant activity for relaxation, and contrary to the 'instrumentalization thesis', Patriarch Kirill suggests here the dramatic significance of the internet is for personal salvation and the world's destiny.

Speaking about 'Ortho-blogging' in Russia bridges the offline gap between the subculture of the 'churchized' [votserkovlennyi], i.e. of regular Church-goers, and the rest of Russian so-

ciety. The widespread justification among Orthodox priests of their online presence focuses on the fact that the non-'churchized' population, which nevertheless feels its attachment to religion and builds its identity on the Russian Church, experiences difficulties with church customs. People often do not know how to behave themselves in church, or how to approach a priest and ask him a question. Blogs of the priests effectively solve this problem, providing them with a medium, in which they feel more 'at home' and do not hesitate to speak about their religious needs. In this sense, 'Ortho-blogs' provide a new social infrastructure for practicing religion and recruiting co-believers (e.g. Lövheim 2013: 52).

All these advantages notwithstanding, for rank-and-file blogging priests the internet is paradoxically acquiring menacing contours. 'Ortho-bloggers' often mention reluctance with which they started their blogs. For example, archpriest Dimitrii Struev begins his first entry with the last words of Christ on the cross: 'It is finished', and then explains his reasons to begin blogging: 'My friends have finally persuaded me to start this blog […] I was hesitant not only because all this virtual stuff [*virtual'shchina*, derogative for 'the virtual'] is going to suck out even more *real* time [from my life], but also because I appreciate traditional human communication too much, and there is a sort of the retrograde fear to substitute it by virtual [communication]' (presviter-ds@lj 2.01.2007). Following this line of thought, Metropolitan Ignatii (Pologrudov) of Khabarovsk and Trans-Amur, who was arguably the first bishop of the ROC to start a personal blog, recollects that it was the head of his Information department, who convinced him to launch an online diary: 'I resisted as much as I could but he displayed the prodigy of endurance and persistence… So [finally] my blog was brought to life' (Ignatii 2014). Archpriest Gennadii Belovolov (aka otets-gennadiy) sounds the same note when confessing the following: 'I have always been skeptical about all sorts of web logging, and could not think of myself doing these things…' (otets-gennadiy@lj 15.07.2010). Self-critical and derogative characteristics of web logging and the internet in general are ubiquitous: 'this virtual stuff [*virtual'shchina*]', 'this slush swallows me up' (here, there is a play on words; LiveJournal is *ZhZh, zhivoi zhurnal*, which sounds to a Russian ear like *zhizha,* slush); 'I keep on buzzing' ('to buzz' in Russian is 'zhuzhzhat''); 'cesspool of the internet' (o-paulos@lj 23.04.2007). WWW is referred to as a 'global spider's web', and experience in the internet – as being 'contaminated with the internet' (presviter-ds 11.08.2007; Iakovleva 2012[5]: 130; Osborne 2004). It is necessary to note, that this 'virtual arachnophobia' exists well beyond the Orthodox blogosphere (Schmidt and Teubener 2006: 52-53).

With the tinge of the paradox of a liar, 'Ortho-bloggers' claim that the blogosphere does not represent or express the interests and opinions of the Russian people. As inokv (hegumen Vitalii Utkin) angrily pens, it is time to limit the dependence of state and society from 'a handful of people in the internet', who in fact 'are nothing but [who] feel their importance'. Otherwise, screams of a dozen of bloggers would muffle the voice of the 'absolute majority of our people' (inokv@lj 21.07.2013). This position suggests a counter to the idea that the internet democratizes politics, and echoes the Slavophile teaching of the mid-19th century, juxtaposing 'the people', which is natural, original and authentic, and the 'public', which is unnatural, unoriginal and unauthentic. The repercussions of this division are observable in

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[5] Olga Iakovleva is the chair of the Union of Orthodox Lawyers, who made her fame by advocating interests of Orthodox believers, refusing to accept digital documents (e.g. passports).

Solzhenitsyn's aversion towards '*obrazovanshchina*', i.e. superficially educated intelligentsia, which assumes the right of moral judgment on behalf of the whole people. Pretre_philippe (priest Filip Parfenov) compares bloggers with such '*obrazovanshchina*' , criticizing them for combining opinionated ignorance with aggressive imposing of their views on the rest of the population. Hence, alignment of the internet with a 'false' public sphere is common: digital technologies are believed to be used by some 'external' forces in order to create 'an illusion of public opinion' (pretre-philippe@lj 5.07.2010; Dobrosotskikh 2013: 7).

However, the majority of 'Ortho-bloggers' do not reject CMC out of hand. The most common strategy to 'normalize' the internet and to make sense of the digital environment is to represent it along the line of Patriarch Kirill's reasoning as purely instrumental to purposes of salvation and personal spiritual perfection (e.g. ierey-masim@lj 15.04.2011; Kuz'micheva 2014). As father Iakov Krotov, one of the 'fathers-founders' of the Orthodox 'Runet', explains, 'the internet in general and blogs and LiveJournal in particular are technical tools, like paper and ink. Tools do not determine the rules of communication...' (Krotov, n.d.) Hieromonk Makarii Markish categorically professes that to believe that any technological invention including the internet could have an impact on faith or theology is 'sheer nonsense' (Markish 2014).

Annette Markham distinguishes three ways, or levels of engaging with the internet: as a tool, as a place and as a state of being (Markham 1998). For 'Ortho-users' the most common way to think about the internet is 'instrumental'. This precludes Orthodox intellectuals and grassroots users from any deep understanding of the phenomenon. The internet is not a problem for them intellectually, but it is anyway a huge problem for them emotionally and intuitively. The discrepancy between the perceived threat of the internet and reluctance to theorize it exposes the structure of the discourse, because even anxiety, vigor and irritation with which 'Ortho-bloggers' insist on instrumentality of the internet suggests that CMC is something more.

The doubling of the world: theological tradition and new media

In the ideal world of Orthodox priests, the digital environment is a means, enhancing physical connectivity among humans, not a virtual double of 'real' society. This disquietude about the 'virtual world' resonates with some deeply seated religious sensibilities, such as the fear of the 'monstrous double' in archaic cultures (Girard 1972: 213-248) or – on a more historical plane of interpretation – with iconoclastic debates of the 8th century. In a nutshell, the key iconoclastic argument against pictures of God and saints was that they violate one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4): 'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below', because creating the double of the world implies a kind of blasphemous encroachment on God's prerogative.

This understanding is weaved into the ROC's concept of the difference between information and knowledge. Information, from this viewpoint, is something unnecessary or even delusive, taking people away from *knowing* really important things. Sergei Chapnin, the ex-editor of two mouthpieces of the Moscow Patriarchate*,* wrote a programmatic article on the

ROC's presence in media, in which he philosophized on the difference between the internet and icons as a traditional Orthodox 'medium'. He pointed at the Orthodox tradition to consider an icon as an invisible 'proto-image' (of God), residing behind the visible iconic image,[6] whereas information in today's media has no 'real content' because it has become a purpose in itself, a mere play of simulacra. Information, he concludes in his train of thoughts, 'has rebelled against knowledge', and first of all against 'knowledge of Truth, Word and Image, united in Christ' (Chapnin 2006: 225-226). In a way, this interpretation recycles the main iconoclastic argument forbidding the 'doubling' of the world.

In tune with this conceptualization, Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin) opines that the internet trains us to live in dependence on ready-made ideas, pleasures and values. The internet sells us a bill of goods, so that people are gradually losing the capacity for independent and critical judgment. He further argues that in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve received all information solely from God, and therefore could not even conceive of an idea to violate the divine will. The Fall happened when people received (false) information from the devil. Likewise in our life, information about sinful deeds has power to cause these deeds, when, for example, teenagers start to smoke or drink spirits, they first learn that this is 'cool' from their peers, and then try doing it themselves (Kapalin 2012).

This line of reasoning was extended by Bishop Longin (Korchagin) of Saratov and Vol'sk; he is concerned with the stream of 'uprooted' information in the internet, which can overwhelm a young person, providing him or her with a wealth of facts about everything in the world. This information, however, has not been 'processed' and structured by an institution, representing cultural tradition and external moral authority (Korchagin 2006). As a result, a youth will be exposed to substantially homogenous and morally neutral information about Orthodoxy and, say, Jehovah's Witnesses, which, understandably, is disagreeable for an Orthodox bishop.

The image of the internet as a place of unboundedly floating of information, torn from its traditions and cultural roots, is threatening for Orthodox intellectuals, because it aligns digital technologies with the danger of losing Russia's national and cultural identity. This anxiety sometimes borders with blaming the internet for being a geopolitical weapon, which Russia's enemies use in order to undermine its sovereignty and cultural originality (Markish 2013b: 91). In a more general sense, Runet as a whole has been a locus of anti-globalist manifestations (Bowles 2006: 32; Agadjanian and Rousselet 2005: 29-57).

Another meaningful input to the debate about the internet was provided by the tradition of 'name-worshipping', an intellectual movement developed in Russian Orthodoxy in the early 20th century, and quickly spread among the Russian residents of Mount Athos and religiously minded intelligentsia in imperial capitals. From their viewpoint, 'the name of a thing is the thing, but the thing is not its name' (e.g. Nishnikov 2012: 56-65). As Aleksandr Etkind interprets 'name-worshipping', it was a kind of protest against the Enlightenment and its semiotic project to see signifiers as but loosely connected with the signified. By contrast, 'name-worshippers', as if reenacting pre-historical animism on a new level, collapsed the name and its object in one, thereby heading towards the end of discourse, when only the 'Jesus prayer' interrupts silence (Etkind 1998: 259-261).

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[6] On functioning of icons in the digital environment see Fabian Heffermehl's article 'Wi-Fi in Plato's Cave: The Digital Icon and the Phenomenology of Surveillance' in this issue of *Digital Icons,* pp. 27-47.

Considering this inseverable tie between the signifier and the signified in the context of 'name-worshipping', virtual reality should be represented as the world of empty signifiers ('simulacra' in Chapnin's wording), or as the world of wretched shadows of real things. Priest Iakov Krotov reminds us that shadows, as we may know from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, can try to take the place of a real person. Father Iakov opines that the internet as a communicative space seduces people to change roles with their shadows, while 'the communion of two shadows would never beget either a person or even the third shadow' (Krotov 2013); it is in this sense fruitless.

The image of the internet as the 'realm of shadows' is haunting in Orthodox blogs (kolokolchik-lby@lj 17.02.2014). The most common trope juxtaposes 'live' (offline) and online (i.e. presumably 'dead') communication. Priest Sergii Kruglov, a popular blogger himself, composed a poem 'A Priest [Logging] in a Blog', in which he reflected his sentiments about online activity:

> Night is everywhere. But not in LiveJournal:
> These are not [just] hard disks [which] spin and rub [themselves]:
> Now here it is someone who is *scratching away [his] life,*
> Now there someone squeakily writes comments.
> Oh, you have to respond to this *deadly squeak*! You have to call
> This person and that one by their *natural names.*
> And you have to bless hundreds of *ghostly friends* […]
> (kruglov-s-g@lj 16.04.2008).[7]

Reading the poem, the image of internet communication appears before our eyes, which is akin to Dante's inferno: this is the nocturnal place ('night is everywhere'), inhabited by 'ghostly friends', who ceaselessly perform the treadmill ('spinning hard disks') of self-destroying ('scratching away his life'), accompanied by 'deadly squeaks'. By mentioning that the priest's mission in this place should be to recall 'ghostly' bloggers' real names, father Sergii attacks the 'evil doubling' of the world in the internet from the viewpoint of 'name-worshipping'.

Echoing this 'other-worldly' metaphor of the internet, archpriest Gennadii Belovolov refers to the short fantastic story by Dostoevsky 'Bobok' (1873). This story tells us about a writer who starts to hear strange muted voices. After a while he realizes that these are conversations of dead men and women in the graveyard; for a couple of months after death, when their flesh is gradually decomposing, corpses can still talk to each other and to relate their histories and give the final appraisal of their lives. They talk for months and months until carrion could squelch nothing else but '*bobok*'. Father Gennadii compares this story to internet communication: similarly to Dostoevsky's sick fantasy, online interlocutors 'are in complete darkness, they neither see, nor know each other, and can talk about anything they want' (Belovolov 2010).

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[7] Italics added for emphasis. All translations are mine. – M.S. In original: Povsiudu noch'. I lish' v ZhZh ne noch':/Ne diski zhestkie, se, trutsia i vertiatsia:/To kto-to zhizn' tam vytsarapyvaet proch',/To skriplo kommenty skriniatsia./O otzovis' na etot smertnyi skrip! O pozovi/Togo i etogo po imenam ikh krovnym,/I sotni prizrachnykh druzei blagoslovi/Perstoslozheniem imenoslovnym.

Another aspect of the 'virtual reality' was pinpointed by Patriarch Aleksii II (Rediger) who combined two images of the internet: as a theatrical play, and as 'faking for fun', and expressed his concern that the internet promotes a 'not… serious, playful approach to life' (Aleksii II 2006). Following this logic, archpriest Vladimir Vigilianskii expresses anxiety that internet discussions foster 'twaddle, mockery… It is a sign of good manners here to run down bishops, to laugh at the Church officials, and to sneer at Church events' (Vigilianskii 2008). Archpriest Aleksii Uminskii, known as a popular TV presenter and who has recently committed a 'virtual suicide'[8] by closing all his accounts on social media, argues that on the social networking sites everything can be easily turned into a fake, and even a person can change into a fake, and a fake is 'something horrendous, this is a joke which looks so much as a truth. This is a really devilish contrivance to make fun of words, to make fun of thoughts and to make fun of a human being…' (Uminskii 2013). Thus, in Orthodox criticism, the internet represents the metonymy of 'cynical reason' (Sloterdijk 1987), ubiquitous in the profit-oriented de-Christianized world.

De-sacralization of the sacraments

Put together, all these representations of the internet mark the dramatic association of CMC with the devil's agency, so that the internet is associated with the 'father of lies', whose purpose is to pervert and to mock God's creation: humans and the world around us. As archpriest Dimitrii Savel'ev answered in the popular project 'Fathers Online', 'it is not possible to improve the virtual world. It seems to me that this is a kind of an enemy's trick, devised in order to suck out people's energy, thoughts and feelings and [transform them into] words on the internet' (Savel'ev 2014a).[9] Association of the internet with the devil is even stronger, and – although much less sophisticated, - very explicit among some Orthodox laymen and laywomen. As one of the Orthodox radio listeners straightforwardly puts it: 'the internet is devilry' (Chinkova 2011). Likewise, Egor Kholmogorov – himself an active internet user, – calls virtual reality 'pure devilry' (holmogor@lj 22.10.2007). Hieromonk Anatolii Berestov argues that virtual reality creates a 'false universe', but this is 'in fact, the choice of demons, the choice of non-being' (Berestov 2007: 79). He further says that virtual reality is the devilish reality par excellence; when the devil seduces people, he acts through the sphere of fantasy and imagination, i.e. by creating virtual reality as a 'medium for devilish energy' (Berestov 2007: 80).

A certain level of techno-phobia has always been widespread on the conservative flank of the Russian Orthodoxy; as hieromonk Makarii Markish puts it, any technological novelty starts to serve to the enemy of humankind even earlier than it becomes useful for people (Markish 2013a: 20). Some 'Ortho-bloggers' consider the virtual world as a kind of inhumane technological utopia, capable of subordinating humans to a non-human entity of dark provenience. Building on the image of the internet as a fake reality, Orthodox bloggers tend

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[8] In another example, archpriest Maksim Kozlov, vice chair of the Educational department of Moscow Patriarchate, cancelled his Facebook account (Tiurenkov 2013).

[9] To be noted: the 'enemy' is a common Orthodox euphemism for the devil.

to negate the authenticity of religious experience, obtained online, with a case in point here being the 'virtual chapel'.

In 2010 an IT-specialist Denis Kapralov created a virtual chapel in the name of Nicholas the Miracle-worker (Image 1), designed, as he explained it, first and foremost for disabled people who cannot go to a 'real' church. On the webpage one can light a candle, choose an icon, or read a prayer, while listening to meditative music. 'It is not possible to substitute the spiritual experience in the [real] church by this project, - he stipulates, - 'But to a certain extent it helps people to absterge, and it gives them force' ('Chasovnia' 2015). This initiative, however, was met with suspicion by clerics and lay Church goers alike (e.g. Svechnikov 2012), who argue that this is not just a 'substitute', but a 'surrogate' [*podmena*] of the true religious experience (e.g. iereys@lj 10.04.2008).[10] Some priests view it as 'de-sacralization of sacraments' (Odarenko 2012), 'de-sacralization of the prayer' (chudo_iva@lj 4.07.2013), or 'turning… prayer into a kind of the computer game' (Savel'ev 2014b). On the same note, democratization of communication online caused irritation among some Orthodox intellectuals, who claim that people lose reverence for the holy rank of a priest or a bishop, so that they can speak with them disrespectfully (Morozov 2013: 38-39).[11]

Image 1. 'Virtual Chapel.'

Source: http://chasovnya.msk.ru (accessed 1 April 2015)

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[10] Ethnographic field research tends to show that in fact, religious experience online may be 'authentic' in the sense that it causes similar bodily effects and emotional states as 'offline' religious practice (see, inter alia Radde-Antweiler 2013: 88-103).

[11] On the general concern about religious authority online see Cheong 2013: 72-87.

The short story by archpriest Dimitrii Struev sums up Orthodox disquietudes about authenticity of the faith online. It tells us about near future when technologies would substantially transform the traditional church routine (e.g. a battery-powered censer, a touchpad in place of a lectern, neon candles lit via the internet, and so on). The protagonist named Nastia listens to the prayers through earphones and confesses by choosing options from dropdown menus on the screen. Having sent the file to her confessor, she suddenly wonders if the priest opens her files at all? Perhaps, there is a special program which automatically forwards replies, but what does it mean, then? What does such an absolution would look like: 'I, IBM, absolve you from your sins in the name of…' In the name of whom? (presviter-ds@lj 30.03.2008). At this point the story abruptly ends, leaving the reader to surmise that in the spirit of Orthodox religious sensibility, if this is not done in the name of God, then it is done in the name of the devil.

Anthropological threat

According to 'Bases of the ROC's Doctrine on Human Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights' (I.2 – I.5), human nature is originally sinful, so human dignity is not something which humans possess by default, but something which is to be gained by a virtuous life. Freedom is considered as one of the manifestations of God's presence in human life, but freedom 'should not be absolutized', because if a person freely chooses to live a virtuous life, this person would acquire dignity and his or her choice should be respected. If, by contrast, a person chooses to live a life of a sinner, he or she loses dignity and this person's free choice should not be respected (Osnovy 2008: II.1 – II.2).

This argument has a deep and lasting impact on the official line of the ROC regarding the internet, which is being perceived as the locus of the emancipation of human passions. The alternative vision of the internet as promoting self-realization is profoundly alien to Orthodox religious sensibility, which tends to confront self-realization as releasing of person's sins with self-restriction in the spirit of Christ's teaching about *kenosis* (self-belittling). Thus, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) rebuked the internet as the place where people can freely lump together all of their dirt and negative attitudes without being censored or punished (Alfeev 2012). With a similar eloquence, Patriarch Kirill indicated that the internet was the zone of high risk of 'moral degeneration' (Kirill 2012a). Specifying his position, the patriarch has recently called social networks a 'vanity fair', detrimental to our soul's salvation (Kirill 2015). Orthodox priests and activists closely follow this argument, professing that the internet unleashes human nature, thereby inevitably allowing evil to vent (Markish 2013b: 90). In particular, they disapprovingly speak of those who post online for the sake of becoming 'seemingly important' (Uminskii 2013), or lose 'internal barriers' and stop controlling their emotions in the online debates (Chinkova 2011; Legoida 2011; Legoida 2014; saag@lj 13.10.2009). The internet from this viewpoint is not a space for self-cultivation but the opposite, a place for self-destruction in a paroxysm of carnavalesque gaiety. This vision of the internet manifests the feeling of the loss of control and agency (Schmidt and Teubener 2006: 57), characteristic for post-Soviet society in general, and for the sensibility of religious traditionalists in particular.

Armed with such an understanding of the internet as potentially impeding person's salvation, the Orthodox religious sensibility situates information in the rubric of 'sinful', or more specifically – 'ferial' as an opposite to Lenten fare. In the Orthodox concept of fasting, people should shun sin and all unnecessary and excessive things in their lives. Mounting the comparison between the internet and the ferial food, some blogging priests reported that they would stop blogging or searching the internet during Lent (fater-go@lj 21.02.2004; griger@lj 14.12.2005). In 2013 archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin used the phrase 'information fasting' and called to keep it during Lent, which implicates refraining from using the internet altogether for this period (Chaplin 2013; Uminskii 2013).

The case in point here is the Orthodox interpretation of the 'internet-addiction' as a manifestation of the human corrupt nature, and a barrier on the way to spiritual perfection. From this viewpoint, 'addiction' to the internet and internet as a 'drug' of sorts are important topics in Orthodox web logs (e.g. kolokolchik-lby@lj 17.02.2014; pfarrer-tom@lj 30.10.2014). Very often they make astute and self-critical observation about their own 'dependence' on the internet, using the characteristic jargon from the sub-culture of drug addicts. Priest Vitalii Timoshenko, for example, with tongue in cheek confesses that he was 'addicted' [*podsazhen*] to LiveJournal by a friend of his (priest-vit@lj 4.01.2022); similarly anonymous prostopop@lj was 'addicted' to the internet by father Mikhail Shpolianskii (prostopop@lj 26.04.2014).

These playful accounts reveal a lot about perception of the internet in Orthodoxy, but some religious activists are seriously concerned with 'internet-addiction' and this concern is only growing. In 2013 the popular website 'Orthodoxy and the World' (pravmir.ru) started an anti-internet campaign; it published an opinion of bishop Iona (Cherepanov) of Obukhov, who voiced his position on people 'stuck in the internet': 'it is tempting to give up on them: well, what could you do? They are vegetables. They can only click on the keyboard and stare at the blinking screen. And nevertheless they are also God's creatures' (Sen'chukova 2013). Soon thereafter two more articles appeared on this website promoting 'digital detox': one of them was sportively entitled 'The Easy Way to Stop [Using] the Internet', parodying an announcement about harm of smoking (Solov'ev 2014; Solov'ev 2013).

'Addiction' to the internet has been substantially explored by hieromonk Anatolii Berestov, M.D., who once was the head pediatric narcologist of Moscow. He considers 'net-mania' [*setemaniia*] as a specific case of compulsive gambling, manifested in pointless rambling in virtual space. In his view, a 'net-holic' or 'info-holic' [*setegolik, infogolik*] is characterized by physiological as well as psychological deviancies such as red eyes, neural and physical exhaustion, lachrymation and yawning. 'Net-mania' has a spiritual dimension as well because 'net-holics', trained to endlessly gratify their Ego and disregard interests and feelings of their fellow creatures, gradually transform their personalities towards demonism (Berestov 2007: 25; Berestov 2013: 54-71). Demonization of humans in the internet is demonstrated by a picture published by pravmir.ru, which illustrates an article about internet-'addiction' (Image 2). A child with crooked fingers and a face, distorted in frenzy, is playing a computer game, so that the image of Darth Vader, the prince of the dark side of the Force in the *Star Wars* universe, is gleaming on the child's forehead (note that according to Revelation 14:9 the mark of the beast is on the forehead or in the hand).

Image 2. 'Internet-dependency: Reasons, Characteristics, Risks.'

Source: http://www.pravmir.ru/internet-zavisimost-prichiny-priznaki-riski (accessed 1 April 2015)

These views fall within the tradition of securitization of human biology in post-Soviet Russia. Accusations of pedophilia on the internet are all too frequent in 'Ortho-net', reaching the scale of a moral panic. Social networks are called, for example, the 'paradise for pedophiles', where 60% of children supposedly have been confronted with obscene advances (Dobrosotskikh 2013: 112, 116). The care for minors justifies the most radical proposals about curbing the internet (Dobrosotskikh 2013: 7). The most spectacular success in this direction has been achieved by the League for the Safe Internet (*Liga Bezopasnogo Interneta)*, established in January 2011 by the Orthodox tycoon Konstantin Malofeev, and with the support from the Ministry of Communication of the Russian Federation. The League has also been seconded on the highest level in the Moscow Patriarchate, and personally by Patriarch Kirill (Legoida 2013). This organization set itself the task of fighting pedophilia and extremism on the internet, mostly by hands of the so called 'cyber-warriors' [*kiberdruzhinniki*], who provoke and expose pedophiles, and report about contentious websites to the law-enforcement bodies.

Anonymity and pseudonymity

From the time of its first advances into our everyday life in the 1980s, digital technologies captivated people's imagination by the possibility to create and nurture multiple identities. Unlike many other religious users (e.g. neo-Pagans – see Cowan 2005), blogging Orthodox priests consider anonymity as the single most important dissatisfaction with the internet when they reflect upon their online experience. In Orthodox understanding, the name is integral,

perhaps even the central part of the personality, so anonymity is sinning against God's creation. Thus, according to Georgii Kovalenko, the former head of the Information department of Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, the internet harbors the threat of splitting personality, so that a human is being alienated from herself. Father Georgii symbolically links doubling of personalities in virtual reality with crucifying Christ the second time (Kovalenko 2012).

Here we approach the core of the Orthodox theological reflection on digital culture: personalities in the online environment become masks and the internet in general, a theater (i.e. the digital double), is absolutely unacceptable for Orthodox religious sensibility. Patriarch Kirill says that a human has not been created to live with two faces, so when we don a mask, it is so unnatural, that it will have ruinous repercussions on the integrity of our personalities.[12] The anonymity in the internet, as hegumen Spiridon Balandin argues, allows us to create multiple masks and identities and thereby transforms our online presence into a 'solo performance' theater, which is nothing else but 'evil and senseless actorism (*akterstvo*), unworthy of a Christian' (Balandin 2009). Sergei Bulgakov's *Philosophy of Name* gives us a glimpse into Orthodox understanding of pseudonymity as 'acting with names' [*akterstvo v imeni*], and 'acting can never pass unpunished: the mask eats away the heart, the 'role' [eats away] the soul, which comes loose on its axis and loses its integrity and solidity' (Bulgakov 1953: 173-174). Sergei Bulgakov points out the mystical aspects of re-naming in, for example, the practices of monastic life, when a monk takes vows, he or she changes names *and* personalities, because the whole of his or her life and its purpose will change too (Bulgakov 1953: 172). Renaming in any other contexts is, therefore, a mere mocking of the monastic feat, that is something absolutely deprecatory.

In online discussions the word 'onanim' has been coined (e.g. p-m-makarios@lj 22.06.2012), a blend of 'onanist' and 'anonym', expressing irritation and contempt towards anonymity. For an Orthodox believer anonymity is associated with evil will and the un-bridling of human sinful nature. In the words of Makarii Markish, 'anonymity… becomes a universal cover for all evil' (Markish 2013a; kolokolchik-lby@lj 26.01.2010). For Orthodox bloggers anonymity is first and foremost a token of irresponsibility and a lack of trust. For example, archimandrite Alipii (Svetlichnyi) remarks that he has never befriended anybody without a realistically looking picture of their avatar: 'it is hard for me to speak to a person who does not show their face. It is absurd to communicate with a kitten or a flower' (Svetlichnyi 2014). Sometimes priests-bloggers explicitly warn their readers to enter into discussion with them only under their real names, not nicknames: 'it is too uncomfortable to converse with anonyms,' as archpriest Aleksandr Kosach says in the opening of his online diary (kosach@lj n.d.)

In the same vein, deacon Andrei Kuraev, the super-star of the Orthodox blogging, avers that he does not see anonymous internet users as humans because for him they are being reduced from 'personalities' to their 'bare' textual expressions (diak-kuraev@lj 13.09.2010; Krug et al. 2006). Similarly father Dimitrii Karpenko juxtaposes a 'real human' to 'lines of the text' on the screen: 'the real human is something, for the sake of which God has come to this world' – not for the sake of 'flickering pixels', so de-virtualization should be viewed as

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[12] 'A human can be spiritually healthy and [maintain] integrity when [s]he has only one face, that is [s]he should be as [s]he is.' (Kirill 2012d: 304).

the ultimate objective for any computer mediated communication (otez-dimitriy@lj 23.08.2008). Following this line of argumentation, father Dimitrii commended 'de-virtualization' as a process in which a human substitutes someone who 'has previously been only a user for me' (otez-dimitriy@lj 01.07.2017). Laying a particular emphasis on the necessity to start virtual communication from de-virtualization (presviter-ds@lj 11.08.2007; 1.03.2008), Orthodox bloggers try to overcome distrust towards disembodied online interlocutors by means of physically embodying them.

The tangle of metaphors, associated with the Orthodox imagery about evil sides of the internet, is illustrated by Image 3, which shows a man in a Guy Fawkes ('Anonymous') mask, sitting in front of two computers in a menacing pose in gusts of smoke and with a bottle of beer. The picture, decorating the article by archpriest Igor Prekup on pravmir.ru, was intended to convey the message about a threat of anonymous online interlocutors and their malevolent scheming against people's security, moral integrity, and cultural authenticity (Prekup 2014).

Image 3. 'Anonymous Online.'

Source: http://www.pravmir.ru/proshhenie-v-internete-virtualnoe-proshhenie (accessed 1 April 2015)

The Orthodox imagery about anonymity and pseudonymity is reflected in the decision of the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church of Old-Believers, which forbade its priests to use pseudonyms in the internet in 2007 (Krug 2008: 4). The ROC did not follow these steps, but many of its clerics, such as archpriest Dimitrii Karpenko, the member of Synodic Department of Mission, benevolently commented on the decision of their more conservative brethren

(Karpenko 2008). Egor Kholmogorov, the arch-conservative popular journalist, hurried to call this decision as the 'main rule of [an Orthodox believer's behavior in] the internet' (holmogor@lj 22.10.2007). Soon afterwards, father Vladimir Vigilianskii, the head of the Press Service Department of Moscow Patriarchate, reproached Orthodox priests who conceal their real names and ranks in blogs (Vigilianskii 2008). On July 22, 2010 Patriarch Kirill made an appearance in front of the believers of Odessa, where he explicitly shared his view on anonymity: 'I categorically disapprove of priests who anonymously participate in online discussions' (Kirill 2010). Soon thereafter Patriarch Kirill elaborated on the ethics of anonymity in the way that it gave a false impression of impunity and lack of responsibility (Kirill 2012b).

In 2011 the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America adopted 'Guidelines for Clergy Use of Online Social Networking'. This document does not develop an explicit policy on anonymity, but it strongly encourages priests to keep online 'friendship' only with those whom they 'have met before in person' (Guidelines 2011). On this basis archpriest Aleksandr Avdiugin worked out his own recommendations for priests, who are active online. These recommendations pronounce more clearly on the unacceptability of anonymity, admonishing clergy that they must write in their profile page their real name, rank and place of service (Avdiugin 2011). The former head of the Public Relations Department of Moscow Patriarchate, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin voiced an idea to divide the internet into two zones: the zone of 'security', where users can enter only after verification of their identity and under their real names, and the 'danger zone', where anonymity is tolerated (Dobrosotskikh 2013: 25, 110). In 2011 he vocally stated that anonymity in the internet represents a threat to society and 'a moral crime', because it destroys cultural norms of communication (Chaplin 2011). The campaign against anonymity of priests in the internet has yielded good results; our sample of blogs shows that most of them are easily attributable to real men either by explicit statements or by linking them to other social accounts where the names of the owners are displayed.[13]

Conclusions

It should be noted that 'digital anxiety' is by no means unique for the ROC. 'Digital risks' have been spotted in many public debates, ranging from post-Marxist critics of the decentralized and pervasive power of the 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2001; Zizek 1997: 127-159) to religious fundamentalists worldwide (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005). Following the 'social construction of technology' theory, this paper demonstrates how the ROC's intellectuals stitched the arguments of 'digital skeptics' with Orthodox traditional imagery and theology. 'Domesticating' of the internet by the Russian Church is problematic because new media sensitize the Orthodox believers to the rooted ideas of the sinful –even demonic - 'doubling of the world', playing with names and de-sacralization of the religious truths.

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[13] A few blogs of priests do not have a clear statement on personality of the owners, but they refer to other accounts in social networks, from which it is easy to figure out who is the author (e.g. http://priest-vit.LiveJournal.com/profile#/profile, accessed 1 April 2015.). Only two blogs in the sample are anonymous (http://pere-grin.LiveJournal.com and http://prostopop.LiveJournal.com, both accessed 1 April 2015.).

To be sure, these concerns are not outlandish, because they resonate with the widespread sensation that if the internet 'is the message' (cf. McLuhan 1964)*,* then this message is not neutral to our identity and quest for a meaningful life. More than that, the internet may well contribute to people's disempowerment and losing their 'true selves' in the communicative environment, which is all too often addicting, sometimes mediating an external manipulative power (Morozov 2011), and commonly facilitating dysfunctional 'brutalized' struggle for recognition instead of a meaningful deliberation (Honneth 2012).

The way, how the ROC views the 'digital anxiety', however, differs from the mainstream interpretation of a threat to human freedom and subjectivity. What accounts for this difference is the specific relation of the ROC to (post) secularism. As a national Church which reclaims cultural hegemony in the Russian society, it frames the 'digital anxiety' as a moral panic resulting from the fear of losing control over the spheres which have recently been re-appropriated by the ROC as its exclusive domain: namely, the sphere of the Russian culture and society's basic values. The 'instrumentalization' interpretation of the internet as merely a means for the Church mission collides with the vague feeling that the ROC's engagement with new media is like opening a Pandora's box, whose insidious forces could be much more destructive for the ROC's hegemony than even decades of the overt suppression of religiosity in the Soviet Union.

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