



The Body of Christ Online: The Russian Orthodox Church and (Non-)Liturgical Interactivity on the Internet

ALEXANDER PONOMARIOV

University of Passau

Abstract: Since 2011, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) leaders have been officially promoting an active online interaction between the Church and its believers. They publish official draft texts online and encourage interactive discussion about them. The application of computer-mediated communication allows the ROC officials to experience a new dimension of connectivity with the flock, as well as arrange an efficient top-down and bottom-up mode of sharing, turning the offline conciliarity into what functions as a digital manifestation of the unity of all in the Body of Christ: as a kind of *sobornost*' 2.0.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, new media, non-liturgical interactivity, spacetime bridge, digital conciliarity, *sobornost*' 2.0

Religion, including Russian Orthodoxy, operates with various types of media, including the 'old' ones, and yet in this regard, 'digital religion' is viewed as a developing field of research.¹ Despite many years of research, one can still come across accounts that 'it is early days for evaluating the full implications of the internet upon religious identity' (Cohen 2013: 52), or that 'theological reflection about the internet remains in its infancy' (Baab 2012: 277). Another instance, evidencing the novelty of the subject, comes from a recent collection of proceedings:

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The theme for our symposium was ‘Digital religion’ and in our call for papers we described it in the following way: “‘Digital religion’ aims to explore the complex relationship between religion and digital technologies of communication.’ [...] As can be seen from the conference proceedings, we did not achieve what we aimed for. The theme was too vast. We knew as much; a new field is always difficult to handle’ (Ahlbäck 2013: 5).

Western scholarship covers a number of religions in their interaction with new media, including Hinduism (e.g., Scheifinger 2013), Buddhism (e.g., Connelly 2013; Foxeus 2013), Islam (e.g., Schlosser 2013; Sisler 2013; Becker 2011), Judaism (e.g., Cohen 2013; Golan 2013; Rashi 2013), and Protestant and Roman-Catholic Christianity (e.g., Jonveaux 2013; Fischer-Nielsen 2012; Noomen/Aupers/Houtman 2011). Nonetheless, Russian Orthodoxy is vastly underrepresented in the Western research agenda. In this regard, Russian scholars argue that ‘the religious segment of the Runet [the Russian language internet] is developing in line with the same laws as the internet in general’ (Luchenko 2009a), and religious organizations use it for both external (missionary) and internal purposes (Luchenko 2009b). Until recently, one of the main ROC internet functions used to be the unidirectional communication of documents, allowing a better coordination between various Church units (Luchenko 2008). The situation has changed after 2011, when lay believers were encouraged to partake in the discussion of ROC documents through the Web 2.0 platforms.

‘Digital religion’ has come through three phases or waves of study, moving from the ‘utopian or dystopian discourses about how the internet would save or ruin the world’ (Campbell 2013: 8) to the questions of ‘ritual, community, and identity’ and how ‘the internet in everyday life was influencing religious practice’ (Campbell 2013: 9). The current fourth wave includes studying religious practices in the virtual worlds (Campbell 2013: 10; cf. Campbell et al. 2014; Geraci 2014). Challenging the established Church authority is one of the most interesting points that arises at the crossroads of traditional religions and the new media, which can be defied through technical use of the internet (Lundby 2012: 36). It is argued that authority is ‘a key concern for communities which have a strong hierarchal structure’ (Campbell 2010: 186), and that the internet activity can both strengthen and weaken it (Cheong 2013: 82). Against this background, we can hypothesize that control and authority issues would be sensitive for ROC hierarchs.

Object

The object herein is the new dimension of Orthodox ecclesiology, the ROC online conciliarity, both in terms of context and conduits of communication. The ‘sacramental’ case studies, chosen for this paper, include digital discussions of recent official ROC documents on the sacraments of Communion and Confession, as well as on the use of the Church-Slavonic language. Promoted by the incumbent ROC leadership, they highlight the non-liturgical interactivity of this traditional and rather closed entity. I have chosen ‘sacramental’ topics because they manifest the very idea of the Church, which, according to Apostle Paul, is described as the Body of Christ. The Eucharist, being the Body of Christ per se in Orthodox theology, and the other liturgical aspects actualize the Church as a union of believers with and in Christ, and make this union visible and palpable. However, the offline Bread and Wine aspect of the

ROC, as well as some other peculiarities mentioned below set certain limits for online liturgical practices. Following the theoretical premises, this paper outlines the modern internet policy of the Russian Orthodox Church, drawing upon its corporate guidelines. This is followed by the case studies in order to shed light upon the non-liturgical ‘interplay between individuals and institutions enacted online’ (Campbell et al. 2011: 1088).

Liturgical and non-liturgical interactivity

Religion in the age of the internet can be looked at in two broad, yet intertwined, aspects: as religion online and online religion. Current scholarship argues that religion online ‘presents information about religious institutions and groups via internet transmission,’ whereas online religion is understood as a ‘*doing* of the religion through online channels’ (Stewart 2011: 1205). Speaking of the Christian context, the latter represents ‘online churches’ that are in fact ‘internet based Christian communities using a range of digital media to conduct worship’ (Hutchings 2012: 207), that include ‘rituals, prayers, and hymns, but also individual activities such as devotion, candle lighting, personal prayer, etc.’ (Fischer-Nielsen 2012: 127). Moreover, scholars operate with two forms of the internet use, one-way information sharing and interactive dialogue: ‘the first of these reflects a classic view on communication, focusing on the distribution of information from an active sender to a passive receiver. The second use acknowledges that the receiver is an active part of the communication process’ (Fischer-Nielsen 2012: 123). The latter can be described as ‘contact, debate, conversation, network, openness, democracy, co-influence, and interactivity’ (Fischer-Nielsen 2012: 125).

The radical distinction between religion online and online religion was first proposed by Christopher Helland, whose idea marked a clear dichotomy between the two: information (the former) – interaction (the latter). For him, religion online was ‘based upon traditional religious hierarchal structure, attempting to harness the internet as a tool of top-down, organized communication’, presenting ‘religion based upon a vertical conception of control, status and authority’ (Helland 2000: 207). In contrast to this, Helland defined online religion as an ‘unstructured, open, and non-hierarchal interaction’ (Helland 2000: 207). Helland’s approach was criticized, among others by Glenn Young, who highlighted the importance of both information and interaction: ‘religion online and online religion, rather than being strictly opposed, are two types of religious expression and activity that exist in continuity with one another in internet Christianity’ (Young 2004: 93). For him, filling out online prayer request forms at ‘informational’ church websites (Young 2004: 95) or visiting a prayer-of-the-day webpage (Young 2004: 96) is a form of online religion, blurring the clear distinction between interaction and communication of information suggested by Helland. In turn, Helland admitted the existence of a ‘gray area of classification’ between the poles of information and participation (Helland 2005: 8).

An example from Russian Orthodox practice may help elucidate the problem. Amongst the Russian Orthodox, there is a tradition of the so-called concerted prayer (*molitva po so-glasheniiu*), which can be seen as a spatial extension of the regular congregational prayer, with or without a priest. In this practice, a number of believers, being in different geographical areas, agree to simultaneously pray about a certain problem at a certain point of time. In such a case, they transcend only temporal limitations. The prior agreement to pray is reached

through some media of communication, nowadays often through the new media, yet the very act of praying takes place offline. Spatially, each participant is separated; but temporally, they are united in a simultaneous offline liturgical act. Although the details of the act can be discussed online beforehand, does this technical interaction constitute 'online religion' ipso facto? To describe it, I use the term 'non-liturgical interactivity.' Similarly, sending an e-mail to a priest asking for a prayer is certainly interactivity, yet it too is non-liturgical.

Furthermore, does visiting a prayer-of-the-day website constitute an online liturgical act? In other words, is reading the prayer text on the screen liturgical? The proposal here is that, although the ROC leadership promotes interactive participation of its members and looks for their online feedback on many an issue, this interactivity does not necessarily constitute a liturgical act ipso facto. Instead, prayer becomes an online liturgical act only if the participants number more than one person and if they simultaneously participate in a live audio/video conference service, such as Skype, which can offer a more interactional technology. This preserves the distinction between the informational and interactive approaches, especially when the latter consists of the liturgical and non-liturgical aspects.

Bridging time and space

Proceeding from the discussion on concerted prayer, I see another frame for researching digital Orthodoxy – namely, viewing the internet as a bridge between time and space, that is, as an effective link in spacetime continuum. This frame joins two secluded dimensions, creating a productive crossroads on the back of a new media technology. The English language has the technical term 'space bridge' that corresponds with the Russian term 'TV bridge' (*telemost*), whose very name indicates a physical thing with a spatial dimension. This term appeared in the 1980s, when first TV bridges between two TV studios in the USA and USSR took place. The 'older' medium, television, lacked free interactivity; besides, it was a rare, costly and complicated event in terms of time organization. The offline concerted prayer, on the other hand, is capable of surmounting time, while being hindered by the space factor. These days, however, through the internet's video/audio conferencing technology, all parties to the prayer act can transcend both time and space – and yet maintain a direct connection to offline liturgical patterns. That is, despite their remote geographical locations and different time zones, the participants can see and hear each other in the real time and in one 'place.' It means that the Orthodox Church could, in principle, conduct some of its liturgical acts using the spatiotemporal bridge.

Etymologically, the word 'liturgy' implies a public work or act, which is a simultaneous collaboration of all in the same location and time. In the offline perspective, participants normally see and hear each other through the air, which is a natural physical medium. For the participants, an offline location normally means a certain building. Through conferencing on the spacetime bridge, participants can simultaneously see and hear each other via the internet and be present in one space point, thus combining time and space.

Nevertheless, the suggested frame has practical limitations. Antonio Spadaro, a Roman-Catholic theologian of the internet, wonders: 'Could you conceivably say a valid Mass by Skype? These are the kinds of (cyber)theological questions we're going to be dealing with very soon' (Spadaro 2012). The assertion made here, however, is that yes, you can 'say' it,

just like you can ‘say’ it over the telephone, but can you *perform* it this way? In the Orthodox context, liturgy is not confined to verbal activity: its culmination is the sacrament of Communion, which is an act of actual eating Bread and Wine, received from a priest. If live prayer conferencing is fully imaginable, the process of eating is not possible because the Host cannot be physically transmitted through the internet. Communion is unmediated in this regard (cf. Luchenko 2008; Geraci 2014: 118). The sacrament of Confession for individuals cannot be performed online either: apart from the imaginable interactive verbal and visual confessing before the priest, the procedure further requires the priest to lay hands upon the confessed. Given that the latter is impossible online, the sacrament cannot take place. Finally, many Orthodox liturgical acts include incensing, whose smoke cannot be transmitted through the internet either. However, Orthodoxy does sometime practice the so-called ‘common Confession’ (*obshchaia ispoved’*), whereby the priest reads aloud an absolution prayer without laying his hands on the believers. This liturgical act is performable online, and it could be useful in extreme situations, such as during war.

Text messaging in the real time can also be problematic for the Orthodox practice, mainly due to verification issues: one cannot be certain, who exactly is writing the text on the screen, even if the alleged author is believed to be known. Perhaps, a combination of video and text conferencing (live video streaming along with live chatting) could serve as a solution, though this would be in the gray area of practice. Therefore, I see simultaneous live audio and video streams online as the most effective means of bridging time and space for the Orthodox Church. Regarding Christian communities with no binding offline sacramental acts involving non-verbal activity, as well as non-Christian religions meeting the same criterion, bridging time and space online has all the potential for successful application in full.

Vox populi and media theories

The central focus for the Russian Orthodox Church is its sacramental life. It is noteworthy that, after years of traditional reserve with respect to publicity, the ROC leadership came up with the initiative to organize a wide interactive discussion of some liturgical practices. For this sake, they uploaded a number of provisional texts, dedicated to Communion, Confession and the Church-Slavonic language, and called on the audience to speak up. Interestingly, the popular feedback (especially on the Church-Slavonic language) fit well in the key theoretical approaches to the problem of media and religion, considered in modern scholarship. These approaches are (see Lundby 2013): Marshall McLuhan’s technological determinism: ‘the medium is the message’ (1964/1995); Stig Hjarvard’s mediatization theory: media is an independent institution integrated by religion (2008); Stewart Hoover’s mediation of meanings: reception of meanings via media (2006); and Gordon Lynch’s mediation of sacred forms: communication of the sacred (2012). Apart from these, social shaping of technology (SST) defies technological determinism, arguing that ‘technology is negotiable and that user groups may shape technology to their own ends’ (Campbell 2010: 50). As a version of SST, Campbell suggests the religious-social shaping of technology theory, focusing on the ‘specific conditions that occur within a religious user’s negotiations with a technology’ (see Campbell 2010: 58), which is also applicable to the ROC. Three of these frames may be described alternatively: for instance, technological determinism is also known as ‘media as a mode of

knowing'; mediation of meanings is also known as 'media as a conduit'; and mediatization is also known as 'media as a social institution' (Campbell 2010: 44-49). I discuss the specific reflection of the theories in the ROC online experience in the case studies.

The ROC's online standards

Current scholarship points out three themes 'regarding interaction between religion and computer technology and the spaces this creates' (Campbell et al. 2011: 1088). One of these themes is 'how offline religious institutions organize and integrate their activities and aims in online context' (Campbell et al. 2011: 1089). In this connection, the present online footprint of the Russian Orthodox community encompasses both corporate (institutionalized) and private sectors, as well as both lay and clergy personal websites and blogs, covering various issues of ecclesiastic and secular character.

Institutionally, the Moscow Patriarchate has its own official portal *Patriarchia.ru* in three languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan), and more and more local dioceses and other entities, such as monasteries, arrange their own respective portals. In cooperation with *Google* ('Sostoialas' prezentatsiia ofitsial'nogo kanala' 2010), in 2010, the ROC also launched its official video channel on *YouTube* with sixteen playlists ('Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' 2014'). This active media promotion was preceded by a structural shift within the ROC, when the Synod Informational Department was organized in early 2009 ('Sinodal'nyi informatsionnyi otdel' n.d.), following the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill. Its main task is to provide a unified media and communications policy of the ROC, coordinate its subdivisions in the dioceses and cooperate with other mass media, both within and without the ROC. Overall, since 2011 the ROC leadership officially encourages online activity and computer-mediated communication, although, of course, under certain corporate standards. In general terms, the latter standards appear as follows ('Sozdan "Standart prisutstviia"' 2011):

Self-governing churches, exarchates, metropolitan districts and metropolies may have their own internet websites publishing information on all dioceses, subdivisions and facilities of a given structural unit. At the same time, the portal should be an independent platform with its own editorial team and original content. It may contain links to diocese websites. However, the official dioceses websites should be independent and should not be organized as sub-websites of one portal of a self-governing church, exarchate, metropolitan district or metropoly ('Standart prisutstviia eparkhii' 2011).

Corporate Church portals may have both open and closed domains, the latter reserved for internal purposes. The open, public domains should be multifunctional and rich in terms of design. At the same time, the ROC leadership warns the Church internet community not to abuse the Web 2.0 technology, as it would not be correct to equate the official diocese websites with social networks lacking a recognized authorship. Nevertheless, links to respective Church-related blogs and other similar online resources are deemed possible, and blogs are acknowledged as often more efficient media than official websites ('Standart prisutstviia eparkhii' 2011).

The ROC requires the official diocese websites to be multi-structured. Besides, they must follow specific reference terms containing thirteen subsections: on the ruling hierarch (his CV and contact information, interviews, publications, meetings, preachings, photo album, etc.); on the diocese and its activity (its history, departments, activities, documents and photo album); on the deaneries (their history, CVs and churches); on the parishes (history of their churches, shrines, activities and their contact information); on the diocese priests (their CVs, interviews, preachings and publications); on the diocese mass media (newspapers, journals and magazines, radio and/or video channels and online editions); on the calendar (menology, vitas of local saints and celebrations); on the Inter-Council Office (discussions on respective documents within the diocese, feedback of the diocese and overall diocese activities under the Inter-Council Office); on the general ROC news; on the contact information of the diocese administration; on the regional mass media; on the website search engines; on the editors' feedback and technical support ('Standart prisutstviia eparkhii' 2011).

The corporate websites must be accessible all day every day, all year round. In so doing, each diocese may outsource technical specialists and web designers, as they can be hard to find within the Church community. It is highly interesting that the ROC leadership recommends creating mobile versions of official corporate websites, thus acknowledging (and making use of) the ubiquity of the latest internet technologies, in general, as well as a deep involvement of the Russian Orthodox believers in contemporary internet developments and the techboom, in particular. The non-liturgical online interactivity, considered below, fits well in and exemplifies the new internet policy of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Websites for interactive discussions

I take up some of the websites that the ROC leadership officially employs for the online conciliarity, such as an academia-oriented portal bogoslov.ru. The portal is tailored to the Web 2.0 communication. The online discussions in question also intersect with the famous and popular, yet conceptually different, Orthodox web platforms pravoslavie.ru and pravmir.ru. These are indeed multimedia projects, encompassing text, video, image and sound materials on numerous aspects of the Church and Church-related life both in Russia and abroad.

Pravoslavie.ru is a 'veteran' launched in 1999 and run by the Sretenskii monastery, which is located in downtown Moscow. This is a male monastery, headed by Hegumen Tikhon (Shevkunov), who is believed to be close to Vladimir Putin. This authoritative monastery-based portal appears to attempt to keep a certain balance between tradition and modernity. It promotes traditional forms and meanings of Russian Orthodoxy by uploading respective materials, while at the same time, for example, it also hosts the Russian Center of the Shroud of Turin, which researches this phenomenon from a scientific point of view, including, for instance, molecular physics (Nemychenkov 2014).

By contrast, bogoslov.ru, which was launched in 2007, is the official theological portal of the Russian Orthodox Church, focusing on interaction among leading scholars and universities in the field of theology, Bible study and other Church-related matters. Its distinct academic character is perhaps best described by the following statement of the portal's board: 'Neglecting the fruits of science today means, for spiritual education, to be doomed to marginalization and to the inevitable degeneration' ('O proekte 2015'). Pravmir.ru (launched

in 2004) is aiming at a wide Russian-speaking audience with a current monthly traffic of up to three million visitors ('O portale 2015'). It is run by laymen with academic degrees in philology, ecclesiology and mathematics, many of whom are women, under the auspices of Vladimir Medinskii, the sitting Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation ('O portale 2015'). They have explored gender and religious practice in connection with Communion.

'Cybergrace'

In Russian Orthodox practice, Communion is preceded by Confession, mandatory for laymen. This issue received broad public attention as early as 2006 (Prutianu 2013), and it was highlighted by discussions of the ROC initiative. Its mandatory character caused an indignation online, directed against inequality of the clergy and laymen, since priests do not have to confess each time before the Eucharist.² It should be noted that, although the problem pertains to all the laymen regardless of their gender, it is quite common for female Orthodox writers online to express distaste for this offline sacramental tradition, as does user Inna on 31 December 2013 ('Proekt dokumenta "O podgotovke"' 2013a).³ Thus, the problem of modern offline Confession and Communion receives a radical online denial through some female users of this medium. Moreover, the established sacramental practice may even be considered to be pagan content within the Church, having nothing in common with the Christian paradigm.

The conventional conservative approach to Confession⁴ faces interactive materials dedicated to equality, such as an interesting view that was uploaded at bogoslov.ru by a learned Orthodox hieromonk Petr (Prutianu 2013). Father Petr applies a historical and liturgical approach to the issue and argues that the existing 'sacred form' of Confession in the ROC is a relatively late and 'wrong' phenomenon that twists the Christian message (Prutianu 2013).⁵ Father Petr suggests practical flexibility as a solution: according to his experience, those taking Communion a few weeks in a row and confessing only once are more responsible in their spiritual life than those who have to confess each time (Prutianu 2013). Another learned priest at bogoslov.ru, Maksim Kozlov, supports this 'progressive' and differentiated approach (Kozlov 2013). It is noteworthy that Father Maksim refers to the actualities of the modern forms of life and its specifics in connection with the liturgical practice that have yet to be pre-

² For instance, see user Protosinghel, 11 September 2013: 'The document on Communion [promotes] a policy of double standards towards clerics and the lay. This is unacceptable for such documents. When our hierarchs and priests begin to fast and confess every time before Communion, only then let them adopt such a document' ('Proekt dokumenta "O podgotovke"' 2013b).

³ 'However, making up something beyond what is contained in the Rules of the Orthodox Church means hypocrisy of the clergy and the hierarchy. For they themselves do not comply with this, yet impose the burden hard to carry upon parishioners. The Rules contain nothing on mandatory Confession and fasting before Communion. These are very late and primitive fables in the semi-pagan Russia'.

⁴ User Fotii writes on 5 February 2014: 'One should not come to the Cup without the Sacrament of Confession, and every Orthodox believer realizes and feels this, living a Church life. The rest is from the evil one, who very subtly and cunningly promotes the renovationist ideas on cancelling the mandatory Confession'. ('Proekt dokumenta "O podgotovke"' 2013c).

⁵ '[...] only in the 12th century, at first in the West and then in the East, there spread an idea that confessing one's sins in the presence of a bishop or a priest is the only form of repentance, and that sins not absolved by the bishop or priest cannot be forgiven. Both views are wrong and dangerous'.

scribed.⁶ He believes that a certain amount of control from the clergy should be preserved; still, it could be mediated in a less sacred form, as a blessing, for the experienced Orthodox parishioners. In general, both online accounts tend to disregard the necessity of different forms for the clergy and laymen.

By recognizing this, the ROC priests exemplify the idea of *sobornost'* so strongly emphasized by Aleksei Khomiakov († 1860), the leader of the so-called Slavophiles in Russia. Khomiakov rejects the irreconcilable division of the Church as a medium into the clergy (those who teach) and laymen (those who are taught) as a Roman-Catholic idea and views Orthodoxy as a unity of all:

Why were the (heretic) councils rejected that had no external differences from the Ecumenical Councils? It was only due to the fact that their resolutions were not recognized as the voice of the Church by all the Church people, those people and in that milieu, where in the issues of faith there is no difference between a scholar and an ignoramus, a member of clergy and a layman, a man and a woman, a sovereign and a subject, a slave-owner and a slave, [...]. This is the dogma, lying in the core of the idea of a council (Khomiakov 1907b: 70 [first published in 1853]).

In this context, it could be expected that the digital environment would make for a wider, faster and easier participation by the Orthodox grassroots with access to the internet, as well as a much more active role of individual judgment in the Church-related agenda. The Web 2.0 initiative appears to be moving towards interactive conciliarity, transfiguring the ideas of Khomiakov and acknowledging that 'the unity of God's grace' (The Russian Orthodox Church n.d.) stretches over to the internet as well.

Language as a Medium

One of the burning issues of the modern Russian Orthodox Church is the use of the Church-Slavonic language as a sacred medium in Orthodox liturgy. A poll conducted in 2011 shows a sizable split in opinions on that score amongst the Orthodox believers in Russia (SREDA 2011): 37% of the polled would welcome a Russian-language liturgy, whereas 36% support keeping the traditional Church-Slavonic service.

Sacred forms and meanings

The problem of the insufficient understandability of Church-Slavonic, as well as questions of the Church-Slavonic culture in Russian Orthodoxy are targeted in the special ROC's document *The Church-Slavonic Language in the Life of the Russian Orthodox Church of the 21st Century*, uploaded for discussion ('Proekt dokumenta "Tserkovnoslavianskii"' 2011). The document contains both history and resolution parts, aimed at presenting a comprehensive outline of the language's origin and development, as well as the actual approach to the language put forward by the ROC. The draft suggests a way of convergence to solve the lan-

⁶ 'On the one hand, if a person takes Communion more often than once a month, offering him fasting means likewise imposing upon him a burden hard to carry and in fact plunge him into an everlasting fast, making his life barely compatible with the actualities of the modern existence.'

guage conundrum. On one end of the spectrum, it implies a mediation of meanings (further redacting liturgical books), and on the other end, it mediates the sacred forms via increasing the level of acquaintance with and performance of Church-Slavonic in practice. By wanting to keep Church-Slavonic as the sacred medium, while at the same time admitting that in some cases national spoken languages should be permissible (provided these are able to mediate original meanings and retain the elevated forms of the Orthodox service), the ROC document testifies that it does not view Church-Slavonic either as a value of its own (as a mode of knowing), or as a social institution. As for formal corrections and alterations, they should pertain only to the textual forms that indeed mediate obscure meanings. In some cases, it is permissible to simplify the underlying Greek forms. As can be seen, here the ROC authors attempt to achieve a relatively balanced approach, trying to avoid radical ruptures with either the medium or its meanings.

Mediation of meanings

Bogoslov.ru gave voice to a range of interesting responses to the initiative. Kirill Mozgov, a lay Orthodox professor, uploaded an article whose title suggests that the liturgical language can and even should be replaced by a ‘better’ medium (Mozgov 2011). His online article touches on an aspect that is widespread among the Russian Orthodox community: namely, Church-Slavonic not only mediates sacred forms and flavor – it is a ‘God-given’ tongue, that is, Church-Slavonic is an independent social institution, which can only be integrated as part of the given religion (cf. Lundby 2013: 229). For Mozgov, there are neither profane nor sacral forms; any language is just a mediation of meanings (Mozgov 2011).⁷ He deconstructs the ‘sacred form’ of Church-Slavonic, arguing that the language is an implication of its poor meaning mediation for the contemporary believers. This tendency can be explained by his rejection of the polar extreme, represented by medium determinism and by its more sophisticated ‘ramification,’ discussed below.

Mediatization

The mediation-of-meanings article of Mozgov received numerous interactive comments and also generated some articles as a reaction. For example, archimandrite Rafail (Karelin), a famous Russian monk, responded from an institutional language perspective, drawing on the special independent character thereof. His online text was published at pravoslavie.ru. In particular, he argued:

In order to translate liturgical texts [i.e., to mediate meanings], it does not suffice to be a poet, it requires acquiring a spiritual vision [i.e., an institutional quality]: ancient hymnographers used to be devotees and, if it be possible to express it this way, even co-authors of the grace. Contemporary poets can hardly repeat the feat of the Saint Fathers – they will tinge their translation with passions and imagination (Karelin 2011).

⁷ ‘Freedom in choosing the language of the liturgy implies a certain active position in the Church life and a respective responsibility for the choice. This approach allows one not to wallow in the established – even if sanctified by centuries – forms, that to date have often lost or are losing their true contents’.

‘Co-authorship of the grace’ is a vivid metaphor, reflecting a traditional concept of synergy of man and God on earth. It raises the question, however, of why Rafail deprives modern generations of a possibility of this co-authorship. In this regard, he especially stresses the ‘established’ ancient character of Church-Slavonic and attaches special spiritual qualities to the ancient languages in general, opposing them to the modern ones (Karelin 2011).⁸ It is clear that Mozgov’s and Rafail’s approaches are mutually exclusive. Mozgov is ‘user friendly,’ and, in a language, he looks for an optimal tool in a given context. Rafail, however, refers to the exclusive ‘sacral’ qualities of Church-Slavonic. Moreover, he applies a traditional philosophy of historical and spiritual decline of the humankind, whereby the sacred medium has no competitors:

The spiritual level of the humankind is constantly decreasing, albeit this decrease is undulatory. In this regard, parallel to it, the spiritual orderliness of a language, that is, a possibility of expressing spiritual actualities via a contemporary language, is decreasing too. Therefore, even the perfect translation of liturgical texts from Church-Slavonic into Russian will be a damage and a loss (Karelin 2011).

Rafail uses the internet as a new media to promote the idea of Church-Slavonic as of a stand-alone living substance or institution, and that humans are not free in their spiritual relations with God, as they need special media institutions to bridge those relations.

The ROC’s shaping of technology

Referring such extant language difficulties, however, neither the ROC leadership nor the interactive discussions mention a critical edition of the Church-Slavonic Bible. Strange as it may seem, Slavic Orthodoxy has no critical Slavic edition of the Holy Scripture, similar to such media as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Further, the ROC has no official digital text of the Slavic Bible, used for the offline Church service, although the new media and online activity may require the introduction of new technologies, such as Church-Slavonic fonts and other software for online texts. Neither the official website of the ROC nor the official website of the Synod Informational Department contain options that would enable users to download fonts. The Russian Orthodox and Orthodox-affiliated community demonstrates, nevertheless, that they can successfully adapt to typical technological challenges around fonts. Starting in 2000, a group of enthusiasts organized the Community of Slavic Typographics to develop and promote Church-Slavonic software tools and standards (‘Soobshchestvo slavianskoi tipografiki’ 2015). Regarding specifically the fonts, its subdivision is a website irmologion.ru that provides a collection of Church-Slavonic fonts for the free download. In addition, they took further strides technologically toward making the fonts available:

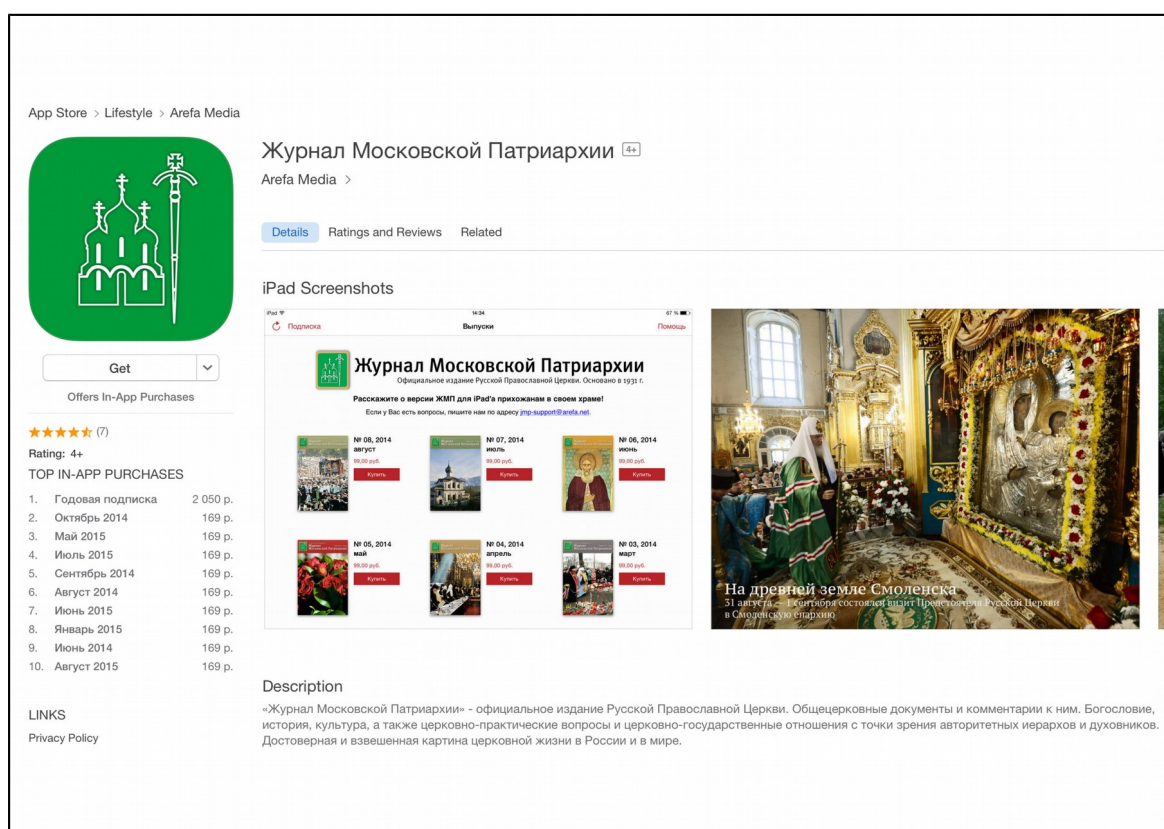
⁸ ‘Mozgov does not consider the difference between ancient and modern languages, and their figurative capabilities. In the meantime, the language is directly connected with human thinking and emotions. The language is a reflection of the soul, and the life of the previous generations was more theocentric than that of ours. Ancient languages to a certain extent help preserve and transmit this spirituality through the word. Modern languages are more anthropocentric, they are more capable of transmitting the psychological life of the man’.

In March 2008, the international Unicode Consortium considered the proposition filed by the Community, underpinned by the Publishing Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Institute of the Russian Language of the Russian Academy of Sciences and other organizations, and included the extended Church-Slavonic fonts into the Unicode standard of the world alphabets that will enhance the Church-Slavonic language in the new versions of operational systems and software products ('Vypushchen novyi tserkovnoslavianskii' 2008).

Moreover, *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchia* recently came up with a mobile application of the *Journal* for iPads (Image 1). The editor-in-chief substantiated the event as follows:

Today, it does not suffice for the printed edition to have only an internet version. It requires separate versions for the tablet devices too [...]. It is quite possible that in the future the print edition and its tablet version will have a different content. We have an opportunity to publish in the tablet version fuller articles and considerably more illustrative material. I also hope to see a multi-media content ("Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii" 2013).

Image 1. Screenshot of *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchia* in iTunes store. Accessed 1 November 2015.



Source: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/zurnal-moskovskoj-patriarkhii/id635158328?mt=8> (accessed 26 August 2015).

One of the most interesting projects is the official ROC's website dedicated to swift sharing of the newly issued liturgical texts with the subordinated subdivisions of the ROC ('Novye bogoslužebnye teksty' 2015). There, the required texts are accessible for downloading in three formats (printer friendly, Word and PDF) and in two types of fonts (in Church-Slavonic in the PDF version and in Modern Russian transliteration in the remaining two versions). Because it is becoming common practice for Russian Orthodox priests to use mobile devices during the service instead of or along with the traditionally bulky print media in the 'sacred form,' this website can be especially useful for parishes with a visiting priest who has all the required liturgical texts either already downloaded and stored, or accessible online. In practice, these electronic texts are used akin to the offline print ones – they are read aloud or sung, by the priest himself and/or the choir. The difference is the medium used: digital texts on mobile gadgets. Such developments show how the Russian Orthodox media community can actually shape the required technology and domesticate it. This is a compelling field of research and fertile area for further academic attention and development.

Conclusion

It looks like the ROC will keep focusing on 'how the internet can be used to support their religious identity and theology in their social and spiritual outreach' (Campbell 2010: 39). Today, ROC officials are actively promoting the use of the internet among the clerics and the flock, paying attention to the latest technical achievements such as mobile devices and at the same time trying to control their online activity. The ROC does not turn into a cyberchurch, but rather, it is an established offline entity with significant online extensions, complying with the 'the researches [that] have concluded that "faith-related activity online is a *supplement* to, rather than a *substitute* for offline religious life"' (Lundby 2012: 34). As an example of how a technological innovation has become woven into the fabric of Church life, an 'older' medium, television, has become a regular tool that is used to broadcast Orthodox liturgies on major holidays in Russia, yet it has changed nothing in terms of the priority of gathering in the offline Church.

This paper shows that the Russian Orthodox grassroots has gotten an opportunity to partake in the contemporary Church agenda en masse by contributing their comments (albeit, for the time being, it remains to be seen, given the recent character of the ROC initiative, whether the comments can significantly influence the content of the document drafts posted for the public consideration). In particular, the online discussion of the Confession problem, contrary to the established offline practice, tends to view the lay and the clergy as one 'medium,' converging the former and the latter in line with the Khomiakovian ecclesiology of *sobornost'* as a unity of all in the Body of Christ. The language issue demonstrates a range of media approaches. The conventional approach institutionalizes ancient languages in general and Church-Slavonic in particular, in compliance with the mediatization theory. It is noteworthy that the chief proponent of this view, Rafail, uses a personal website as a new medium in order to disprove the opposite position on the language as a mere conduit. Besides, the ROC engages in shaping of technology.

The desire of the ROC leadership to involve the Orthodox internet users in the Web 2.0 era points to a search for a new dimension of 'unity in multitude' (Khomiakov 1907a: 313

[first published in 1860]). The ROC under Patriarch Kirill attempts to act, at least formally, ‘according to the understanding of all’ (Khomiakov 1907a: 313 [first published in 1860].), aiming at the idea of ‘the Church of a free and complete unanimity’ (Khomiakov 1907a: 313 [first published in 1860]), which includes the digital aspect. By instrumentalizing the new media, the ROC initiative transfigures the conventional offline conciliarity, turning it into an online conciliarity: *sobornost’* 2.0. The synonyms can be internet-*sobornost’* (iSobornost’), interactive *sobornost’* or online-*sobornost’*, respectively.

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ALEXANDER PONOMARIOV wrote his PhD dissertation on the Russian Orthodox Church and modernity at the University of Passau, Germany. He studied foreign languages in Ukraine, Orthodox theology in Russia, and received his M.A. degree in Russian and East-Central European studies in Germany. His research interests include Orthodox Christianity, theology, history, Bible criticism, and ancient languages. His dissertation focuses on Russian Orthodox canon law in the post-Soviet era. He is the author of *The Pussy Riot Case in Russia: Orthodox Canon Law and the Sentence of the Secular Court* article (*Ab Imperio*, 4/2013), of *The Lord’s Prayer in a Wider Setting: A New Hebrew Reconstruction* article (*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 41-1/2015), and some book reviews. [aponmaster@gmail.com]