'Ortho-Blogging' from Inside:
A Virtual Roundtable

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Abstract: This paper presents a 'virtual roundtable', compiled from the written interviews with blogging Orthodox priests and religious activists. They relate their experiences and reflections on digitalization of the Orthodox religion, challenges and promises which the Church encounters in the internet. Their direct speech is framed by the introduction, in which strategies of self-presentations in 'Ortho-blogs' are surveyed.

Keywords: 'Ortho-blogging', religious communication, Church mission in the internet

The idea of this publication came in August 2014 when Mikhail Suslov was collecting materials for his article on how the Russian Orthodox Church is 'colonizing' the internet. Using the snowball method, he chose 38 blogs for in-depth research. Most of them were opened around the year 2007 (the oldest blog started in 2003); 20 of them continued well into 2014 whereas others had been terminated before the beginning of the study. A typical social portrait of an 'Ortho-blogger' is a young man (average age 30 years), who graduated from an institution of higher Orthodox education in Moscow or St Petersburg (among the most common choices are Moscow Spiritual Academy, and Orthodox University of St Tikhon), and received a position of a priest in a parish, usually in the province.

The Orthodox bloggers constitute a fairly tight group of *svoi,* 'ours' who share the same assumptions and values (Yurchak 2013: 108-109). This 'interpretive community' (Dorfman 1996) has a core of some five hundred blogs on the platform of *LiveJournal*, which constitute a net of interconnected 'friendships', and established traditions of commenting on each other's posts. All in all, 'Ortho-blogosphere' took shape as a relatively closed safe niche, to which heated debates and unwelcomed intruders are not welcome. Thus, 'Ortho-blogosphere'

reproduced the offline exclusion of the (sub-)culture of regular Church goers ('churchized', *votserkovlennye*) from the broader community.[1]

By contrast, the Church's officials consider social networks as first and foremost venues for the Christian mission. Thus, Patriarch Kirill's report to the Bishops' Council of 2013 emphasized the importance of the ROC's presence on the internet and especially in social media, which 'provide new possibilities for a Christian Testimony' (Kirill 2013). Likewise, hegumen Agafangel Belykh avers that a contemporary Orthodox preacher has to have a blog of no less than two or three thousand readers (Agafangel 2007). In this way, blogging priests could bridge the offline gap between the subculture of the 'churchized' [*votserkovlennyi*], i.e. of regular Church-goers, and the rest of Russian society. 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, experience difficulties with church customs. People often do not know how to behave themselves in the church, or how to approach a priest and ask him a question. Blogs of the priests could effectively solve this problem, providing those 'drop-iners' [*zakhozhanin,* a derogative name for those who occasionally drop in the church] with a medium, in which they feel more 'at home' and do not hesitate to speak about their religious needs. In this sense, the 'Ortho-blogs' provides a new social infrastructure for practicing religion and recruiting co-believers, thereby collapsing the divide between the online and the offline religious life (Lövheim 2013: 52).

However, priests logging online do not explicitly speak about the task of the Orthodox mission as such, and usually share online their views about faith, politics, or just everyday impressions. In the international context, blogging has recently become central for religious traditions, aiming at 'cultivation of the self' (Bakardjieva and Gaden 2012; Lee 2009). Likewise, the leader of 'Ortho-bloggers' deacon Andrei Kuraev shared his vision of blogging as his '[spiritual] quest, his perception of this world', not an ambo for preaching (Krug 2006). Often, blogging priests self-reflexively take issue with the notion of their missionary responsibility and defend complete freedom from professional obligations in their web logging. For example, fatherpenguin (anonymous) playfully entreats his readers not to look for lofty truths in his blog: '[if you are searching for spiritual food] you have to go to the church. I've been there today, ministered and even preached… But only thoughtless people can detect anything spiritual in my diary [filled with] idle talks' (fatherpenguin@lj 31.07.2011). Blogging priests admit, that this activity is a foible for a priest, a distraction from ministering and family commitments, which is not to be taken seriously.

Trying to conceptualize the difference between what the Church wants its clerics to do online and what they are actually doing there, we came an idea to ask 'real' bloggers what they think about this, and whether they perceive any challenge which new communicative technologies cast to the Church as a traditional 'communicative mechanism'. Having this in mind, Mikhail Suslov designed a questionnaire and distributed it among 28 'Ortho-bloggers' by email; eleven of them responded and eight finally filed their answers. For Orthodox priests and activists, this response rate is extremely high, to be accounted for the interest in

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[1] On the *LiveJournal* community of 'Ortho-bloggers' see Ekaterina Grishaeva's article 'Heretical Virtual Movement in Russian *LiveJournal* Blogs: Between Religion and Politics' in this issue of *Digital Icons* issue, pp. 109-122.

the topic as well as respondents' specific profiles. One can surmise that more often than not they view themselves as public figures whose opinions are consequential, experience is more extensive than that of an average 'Ortho-blogger', and the degree of independence from the Church hierarchy is relatively greater in comparison with their fellows who chose not to answer the questionnaire. From these eight responses Irina Kotkina cherry-picked four most detailed answers and arranged them as a 'virtual roundtable'. Its 'virtual participants' represent different ideological strands, different Church's constituencies (clerics and laypeople), and even different ecclesiastical bodies (canonical and non-canonical Churches), but all of them are well-educated and highly intellectual religious thinkers, as well as very active Orthodox bloggers. Naturally, all respondents were informed about the ongoing research in which they had been invited to take part.

One of the participants, hieromonk Makarios (Markish), did the translation of the text himself, whereas others were translated by Irina Kotkina. Father Makarios was born in Moscow and graduated from the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers. In the mid-1980s he emigrated to the U.S. with his family and worked there as a programmer. He baptized on the eve of the Epiphany in 1987 in the Church of the Epiphany in Boston, and in 1999 he graduated from Holy Trinity Orthodox Seminary in New York. After the U.S. bombing of Serbia he returned to Russia for good (2000) and settled down in Ivanovo, where he was tonsured (2002) and ordained a priest (2003). Father Makarios is the author of numerous books and publications, one of the developers of 'The Fundamentals of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights', adopted by the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2008. He is active on radio, television and internet (aka p_m_makarios), ideologically close to ruskline.ru news agency, notorious for cultural fundamentalism and Russian 'great power' nationalism.

The second is priest Sergii (Kruglov) of the Russian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate) from Krasnoyarsk. He is a professional poet, essayist and journalist in the local newspaper. In 1996 he baptized and in 1999 was ordained a priest. In 2008 he won the Andrei Belyi prize with the book *The Mirror* [Zerkal'tse, 2007] and *Scribe* [Perepischik, 2008]. Father Sergii is a prolific blogger known as kruglov_s_g.

The third participant is Dmitrii Vaisburd, a layman born in Moscow and the graduate of the Moscow State Academy of Fine Chemical Technology. He came to the faith in the mid-1990s and enrolled to the St. Filaret Orthodox Christian Institute (1995), where he obtained a bachelor's degree in theology. From 1995 to 2011 he was a member of the Brotherhood of the Transfiguration, headed by a well known father confessor Georgii Kochetkov, popular among liberal intelligentsia. He is an active internet blogger (aka vaysburd), writing mostly on religious topics. He stipulates that this is being done without a blessing, as a completely private endeavor. Dmitrii Vaisburd writes for a number of online projects for civic journalism such as *The Daily Journal* [Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal (ej.ru)], kasparov.ru, and grani.ru; the two last websites are now being blocked by the Russian government because of their oppositional stance.

The fourth participant is from a non-canonical Orthodox Church who had experienced persecutions and physical attacks due to his dissenting views. After perusing the English manuscript, he asked not to publicize his answers, so we decided to anonymize his replies.

Questions and Answers

K. & S.: Why and how have you decided to start a blog?

Dmitrii Vaisburd: In fact, I started it by blessing of [my] spiritual father, [who asked] to publish one document online. I had no idea how to do this, and [in order to accomplish this task] I started a blog. And I came to enjoy it [*vtianulsia*]. It is hard to overestimate [the internet's] importance. This is especially true for our gangster [*banditskii*] state, where people even stopped to pay visits to each other.

Father Makarios (Markish): Why am I maintaining a blog? […] Because of the direct call from the [Church] hierarchy.

K. & S.: Is the internet, for you, a merely technological achievement? Or do you see the internet as something capable of changing our perception of the faith, of Orthodox theology?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): The internet is a space which connects all people, including Christians. Virtual life only mirrors real life with its passions, thoughts and projects. The internet can challenge the prejudice that Christianity is something that belongs to the Middle Ages and cannot be adapted to modernity. A person who reads a parchment or a text on a computer screen remains basically the same in nature, and the Gospel of Christ is relevant at all times.

Father P.: Being a new technical achievement, internet is a means of conversation, education and reading. To sum it up, the internet is just words addressed to me and words that I address to others.

Father Makarios (Markish): To suggest that technological development can affect the faith or theology is sheer nonsense. Technological developments are quite diverse in nature, from the toothpick to genetic engineering, from the slingshot to the ballistic missile. Depending on their nature, they might affect the way people live to their faith – rather than the faith itself.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: The internet is just a means of communication and mass information. It is unable to impact my faith.

K. & S.: Is it possible, then, that the internet changes ecclesiology, e.g. introduces democracy into Church life, reduces the Church's hierarchical authority, and takes it back to the practices of the Early Church?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): It is certainly possible and it is happening today. For Christians, the internet opens a horizon beyond the narrow circle of their remote parish, shows them the life of other parishes, acquaints them with the priests and parishioners who have experience of church life other than their own, and gives them the opportunity to read books by classic and contemporary ecclesiastical writers, which reflect theological and canonical opinions that are different from the usual views of a parish priest or a diocesan bishop. To give just one example: dramatic changes of consciousness that can cause a new internet experience still depend

first and foremost on whether a Christian is able to accept new ideas or is just looking for confirmation of his already entrenched beliefs. The internet provides a Christian with both opportunities.

Father Makarios (Markish): "I believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church", – states the Creed. Thus, Church reality, with its principal tenets as well as its practices developing in time and space, is inseparable from the reality of the Christian faith, and no more subject to change by external means than any other element thereof.

However, as I said, the way people live is always subject to change; and some people, driven by the phantoms they get from the internet and elsewhere, might indeed drop out of the Church and consequently join the synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9). That occurred in the past more than once by the agency of the whip, guillotine and barbed wire; nowadays the same thing might occur in the field of information.

Father P.: Internet itself is unable to change anything, but people are able. Internet can be of use as a source of information, which is easier to find there than in books. As for belittling the authority of the hierarchy, I do not think that this in itself could become an aim of Christians. The problem is not the authority, but in the absence of conciliarism in the Church. If each of us suddenly becomes aware of its necessity and indispensability for the church, the question of authoritarianism will disappear by itself. In this sense, the internet, of course, may be useful.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: The internet is certainly not able to change the perception of Church reality. But it allows spiritual bonds to be created through virtual communication (which is extremely important for the Church), which was not possible before. Thanks to the internet I have brothers and sisters in Christ in various parts of the world.

K. & S.: Is it possible to achieve a genuine religious experience with the assistance of digital technologies? – There are "virtual chapels" on the Net wherein one is invited to light a "virtual candle", listen to a sermon by a priest, utter a prayer, request an intercession service etc. Are these activities truly religious?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): I think it is still not occasionally that the Liturgy – in the form of prayer, chanting, venerating icons, entering into living contact with the priest, not to mention participating in the Communion – is focused on personal presence. The experience of modern Orthodoxy in Russia shows that even if a believer has the opportunity to listen to the recorded or broadcast service from home, to light candles in a virtual chapel (these virtual chapels, by the way, are still perceived by the mass of Orthodox believers as an electronic toy), or to communicate with the confessor in absentia by e-mail or online chat, it is not felt as genuine participation.

However, being in touch with the world of faith through digital technology can give a person a certain feeling of the authenticity of the religious action. This is particularly the case for people with disabilities who are unable to go to the temple and who spend days in bed with a laptop. In short, everything is determined by the words of Christ, given by the Evangelist and

Apostle John, that genuine religious action is the worship of God in spirit and truth, and whether this is achieved in a, so to speak, digital format or in the real world, depends on personal circumstances.

Father Makarios (Markish): No other assistance but the personal assistance of Christ is necessary for a believer; material factors, however, including those of a technical nature, can certainly facilitate (or hinder) any spiritual efforts.

Thus it should be clear that the category of *"digital technologies"* in this case is fruitless: "virtual chapels and candles" are a silly fake, while e-mail, on the other hand, is a most convenient means of communication, and the capability to find and retrieve from the internet liturgical, historical and theological texts, icons, music and much more is a huge advantage of our age.

Father P.: No, nothing virtual can be real. The internet as a huge library may be of some value, but to the very religious experience the internet has no relations. I do not even want to talk about virtual chapels, candles, notes, etc. In my opinion, it is an opiate on sale. I believe traders will be punished for their poison when their time comes.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: If you are interested in gaining religious experience and emotions, then you can get them in any way that suits you personally, including the internet. But the Church is not a producer of spiritual services, but a community of believers. It is not religious emotions, but deep interpersonal communication that is of prime importance. And of course it is much easier to communicate looking into each other's eyes. Although, when this is not possible, the internet can help a lot.

K. & S.: What do you think of virtual (digital) icons? Is it possible to pray before an icon downloaded from the internet, displayed on the computer screen?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): It does not matter if the icon is painted or highlighted on the screen. I believe that the controversy about colours, boards, and materials was overcome in the iconoclastic era.

Father P.: I do not see any difference between an icon on the wall or on the screen. Aesthetically, of course, the traditional icon is preferable. After all, the paint and modern screens - all consist of the same chemical elements.

Father Makarios (Markish): It is possible and incumbent upon a Christian to pray in any circumstances (1Thess. 5:17), even before such unappealing objects as a pine stump or the muzzle of a rifle – like the New Martyrs of Russia did. Keeping that in mind, we nonetheless prefer iconographic images of a better quality; it should be noted that technological developments in recent years have brought computer images quite close to the original.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: An icon is an image, but not only the board and paint. An image can be produced by any means, traditional or hi-tech. It is valid as long as it fulfills its purpose – to help us to pray.

K. & S.: Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them". What if these two or three are gathered in a virtual internet community?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): Jesus will be in the midst of them. Everywhere. God loves us so much that for our sake Jesus went to the cross – I do not think that He ceases to love us because we invented the internet ... For our sake He had been in places much more terrible than the internet.

Father P.: I do not know. Rather Jesus could have been asked if He had in mind such unity. I think as long as there are no visible obstacles to real Christian unity in the Church, all virtual 'substitutes' are out of the question. Holy Communion Bowl has always been the center of the Church union. What could be the 'virtual' center? The screen? Even if we assume the open persecution of Christians, virtual unity cannot meet spiritual needs of true believer.

Father Makarios (Markish): Virtual gathering in order to pray is better than no gathering at all, but is worse than a personal gathering. – Precisely the same ought to be said about a phone conversation.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: There were precedents in the twentieth century when people who were hundreds of miles away from each other agreed in advance on a joint prayer at a certain time every day and kept this agreement for many years. Judging by the results, it is possible to say that the unity in Christ between them existed even without the internet. But communication via the internet can create this unity easily. One important condition should be observed – people should not communicate via the internet because they do not want to see each other in real life.

K. & S.: In your opinion, are digital technologies a threat to personal faith and Orthodoxy in Russia, or vice versa – are they opening up new opportunities?

Father Sergii (Kruglov): I see mostly new possibilities that are opening up. What kind of a 'threat' could it be? For example, all correspondence in the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate has long been conducted by e-mail. There are many Orthodox internet resources, and a large number of bishops, priests and laity have websites and blogs in social networks.

Father P.: Digital technology by itself does not constitute a threat or benefit. It's like a knife that can cut a piece of bread to the hungry, or can kill. Digital technologies offer great possibilities of both evil and good, and every person determines what is closer to him.

Father Makarios (Markish): The internet is a tool in the hands of man. It helps the free person to be free, but to the slave owner it helps him to retain voluntary slaves. Everybody creates rules and spheres of social communication in the internet based on personal discretion.

Dmitrii Vaisburd: The internet is a tool, and a very effective one. When used properly, it can bring much good. For example, one can preach the word of Christ. But of course abuses are possible.

K. & S.: Another problem that may be noticeable is the alleged deterioration of cultural identity resulting from global phenomena on the internet, which are perceived as a menace to Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Father Makarios (Markish): There is no menace to Christianity. There is a menace to some Christians, especially young ones who, of course, need protection from it.

The menace, indeed, has something to do with cultural identity – but very little, if at all, with Russian identity. Pornography, gambling, violence, promiscuity, perversions of any sort, obscenity, totalitarian cults and sects, stupidity ("dumbing-down") and a score of other champions of subhumanity are as hostile to Russia as to any other nation (if it is a nation rather than a herd of cattle), and as adverse to Christians as to followers of any other religion (if it is a religion rather than a sham). And the internet could either promote the above-mentioned "global phenomena", or defend us from them – depending on how we use it.

K. & S.: It is believed that the internet contributes to the development of a rational discussion on blocking the acquisition of mystical experience. Is this a threat to Orthodoxy?

Father P.: I think that this comment is worth of attention. This is a threat only when your Christianity it just a 'discussion'. In fact, Christianity can be a place for discussions, but does not consist only of discussions. St. Gregory the Theologian said: 'Be tied to God more than defend the doctrine of God.' These ties are always a mystical experience.

Father Sergii (Kruglov): Sometimes there are so many sinful passions and so much vanity in the comments on Facebook and *LiveJournal* that I question whether the internet can really facilitate 'the development of rational discussion'! ... I do not agree that the internet is somehow blocking the acquisition of mystical experience. The internet is just a part of life. Yes, life is full of noise, silencing the voice of Heaven – but this Voice is heard nevertheless through any obstacles if your heart is set to hear.

Commentary

It should be born in mind that our interlocutors do not represent the whole of the Orthodox segment of the Runet, because with the exception of *Father P.* they are *professional* bloggers, writers and publicists. Being most thoughtful and reflexing Church intellectuals, they express concerns and ideas, central to the Orthodox sensibility towards the internet. Importantly, participants of this 'virtual roundtable' rarely refer to blogging as a missionary activity, framing it mostly as an element of the lifestyle of a present day believer, who sees the internet as a handy tool for personal development. Respondents resist the idea of the internet as a theological problem, interpreting the digital technologies as ethically neutral. Likewise, the question

of digital icons does not seem to be interesting for them, because, as *Father Sergii* pointed out, the controversy of iconic visuality had been solved already in the era of iconoclasm.[2]

At the same time, they explicitly manifest discomfort about disembodiment of the religious communication in the virtual world. Regardless of their ideological disposition, they discard such novelties as a virtual chapel, regarding it as a 'toy', or 'fake', or 'opiate'. From their viewpoint, Orthodox faith requires corporeal contacts in order to perform sacraments, or just to talk to a priest privately, and whatever perfect technical devices could never mediate these contacts. In this sense, the advent of the internet sensitized the Church intellectuals about the challenges to bio-political governmentality (Foucault 2003), associated with virtualization of human life.

Digital possibilities of slipping from the 'pastoral power' reactivated old debates, traditional for Russian Orthodoxy, between conservative supporters of the authority of clerics and reformist advocates of laypeople's participation in Church's life (Shevzov 2004). Thus, *Father P.* observes the reformatory perspective in the use of the internet for promoting greater conciliarity in Orthodox ecclesiology.[3] In particular, as has been approvingly mentioned by *Father Sergii*, the internet gives people an access to the literature, previously monopolized by clerics. In principle, this could support the development of lay theology and culture of religious debates, thereby rectifying one of the mostly oft-noted deficiencies of Russian Orthodoxy – the accent on ritualism (*obriadoverie*). Probably, some of the respondents recollected their formative years as Orthodox believers and marked off the role of freely downloadable reading materials in this process. By contrast, *Father Makarios* raises his voice to warn against joining 'the synagogue of Satan' as a possible outcome of reconsideration of the role of the church in people's life. All in all, the 'virtual roundtable' corroborates the conclusion that Orthodox intellectuals do not sufficiently theorize the theological dimensions of the digital environment, which hinders thematization of the 'digital anxiety' when it comes to the processes of virtualization of 'real' bodies.[4]

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[2] See the article 'Wi-Fi in Plato's Cave. The Digital Icon and the Phenomenology of Surveillance' by Fabian Heffermehl in this issue of *Digital Icons*, pp. 27-47, which, in spite of this view, problematizes the take of the Orthodoxy on icons and virtual reality.

[3] See the article 'The Body of Christ Online: The Russian Orthodox Church and (Non)Liturgical Interactivity on the Internet' by Alexander Ponomariov in this issue of *Digital Icons,* pp. 145-163.

[4] See Mikhail Suslov's article 'The Medium for Demonic Energies: 'Digital Anxiety' in the Russian Orthodox Church' in this issue of *Digital Icons,*pp. 1-25.

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