

SUBMISSION, CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMERISM AMONG “VOTSERKOVLENNYE” IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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Abstract: Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) often makes use of moral arguments in its struggle for power onto post-Soviet Russian society. Orthodoxy is represented as a moral mentor which is capable to contribute to overcoming negative phenomena, such as criminality, destructive behaviour, and the decline of the value system in present-day Russia. The anti-modern views, disseminated in the circles of most devoted believers (*votserkovlennye*), find expression also in the attitude to the public consumption, which is being transformed in the Orthodox parishes by way of the symbolic work towards its adaptation to the ideals of asceticism. Consumerism in its different manifestations and dimensions, however, is received categorically negatively, going as far as overt demonisation.

It is the aim of this paper to focus on a specific aspect of the religious moral discourse(s): the theme of submission as a traditional Orthodox value. Which are the particular messages directed by the clergy to the laymen? In which way do coexist such conservative (and anti-modern) values together with the strongly represented philosophy of consumerism, competitive spirit, and everyday struggle for prestige and social recognition? These are main research questions to which the paper is going to address. In order to find answers, empirical evidences (obtained through field work in 2006-2007 in Central Russia) will be discussed.

Key words: religion, Russian Orthodox Church, submission, consumption

In one of the last days of August 2007 I was organising my departure from Kaluga – Central Russia – after two months of field work, devoted to the revival of Orthodox Christianity. While I was purchasing small gifts for my family in a neighbourhood supermarket, I noticed that I was being watched. I recognised one of my informants, a parishoner from one of the two parishes where my research was conducted. The man critically viewed my purchases and offered to teach me to tell apart those of them marked by bar codes, concealed in which was the lethally dangerous number 666, “a number of the Beast” (i.e., Satan). The man belonged to the so-called *votserkovlennye*, the most devoted believers, who would be discussed further on, and the mentioning of the bar codes and the

threat assumed to be coming from them reflected a fragment of the discourses, typical of this cultural stratum.

This episode of field work leads to the matter of the comparison of the ideologies and moralities, on the one hand, and the social practices, on the other, which are widespread among the present-day *votserkovlennyye* in Russia. This is a matter of the contradictions between the ambitious policies of the Russian Orthodox Church, aiming at desecularisation of the Russian society, and the clash of these policies with the realities of the consumerist environment, in which contemporary everyday life invariably proceeds – in Russia, as well as elsewhere. Present article is devoted to these contradictions construed in the context of a post-Soviet upsurge of Orthodox Christianity.

The disintegration of the socialism between 1989 and 1991 gave an impulse to the post-socialist “religious revival” which some authors [Borowik, Tomka, 2001: 8] define as an aspect of the global upsurge of the religiosity developing since the 1980s [Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999; Davie, 2000]. The advance of the post-socialist religious movements, in particular, could be characterised by using the metaphor for “resurrected body”, which “is, though, not identical with the old one” [Borowik, Tomka, 2001: 8].

It is the aim of this article to study moral dilemmas accompanying the process of recovery of the religious life. I’d like to compare macro statistical data regarding Orthodox religiousness in Russia with my own qualitative data, acquired through (a rather short) fieldwork: a total of three months in 2006 and 2007 in the city of Kaluga – a district capital in Central Russia, populated by 339 488 inhabitants [Rosstat, 2012: 5] and located at the distance of 180 kms from Moscow. The proximity of the famous *Optina pustyn’* monastery (60 kms from Kaluga) is important factor shaping local religious life to a significant extend. I carried out observations, interviews and informal talks in two Orthodox parishes among laymen and clergy.¹ One has to declare in advance that my estimations and conclusions concerning current developments of the Russian Orthodoxy are influenced by my contrasting observations on Orthodoxy in Bulgaria.

Many Russian sociologists as well as some Western [see Kääriäinen, 1998: 155-162; Kääriäinen, 1999: 35-46; Borowik, 2001: 47-49] are skeptical concerning the level of religious commitment in post-Soviet Russia. According to these authors, the actual participation in the practice of religion is quite exaggerated. The scholars emphasise on the discrepancy between the declared religiousness on one hand, and the data concerning the frequency of the attendance of the temples, on another hand. According to 2010 data², 75% of the whole of Russia population, or 82% of all ethnic Russians [Filatov, Lunkin, 2006] proclaim themselves as Orthodox believers. Regardless of the increasing number of citizens, who declare their religiousness, “one can say that between 2 and 10 per cent of the population, i.e. between 3 and 15 million people, are practicing Orthodox” [Filatov, Lunkin, 2006: 43]. Different results have been reported by

¹ All names of the interlocutors referred to further on, are fictitious. All translations from Russian are mine [Milena Benovska].

² Data provided by ARCIPO (All-Russian Center for Investigation of the Public Opinion), published by the news agency “Interfax” on 30th March 2010 [see Rossiane, 2010].

the different researchers regarding the number of the “traditional” or “practicing” Orthodox, but this number is never higher than 10% [**Kääriäinen, Furman, 2000: 16-24**].

How can be explained the discrepancy between the low number of actively practicing Christians and the overwhelming self-identification of the Russians with the Orthodox Christianity? It is not hard to establish that the criteria, according to which the religiousness is measured, are formulated in a maximalist way. Some authors define what is happening in Russia as “desecularisation from above”, i.e. desecularisation supported by the Russian political and economic elites [**Karpov, 2013; Schroeder, Karpov, 2013**]. Logical conclusion in this case would be that “a desecularisation from above can not make people go to church on a regular basis” [**Karpov, 2013: 259**].

Yet, other authors demonstrate a more flexible approach to the issue. Accordingly, Victor Garadja establishes that there is a “revival” of the religious institutions in post-Soviet Russia, but indicates that it is premature to regard this as “religious revival” in terms of “mass consciousness” [**Garadja, 2005: 328-329**]. On his turn, Alexander Agadjanian is attempting to reach the meaning beyond the numbers indicating low level of participation of the church life. “What really matters here is not just the number of deep conversions, but the whole spectrum of religious presence”. The boom of baptisms and church weddings in Russia during the 1990s, although it represented certain trend, indicates the “responsiveness to religious symbols operating in society” [**Agadjanian, 2001: 476**]. Miklos Tomka’s statement about Eastern and Central Europe is valid for Russia as well: “In three respects there is a clear “religious revival” in Eastern and East-Central Europe. Majorities of individual societies declare themselves to be religious [...]. Religion became a topic in public discourse and the media. Finally, churches gained or maintained an influential social position and a crucial, yet often controversial role. This overall picture deviates from the situation and tendencies in Western societies” [**Tomka, 2001: 25**].

What does field work show? According to my observations, the attendance of the Orthodox temples in Kaluga does not deviate from the average data in Russia. In fact, it is hardly possible the regular churchgoers to be much more numerous. Besides, the weekly participations in church services, the regular taking of Eucharist and compliance of the fasting require dedicated effort and radical reorganisation of the daily life of the believer. In addition to the problematic compatibility of the traditional Orthodox practices with the rhythm of the contemporary life, it is worthy noting that the Russian Orthodox clergy is not inclined to compromise in order to attract more believers in the temples; the churchgoers are strongly required to follow the strict rules and tenets. In other words, the strategy of the Russian Orthodox Church is not inclusive – but rather the opposite would be correct statement.

This irreconcilability repels part of the believers, who can be referred to the inference formulated by Grace Davie with regards to the Great Britain: “*Believing without belonging*” [**Davie, 2000**]. Legitimation for the strategy of exclusion is being sought and found in a quote from the Gospel of Luke: “*Fear Not, Little Flock*”. “Little Flock” identifies itself as a provider of the “real Orthodox Christianity” and this is an argument which confines the subscription of more people

to the circle of the practicing Christians. On another hand, “Little Flock” or *votserkovlennyye* (i.e. “in-churched people”) are of special significance to the contemporary standing of the Orthodoxy in Russia.

In this context, the appropriate term here would be vicarious religion, which was introduced by Grace Davie: “the notion that a relatively small number of people might be able to ‘look after’ the memory (and particularly the Christian memory) on behalf of others” [Davie, 2000: 177]. Transformed towards the Russian post-Soviet reality, this term is relevant to the development of the contemporary Orthodox religiousness. The group of *votserkovlennyye* (Russ. *воцерковлённые* – ‘in-churched people’) mediates between clergy, the institutions (religious and secular ones), the irregular churchgoers and the Russian society in general. This interaction is a powerful factor, and a political one as well, for influence to the daily agenda of the society. The field observations in Kaluga showed that some of ‘*votserkovlennyye*’ are influential people with respected professions. Besides being actively involved in the life of their parish and diocese (as singers in the choir; guides leading pilgrim groups; teachers in Sunday schools; ‘Orthodox journalists’ specialising in writing on religious matters; members of various parish or diocesan committees, etc.), they have (thanks to their prestige) the ability to transmit religious messages to the public and to mediate between the latter and church institutions. Their role as social mediators is crucial for the functioning of everyday religious practices. They are one of the bridges by which the church affects society at local and national level. The ‘little flock’ organises and orients its daily lives as required by the church canons. In addition it provides legitimacy to the ambitions of the clergy for influence and power in Russian society.

A specific task of this paper is to address the contradictions between the morality, shared by the *votserkovlennyye* and the clergy, and the consumerist culture – on the other hand. I shall present in short the specific moral convictions and discourses which are popular among the *votserkovlennyye*. Under the impact of theological ideas, introduced by popular preachers from the beginning of the 20th century on, this ideology integrates conservative values with diverse, but mutually related religious and religio-political metaphors. The image of “the Orthodox Russia – a Messiah and a victim” is opposed to “the Satanic army”, latter uniting the perceived internal and external “enemies” of Russia. The heterogeneous combination of eschatological expectations, monarchist adherence, anti-Semitism, hatred for Freemasonry, fear of technological progress, contempt of the intelligentsia, demonisation of Leo Tolstoy, the perception of the monasteries and monkhood as an ideal, radical anti-Westernism [Tarabukina, 2000].³ Ethno-nationalism or chauvinism (according to some authors – religious nationalism [Karpov, 2013: 259]) unites these inexhaustively presented metaphors, mythological narratives and ideas [Knox, 2004: 132-155]. This ideological conglomerate is being extended in our days with the stigmatisation of television and the commercial magazines as vehicle of the devil, along with the

³ All quotations from Tarabukina, 2000, here and thereafter, follow the internet edition, no pages.

rejection of consumerist culture in its diverse manifestations, including the fear lest we could be “coded” through the “number of the Beast” concealed in the bar codes of the goods [Tarabukina, 2000; Mitrohin, 2004: 107, 299; Kushkova, 2006: 151-171].

Russian Orthodox Church and its allies often make use of moral arguments to legitimate the struggle for power onto and influence in post-Soviet Russian society. Orthodoxy is represented as moral mentor, which is capable to contribute to overcoming “the moral vacuum” and negative social phenomena. Several authors report about this, mostly with respect to heated long-standing debates concerning the introduction of religious instruction in public education [cf. Mitrohin, 2004: 357-367; Glanzer, 2005: 208, 215-216; Willems, 2006: 288-291; Mulders, 2008: 7-9].⁴

One can clearly discern the theme of submission (and related notions) as traditional Orthodox value in different discourses and social contexts. Moreover, submission is thematised as a model of behaviour in the social life and in communication among believers in current Orthodox parishes. An inexhaustive enumeration should not miss topics as “wifely submission” at normative and at pragmatic level; the influence of monastic tradition on imposing conservative values; submission as an instrument of power used by the clergy; humbleness and submission as aspect of the moral amelioration, especially in monastic milieu.

“**Wifely submission**”. I realised the significance of this topic during the fieldwork in 2007 when one day, I received a phone call. It was Lena, one of my interview partners. Apparently excited, she invited me to visit her place in order to join a social event which was important to her. “*Do you remember, she said, I talked to you about a young priest’s wife, a matushka [mother], and what a strong impression she left on me? She travels now altogether with the priest and the children, they come to see me. Do come to make an acquaintance, it’s going to be very interesting.*” Lena was talking about the priest’s wife from a nearby village who, in Lena’s mind, was a model of female behaviour. Twenty six years of age at the time, the young lady in question was a student in philology, a mother of four, conductor of the village church choir and kept large domestic agricultural holding. Lena had mentioned about her in a previous conversation of ours, admiring the lady and especially her behaviour of submission to the priest, her husband: “*And how does she behave! He [the priest] tells her: “Matushka! [Mother!] And she replies: “Yes, father! As you wish, father!” What obedience! Not to contradict him about anything! I want my daughter to see her and to learn from her.*”⁵

The wish not to contradict to husband was mentioned in other interviews, too. This is but the most conspicuous among the recurrent episodes dem-

⁴ Religious education was eventually introduced in high schools and universities, all over Russia. The first large-scale experiment of introducing the Basics of the Orthodox Culture in schools in fifteen districts of Russia dates back to 2006. In 2010 by a Government’s resolution, the religious education was introduced at national level, while in 2012, the subject was introduced on the entire territory of Russia (see the publication of the Government’s resolutions in: NEWSru, 2006; Russian Gazette, 2009).

⁵ Lena M., interview taken on 4th August 2007, Kaluga.

onstrating that submission is internalised as a value among *votserkovlennye*, and that the very fact invites for analysis. “Wifely submission”, apparently, is a problem strongly marked by gender specificity. As an element of the Christian ethics, submission is by no means particularity of Russian Orthodoxy. Narrative practices problematizing since 1960s “wifely submission” as an expression of Christian sacrifice, are observed among conservative Protestant women in United States [Griffith, 1997; Griffith, 1997a: 160-195; Griffith, Harvey, 1998: 63]. Both cases are similar in prescribing “exceptionally conservative model of traditional gender roles” [Griffith, 1997a: 163] and in the option to transform submission in instrumental value and in female manipulative strategy [Griffith, 1997a: 176]. What is challenging here is that submission in the Russian example is adopted after more than seven decades of socialist emancipation.

One should try to look for historic reasons for the current activation of this conservative value in Orthodox milieu. Obedience for example has central role in a specifically Russian religious phenomenon: so called *starchestvo*. It is its essence in the worship of *starsy* [elders]: wise ascetic monks whose advices younger monks but also believers should follow strictly.⁶ Elders exercise strong informal influence on the believers and this is especially true for Russian religious life during the post-Soviet period [cf. Mitrohin, 2004: 96, 99-100]. “It is the strict and full implementation of the testament of obedience to the leader-*starets* which is specificity of the arrangement of *starchestvo*” [Solov’ev, 1899 [2005]: 57]. I assume that namely the proximity of the famous *Optina pustyn’* monastery (where *starchestvo* came into being) to Kaluga is a prerequisite for the influence of *starsy* on believers in Kaluga. Probably this is but one of the channels of spreading conservative values among believers, submission including.

Certain part of believers takes into consideration the opinions of the *starsy* when taking decisions in important moments of their lives [Mitrohin, 2004: 96]). Two of my interview partners decided to adopt children after a period of painful hesitations and after requesting advice from the *starsy*; other believers looked for advice and prescriptions, how to deal with a problematic teenager at home, etc. The acquaintance to *starets* Iliy from *Optina pustyn’* monastery⁷ has changed the life of a young man influencing his decision to accept the career of a priest. At the time of his first meeting with the elder, Fr Evlogiy was a student and was about to graduate as constructing engineer. The young man started spiritual career and became a priest under the influence of the elder. Fr Evlogiy kept his relationship with *starets* Iliy and later

⁶ Elders are defined as “persons of exceptional spiritual insight who often (but not necessarily) provided religious directorship to neophytes” [Paert, 2010: 4]. “In the eyes of ordinary believers, *starets* was a living saint, a mediator between heaven and earth, who – by virtue of his or her special relationship with divine powers – could perform miracles, heal the sick, and predict the future, and who often possessed a rare insight into human nature” [Paert, 2010: 214].

⁷ *Starets* Iliy (Nozdrin) inhabited *Optina Pustyn’* monastery 2009. Concerning *Optina Pustyn’*, see its internet site: www.optina.ru/ [accessed: 16 March 2017]. Since the election of Patriarch Kirill in 2009, the elder Ilij has been chosen as personal spiritual father of the Russian Patriarch, www.peredelkino-land.ru/pages/u_starca_ilija. [accessed: 16 March 2016].

on. Fr Evlogiy not rarely plays the role of mediator between his parishioners and the *starets*, passing questions of the formers to the *starets*, and his answers back to them.⁸

Monastic influences contribute to shaping language etiquette which cultivates obedience in the life of the Orthodox parishes, also. In church milieu, lay people need on any occasion to ask the priest for permissions called *blagosloveniya* (blessings); performing various jobs in the parishes is called *poslushaniya* (obediences). Euphemistic form does not change the fact that what we observe here, is a manifestation of power exercised by the clergy and this is even more tangible in negative phrases as *ne blagoslavlyayetsya* (it is not blessed), for example, which should be interpreted as “not allowed”. In Orthodox context, submission and power are not just contrasting, but complementary notions as well. On pragmatic level, it is not rare Orthodox morality to be instrumentalised in establishing harsh hierarchy of power and discipline in various Orthodox communities.

I witnessed manifestations of discipline and obedience in the distinct communities of *vosserkovlennyye*, for example in the Orthodox Sisterhood “*Elizaveta Fyodorovna*”, associated to *Kazanskiy* convent in Kaluga. Internal hierarchy proved to be an obstacle to take formal interview (latter was postponed and taken later on) from one of the “sisters”. During our later meetings and conversations (but beyond the walls of the convent) the same woman repeatedly problematised the submission and its antipode, the willfulness: “*I am willful, I do not fit the monastery,*” she said and continued: “*All this discipline, obedience – I can’t... I had brought up two children by myself, and had always taken decisions by myself. And now I bring up an orphan, as well.*”⁹ It’s not hard to notice the problematic compatibility of abstract norms with realities of everyday life. Label “willful” (*svoevol’naya*) belongs to the abess of the convent. As a matter of fact, it is a strong moral qualification, accusation, as far as “willfulness” is considered a sin, a direct antipode of “submission” in the language of Orthodox morality. Its explicit mentioning evidences of the struggle for defining and contesting limits of (good) Christian behaviour inside the community of the Sisterhood.

Submission, discipline and consumption meet in the social practices of the parishes. Larger parishes develop multi-dimensional activities, usually including organisation of Sunday schools, editing and publishing church periodicals, running Desks for pilgrimage travels, “military-patriotic clubs” for teenagers and youth, etc., which gives me ground to compare a parish to a small company. Establishing dining rooms called ‘*trapeznaya*’ at (some of) the parishes is the logical consequence of this stance, though, alluding for respective monastic premises. Rules to behave in *trapeznaya* also stick to monastic patterns: joint meal is preceded and is concluded by choir “stand-up” singing of prayers. Its duration is rather short (about fifteen minutes), it starts and stops by command given by some of the senior parishioners, and it runs in silence; it goes under the accompaniment of reading lives of the saints. The same applies to the way in

⁸ Interview with Father Evlogij, 1st July 2007, Kaluga.

⁹ “*Вся эта дисциплина, подчинение – я не могу... Я вырастила двое детей одна, всегда сама принимала решения. Теперь выращивать сироту тоже.*” (Interview with Zinaida, taken on 23rd July 2007 in the village of Lev Tolstoy, district of Kaluga).

which daily charitable dinners for homeless people are organised by the Orthodox Sisterhood in Kaluga: homeless also stand up while listening to the lives of saints, before or while having meal.

Strict rules and implementation of discipline in the Orthodox parishes and communities strongly remind of the continuity with Soviet legacy [cf. **Zigon, 2006: 8**]. Moreover: prayers, religious reading and discipline symbolically neutralise the pleasure of consumption and transforms it in compliance with the ethics of asceticism, perceived or real.

While public consumption is accompanied by symbolic procedures of adaptation, the attitude to consumerism is negative among of the clergy and the *votserkovlennyye*. One of the priests in whose parish I conducted the research told me that “*Kaluga is the heart of Russia. Here you cannot find even a MacDonallds*”. Obviously the homeland and one of the main symbols of globalisation are antithetic in his eyes. This conviction is so strong that it is capable of ignoring the presence of a fairly large and prestigious building with the inscription “MacDonallds” in the Cyrillic, located at a distance of no more than four hundred metres from the church, in which he serves. In fact, unlike its reputation in the United States and Western Europe, MacDonallds in Kaluga is one of the places of prestigious consumption and communication (at least because its menu is more expensive than the traditional pastries, sold in the kiosks around). It is frequented mainly by young people and children, similarly to the MacDonallds restaurants in Bulgaria.

Instead of a conclusion. Standing out from everything stated so far is the conclusion that ethno-nationalism has been “the cement” welding together the conglomerate of heterogeneous ideologies, conceptions and the social practices corresponding to them among the *votserkovlennyye* in Russia. The imposition of conservative values like submission could be interpreted as one of the specific manifestations of the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church (along with the community of *votserkovlennyye*, supporting it), directed at desecularisation of the Russian society. The anti-modern views, disseminated in the same circles, find expression also in the attitude to the public consumption, which is being transformed in the Orthodox parishes by way of the symbolic work towards its adaptation to the ideals of asceticism. Consumerism in its different manifestations and dimensions, however, is received categorically negatively, going as far as overt demonisation; in this sense the conclusion becomes dominant that the *votserkovlennyye* share an anti-consumerist philosophy. In the same way as the imposition of subordination and discipline as moral values in the Orthodox parishes, so the strong anti-consumerist sentiments lead to the conclusion concerning the continuity between the heritage of Soviet culture and the traditions of the Russian Orthodox Christianity, seemingly at odds with it. This – at first sight – conflicting coexistence of ideas, of Eastern Orthodox morality with the complexities of present-day life becomes possible thanks to the efforts of the Eastern Orthodox elites to forge a flexible philosophy, which seems to be reconciling apparently incompatible heritages of the historical Russian cultural traditions. In this way, while searching for unitary Orthodox morality, the communities of believers actually develop their social practices in conditions of multiple moralities [**Zigon, 2011**].

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