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MYTHS ON RELIGIONS IN RUSSIAN MEDIA:
A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Considering the myth in the Platonic tradition as a surrogate replacement of the reasonable cause of some judgment or action, when the true cause is not understandable due to its complexity, the author describes the phenomenology of modern myths and their functioning in Russian media and public sphere. The paper is focused on two types of mythologizing of religion in media, related to the subject of coverage – internal, doctrinal, irrational or external, social, rational. Author suggests that from the normative point of view epistemological function of journalism presumes the rationalization of religious life coverage and "demythologizing" of socially dangerous myths related to the religious sphere.

Keywords: myth, mythology, religion, journalism, epistemological function.

МИФЫ О РЕЛИГИЯХ В РОССИЙСКИХ МЕДИА:
ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ

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Рассматривая миф в платоновской традиции как суррогатную замену разумного основания некоторого суждения или поступка, когда истинное основание мнения или поступка недоступно в силу своей сложности, автор описывает феноменологию современных мифов и их бытование в российских медиа и публичной сфере. В статье выделяются два типа мифологизации религии в медиа, связанные с предметом освещения, – внутренним, вероучительным, иррациональным или внешним, социальным, рациональным. С нормативной точки зрения познавательная функция журналистики, по убеждению автора, предполагает рационализацию освещения религиозной жизни и «демифологизацию» социально опасных мифов, связанных с религиозной сферой.

Ключевые слова: миф, мифологизация, религия, журналистика, функции.

The religious segment in public sphere is commonly referred to the irrational sphere of mass consciousness along with various formations of mythological nature. What unites mythology and religion is their fundamental irrationality, inaccessibility to logical methods of cognition, as well as faith as a necessary precondition for their existence. Some researchers consider mythology as "proto-religion" [14], the original syncretic form of any comprehension of reality.

This similarity makes the "mythologization of religion" a semantically almost tautological statement, like the "irrationalization of the irrational". However, the analytical procedure of the minimal, simplest meaningful distinction in the religious sphere exposes the existence of an important problem, which recently has increasingly looked like a challenge to professional journalism.

Myth as a surrogate substitution for reason

All the different conceptualizations of myth can be placed on a scale from the narrowest understanding of it (as a phenomenon or text of primitive culture overcame later on in history by logical tools in philosophy, science, art) to the broadest (we live in myth, the entire space of culture is mythological). The diversity of definitions is generated by a variety of approaches to the study of myth: sociological (E. Durkheim), ritual-mythological (J. Fraser, B. Malinowski), ethnographic (C. Levy-Bruhl), structuralist (C. Levi-Strauss, R. Barthes, M. Foucault), psychoanalytic (Z. Freud, K. Jung), symbolic (E. Cassirer) etc.

Cultural, anthropological and structural-semiotic studies made obvious that myth functionally is one of the most important mechanisms of organization of social life. The cognitive function of myth – unlike science – is subordinated to its

regulatory function. And therefore the myths in media are used mostly to manage, regulate social processes rather than to discover the reality.

However, consideration of the methodological nuances of studying myth is clearly beyond the scope of this article, while a brief analysis of its definitions – lexical and philosophical – seems to be necessary.

Plato's definition is deep and heuristically rich: "Myth is a surrogate substitute for the rational basis of some judgment or action, when the true basis of the opinion or action is inaccessible because of its complexity" [9, p. 71].

This definition, which came down to us from Ancient Greece, already contains both two relations to myth and the criterion of their distinction. Following Plato, on the one hand, we can conclude that myth is a benign and necessary phenomenon of culture in cases where it is impossible or extremely difficult to get to the logical, reasonable basis of a judgment or an act. On the other hand, according to Plato, whenever and wherever there is such a possibility, one should strive to rationalize being, to build cause-and-effect relations, to search for rational basis, i.e. to overcome myth, to go beyond the mythological picture of the world.

In fact, this is a call from the depths of the ages for "de-mythologizing" of narratives. Later, on this call has been developed in different ways in a wide range of philosophical systems – from Thomism to positivism. Plato's understanding of myth already contains the possibility and even the necessity of verifying information and correlating it with the "truth-false" scale, which is extremely important for media.

In Russia, however, academic papers on myth (in particular doctoral dissertations in philosophy) reveal just the opposite tendency. In particular, the approach in which myth is evaluated in the categories of "true" and 'false" and the progress of knowledge is associated with the process of progressive demythologization is called "narrowly scientistic". The research attitude of understanding myth as something illogical and inadequate compared to other explanatory models (scientific and philosophical) is called "primitive"; the dichotomy "mythical – rational" is described as obsolete, etc. Myth is praised as such, as a

cultural phenomenon, and the approaches of its functional rationalization are considered to be "archaic".

This trend of the apology of myth impacts also on media decision-making subjects, pushing back the rational arguments in journalistic texts. Meanwhile, journalism is primarily a form of rational knowledge and description of reality, so considering it within the framework of the "mythical-rational" dichotomy seems essential in the context of the main differences between modern myths and archaic ones.

Nevertheless, modern myths are very much different from archaic, because:

1. They are distributed primarily through channels of mass communication and journalists play an active role in their creation and transmission.

2. They coexist alongside rapidly developing positive knowledge, so they are packaged in formats of rational knowledge and emphasize the alleged possibility of empirical verification.

3. They need rationalized forms of legitimation.

As S. Neklyudov put it, "myth nowadays willingly dresses up in quasi-scientific clothes and resorts to quasi-scientific proofs of its truth and rightness" [8].

The mythic and the rational in religious life

Religions and religious activity as an object of media coverage are evidently divided into two spheres:

a) *Internal*, ritual-teaching, irrational, hermetic, difficult to understand and describe in everyday language (for example, Orthodox Liturgy, sacraments, initiation rites in various religions) and

b) *External*, transparent, intelligible and verifiable, quite acceptable for journalists to understand and describe in everyday language in the media.

Mythologization of the first, the inner religious sphere, is natural and understandable, although it also raises the concern of spiritual leaders who care about the "purity of faith" which is inevitably "obscured" by alien mythological elements (heresies, superstitions, delusions). This kind of mythologizing is also spilled out in the media (quantitatively in Russia this is primarily associated with Christianity, but

qualitatively with more exotic religious groups such as Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.). The problems here are primarily related to the difficulty of translating important doctrinal things into common and universally understood Russian (in some cases, the inability or unwillingness to "translate").

Mythologization of the first type is revealed during field sociological research – both when analysing the results of representative mass surveys and when studying spontaneous texts of Internet communication. Sociological attempts to reconstruct the "creed" (a set of doctrinal principles and notions) in the minds of those Russians who consider themselves Orthodox reveal noticeable deviations from the canonical confession of faith in the direction of mythological, irrational, but incompatible with Christianity elements (belief in the "evil eye", spoilage, "charms"). And these elements are strong enough to motivate people to act – from everyday superstitious actions (avoiding the black cat, not planning serious business on "Friday the 13th", etc.) to turning to fortune-tellers in the hope of finding a missing thing or even returning a husband/wife [12; 13].

As sociologists E. Kofanova and M. Mchedlova note, "among people who are not followers of certain confessions, the level of spiritual quests is also high, about 30% declare their strong and even deep religiosity, which indicates the need to search for a transcendent basis" [5].

The absence of faith in the formal rituals and practices of different religions, as well as the internal inconsistency and fragmentation of the religious segment of the consciousness of the followers of several confessions were empirically confirmed by Russian and Finnish scholars [11].

Russian writer and journalist Alexander Genis quotes a vivid example of mythologized Christian doctrine: "I remember coming to Moscow recently, sitting in a cab, trying to fasten my seat belt, and the cab driver said that if there is an icon hanging in the car, then there is no need to buckle up..." [2].

The mythologization of the second – external – religious sphere, where quite understandable and verifiable things are in question (status, structure, social, charitable activities of religious associations, statistical data, positions on various

issues of public interest, etc.) leads to misinforming the audience. Therefore responsibility for this must be assumed by journalists and media managers who do not consider it necessary or do not want to verify information.

The distinction between two types of mythologization also defines zones of responsibility of the subjects of communication in the formation of mass perceptions and attitudes towards religion.

This paper deals mainly with the external mythologization of religion, which can be described as the "irrationalization of the rational". The involvement of the media in this process, which reproduces and disseminates various kinds of rumours, beliefs, and myths, unwittingly or intentionally giving an irrational character to things that are perfectly conceivable, seems quite obvious. The distorted, mythologized picture of the world that emerges in the creation of an audience, in our opinion, exposes the crisis of journalists' responsibility and the existence of a serious professional problem.

Mythic instead of rational

Journalism is traditionally defined as a cognitive activity for producing and dissemination of "reliable information about socially significant changes in reality" [6, p. 37]. All of the normative theories of journalism require truthfulness and verification procedures. Consequently, journalistic text carries operational knowledge about reality, designed to increase the reliability of social orientation and, therefore, to strengthen the stability of society.

Meanwhile, according to our observations, processes of *"irrationalization"* are more and more common in Russian media. This trend has become increasingly visible in recent years. Some media consider presenting material in a mysterious, irrational arrangement as normal and likely, basing its broadcasting policy on this principle. The opposite example, the television channel *"Kultura" (Culture)* is primarily aimed at presenting material in a rational, illuminating way, has been and remains marginal in terms of ratings and mass interest.

The factors of Russian media "mythologization" are the following:

a) Government control over the media, official or unofficial censorship.

b) Suppressed and non-transparent public sphere.

c) Restricted access to information, and strict regulation of information flows.

Factors contributing to "demythologization" and rationalization include:

a) Openness.

b) Transparency of the public sphere.

c) Legally guaranteed access to information.

The most mythologized – that is, significantly distinguished by the number and variety of myths – are just those areas, those fields of reality, the reflection and modelling of which is associated with difficulties of verification due to their:

1) Hermetic nature (religions, cults, beliefs – e.g. the myth about the end of the world on December 21, 2012).

2) Complexity (sciences, especially natural sciences – for example, the Large Hadron Collider).

3) Geographical isolation or impossibility of direct communication (myths about other civilizations – "they say that over the sea there are people with heads of dogs").

4) Cultural "otherness" ("What is good for the Russian is bad for the German") [3].

S. Neklyudov gave an illustrative example of such perceptions: "The residents of Yuryevets, a typical Russian town on the Volga, according to a local priest, believe in the reality of life abroad as portrayed in TV shows and are convinced that no one works there and that robots do everything for the people" [8].

Russian researcher A. Toporkov identifies four groups of modern myths:

1) Myths of political and public life, which are created mainly by politicians and journalists.

2) Myths of ethnic and religious self-identification (for example, various myths about Russia, about Orthodoxy, about the national idea) [7, p. 17-18].

3) Myths associated with non-religious beliefs (e.g., about UFOs, Bigfoot, psychic healers).

4) Myths of mass culture (e.g., myths about food, cosmetics, sex) [10].

One important reason for the inertness and persistence of myths is that mythologizing cements mass axiologies and is the "social glue" for agreement on values. "The level of mythologization of social life in our country has increased enormously over the last decade, and we have stepped from the realm of science and rationalism into a kind of "mythological" era", – emphasized S. Neklyudov [8].

Conclusion

Philosopher E. Cassirer warned about similar danger of manipulating public consciousness for political purposes: "Philosophy is powerless to destroy political myths. Myth itself is invulnerable. It is insensitive to rational arguments, it cannot be denied by syllogisms. But philosophy can do us another important service. It can help us to understand the enemy. To defeat the enemy, we must know him. To understand a myth is to understand not only its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but also its strength. We have all been known to underestimate it. When we first heard about political myths, we found them so absurd and ridiculous, so fantastic and ludicrous, that we could not take them seriously. It has now become clear to all of us that this was the greatest delusion" [4, p. 58].

Consequently, the function of journalism is *not to destroy myths, but rather to understand them and to "defuse" the most aggressive, socially dangerous ones by rationalizing them.*

The process of de-mythologization usually encounters a number of difficulties related to the inertia of myth and its structural and semantic stability, and this stability is much more structural than semantic. A vivid illustration of the resistance of Russian public opinion to demythologization is the long story connected with the public discussion about the removal of Lenin's body from the mausoleum.

Neklyudov's precise accurate observation remains valid: "We are witnessing how old myths in new social and national shells are recreated in modern politics and ideology based on archaic models that come from the depths of centuries. The twentieth century has shown to what monstrous consequences their implementation leads in practice" [8].

"Lies, recognized as socially useful, are now reaching such unprecedented proportions in the myth and so deforming the consciousness that the question is raised of a radical change in the attitude to truth and lies, of the disappearance of the criterion of truth itself", – wrote N. Berdyaev in 1939 [1, p. 272]. However, their relevance for the professional "test of conscience" of modern journalists also seems obvious. If, of course, they really believe that they cognize the world and help others cognize it – their readers, listeners, and viewers.

Unfortunately, however, there is little awareness of this responsibility for the social consequences of their activities in the reflection of the journalistic community.

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