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**“QUESTION-ANSWER” PATTERNS  
IN RUSSIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE ON RELIGION**

**Khroul V.**

Analysing the history of journalistic genres, author discovers “question-answer” patterns and suggests them to be an immanent fundamental communicative pattern for transmitting the knowledge and mass information in media. Observing recent genres dynamics in Russian media, the author describes main trends in the media discourse – irrationalization and primitivization. Applying his theoretical frame to the empirical analysis of Russian media texts on religion, the author finds “question-answer” patterns in interviews, expert commentaries and analytical articles. He indicates journalists’ desire to clarify issues of audience’s interest about religious life through questions and answers.

**Keywords:** mass media, religion, genres, Russia, questions, answers.

**"ВОПРОСНО-ОТВЕТНАЯ" МАТРИЦА  
В РОССИЙСКОМ МЕДИДИСКУРСЕ О РЕЛИГИИ**

**Хруль В.**

Анализируя историю журналистских жанров, автор обнаруживает "вопросно-ответные" структуры и предполагает их в качестве имманентного фундаментального коммуникативного паттерна для передачи знаний и массовой информации в СМИ. Наблюдая за динамикой жанров в российских СМИ в последнее время, он описывает основные тенденции в медиадискурсе – иррационализацию и примитивизацию. Применяя свою теоретическую рамку к эмпирическому анализу текстов российских СМИ о религии, автор обнаруживает паттерны "вопрос-ответ" в интервью, экспертных комментариях и аналитических статьях. Он указывает на стремление журналистов прояснить интересующие аудиторию вопросы о религиозной жизни через вопросы и ответы.

**Ключевые слова:** СМИ, религия, жанры, Россия, вопросы, ответы.

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## **Introduction**

Russian media discourse covering religious life has been studied in different perspectives, but the dynamics of new formats and generating “matrices” for media text on religion seems to be underexposed. Moreover, the traditional theory of genres is not sufficient to explain new phenomena.

The theory of genres in Russian journalism has been developing autonomously for many years, in isolation from international research. And the most important reason for this was not only the isolated nature of Soviet society itself, but the autonomy of the subject of research itself – Soviet media system. It was a self-focused system, therefore its genre structure also had very little interaction with the genre traditions of other countries, with the exception of its closest neighbours in the socialist camp. Religious topics were understandably painted in exclusively anti-religion colours according to atheistic state policy.

In recent decades, however, the emphasis has shifted markedly in the other direction: anti-religious intonations have been replaced by pro-religious ones. In addition, the division religions in Russia for so-called “traditional” and “non-traditional” gradually pushed coverage of “non-traditional” out of the official media into the uncensored Internet space and packaged in appropriate formats and genres.

Despite some isolationist tendencies, “Western”, hybrid genres and formats (*longread, listicle* etc.) are gradually becoming part of Russian journalism and have an increasing influence on its genre palette, accordingly, they used in the media in relation to religious issues as well.

The definition of genres (or, more precisely, the criteria for singling them out) remains one of the main problems for journalistic theory. Soviet theory of journalism proposed to categorize journalistic materials into genres depending on how they answer three main questions: what is covered, for what purposes, and how. Continuing this tradition, A. Tertychny in his book “Genres of the periodical press”

discovered the main genre-forming factors in journalism: 1) the subject of representation, 2) the intentions of the text, and 3) the methods of researching the subject. He identifies 35 journalistic genres [q.v.: 5].

In recent years, the concept of “genre” has been increasingly replaced by the word “format” - it also applies to journalistic materials on religious topics (this creates certain difficulties for the press services of those religious communities that work using traditional methods and try to fit into traditional genre expectations, while it is already time to adapt to the new ‘formats’ of the media). Format is a relatively new concept that has become widespread for naming the information ‘packages’, while genre is a traditional one that needs clarification. In some senses, these terms overlap [q.v.: 3; 4].

### **“Question-Answer” as an immanent fundamental communicative pattern**

The dynamic interaction of questions and answers as two semantic fields – from Plato’s “Dialogues” to modern FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) – is the basic architectonic principle that has proved its effectiveness in mediated knowledge transmission: questions and answers that have been used over centuries as a system-forming principle of communication in different religions. In particular, the main popular doctrinal books – catechisms – were written by Christians in the form of answers to the questions.

Moreover, the criterion of effectiveness of any educational activity (both religious and journalistic, among others) is the area of “intersection” of these fields of meaning (i.e., the area of questions to which full and adequate answers are available to the audience). Theoretically, it is even possible to construct an appropriate “measuring tool” for quantitative and qualitative assessment of educational activities.

The question-answer principle as such refers mainly to the method of reflecting reality in journalism, and the degree of its manifestation depends on the subject (in religious journalism this degree is very high) and function (educational tasks encourage journalists to make greater use of answers to questions). Journalists ask questions, get answers, and publish them in the media in the genre of an interview, roundtable, commentary, analytical article quoting experts, etc.

According to our observations (which, however, need quantitative confirmation), in recent years the question-answer structure has become more and more prominent in Russian media in journalistic genres in general and in religious journalism in particular. In a number of cases, it is reduced to “direct speech” answering questions, published in the genres of interview or commentary.

The question-answer dominance in the architectonics of the text, given the lack of time, qualification or motivation, besides educational effectiveness, leads to the production of information "fast food", which the unassuming public eagerly consumes, gradually getting used to such formats of information packaging. At the same time, the potential dangers of simplification of communication with the audience do not cancel the fundamental importance of the dynamic interaction of questions and answers as a basic principle in educational and journalistic activities, which significantly influences the formation of the information agenda. The quality of the product depends on the will of the communicator and the degree of favourable conditions of information production.

The tendencies towards the simplification of the genre palette, the clip-oriented and mosaic nature of the audience's perception of media information predict further quantitative and qualitative expansion of the architectonic principle of “question and answer” in the space of journalistic genres. This is indirectly confirmed by the increasing penetration into journalistic texts of ranking (*top-25 or top-10 persons, events, phenomena, things*) and structuring (*ten ways to quit smoking or five ways to lose weight*), which are essentially answers to hidden questions about influential persons, events, how to lose weight, quit smoking, etc. Therefore the question-answer principle is becoming more and more prevalent in journalistic texts [3].

Adapting religious discourse in media to the interests of the audience, the "question-answer" matrix is becoming more and more in demand in various areas of information activities, including the activities of religious media [q.v.: 6; 7; 8].

### **Genres and formats dynamics**

The modern system of media genres is undergoing serious changes: some traditional genres are disappearing (the editorial, the feuilleton, as they existed

earlier). A significant impact is made by time pressure, the lack of time, which is a direct consequence of the intensification of journalistic labour. There is simply no time to create materials in genres that require large time and money costs. The volume of texts produced by a journalist per unit of time (day, week, month) is steadily increasing in Russia [2], which leaves very few opportunities for slow, deeply thoughtful work.

Therefore the genres system of contemporary Russian discourse on religion faces at least three challenges.

1. *Irrationalization*. Studies on the texts of Russian Internet communication have revealed a tendency of gradual displacement of rational judgments by irrational ones: “The faith and religious feelings of discussion participants find their place in communication today more often than before. They manifest themselves not only at the level of the general structure and topics of communication, but also at the level of argumentation formation” [1, p. 20]. Irrational arguments mostly are imported from media texts.

2. *Primitivization*. It is directly related to the ‘washing out’ of labour-consuming genres from the palette available to Russian journalists. In academic literature it has become commonplace for ‘lamentations’ over the large traditional genres – the portrait and travel essay, the analytical article, and others. This process is strongly correlated with the economic situation of the media and the availability/absence of time and money resources that it is or is not appropriate to invest in labour-consuming genres. One of the main reasons for the shortage of qualified analytical journalists, essayists and feuilletonists (primarily in the regional press) is the lack of time to create analytical materials.

On the one hand, primitivization impoverishes the palette of genres, and on the other hand, it catalyses new formats and genres oriented at quickly satisfying the audience's demand (convenient, easily digestible answers to questions generating 'clicks' and 'likes') or even imitating the question-answer structure simply to strengthen the dynamic tension of the text in the rhetorical sense.

3. *The crisis of the journalist's 'subjectivity'*. The journalist in Russia as a

decision making subject is losing his or her independence in at least two dimensions: a) in the area of decision-making (assignments from above are becoming more and more rigid, leaving fewer “degrees of freedom” for the journalist) and b) in the area of corporate standards (with the exception of “authorial” journalism projects oriented towards subjectivity, the bulk of Russian media follow the model of ‘objectified’ journalism, which assumes the neutrality of the correspondent and the asking of questions to third parties).

### **“Question-Answer” patterns in religious life coverage media landscape**

All these trends can be traced in Russian media coverage of religious topics. We analysed genre diversity in 4,291 texts about religion published in 25 most highly ranked Russian media from April 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020.

A list of the following keywords was used during the search of materials (an asterisk indicates the need to take into account derivative words and case forms): Relig\*, God\*, Orthodox\*, priest\*, temple\*, worship\*, pray\*, church\*, ROC, patriarch\*, bishop\*, Old Believer\*, Islam\*, Muslim\*, Jude\*, Buddhist\*, Catholic\*, Anglican\*, Lutheran\*, Baptist\*, sect\*, Pentecostal\*, Krishna\*, Jehovah\*, Adventist\*, Atheist\*, mosque\*, synagogue\*, church\*, kirch\*, datsan\*. Further, step sampling was applied in forming the array of texts.

#### *Religious publications genres in Russian media (% , N=4291)*

<b>Genres</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Editorial	106	2,5
News	2932	68,3
Analytical genres	<b>1137</b>	<b>26,5</b>
Fiction	<b>116</b>	<b>2,7</b>

The genre palette of media texts about religion is dominated by informational genres (68.3%), which is quite natural, while fiction-publicist texts are almost invisible (only 2.7%).

The discovered phenomenon, of course, deserves a closer analysis and interpretation. In addition to the general, empirically observed crisis of fiction genres in general, regardless of the subject matter, the religious sphere in this context has a number of specific features that cumulatively reduce the potential of genres in this

part of the spectrum.

In particular, the hermetic nature of the religious sphere, which implies serious training of the journalist who is going to describe and analyse it, makes fiction-publicist genres risky from the point of view of both professional reputation and the sensitivity of religious communities.

Moreover, the legal field in the coverage of religious subjects in recent years has noticeably tightened after the adoption of amendments to the legislation on insulting the feelings of believers (2013) and other legal acts, for example, anti-terrorist amendments to the legislation of the Russian Federation.

Taking into account the fact that criminal cases have been initiated for reposts in social networks, journalists try to avoid the explicit expression of their position, especially with a critical assessment of the activities of religious organizations (there are no feuilletons, pamphlets and parodies in the analysed texts).

At the same time, a noticeable share of analytical genres (26.5%), among which the leading ones are review, interview and commentary, testifies to the journalists' desire to clarify the questions that the audience is interested in regarding religious life, when just non-commented information is clearly insufficient and evaluative judgments and explanations of what is good and what is bad from the religious point of view are required. Analytical genres help to organize the not quite systematized set of religious ideas in the mass consciousness and somewhat reduce the level of entropy in this area.

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**Data about the author:**

Khroul Victor – Doctor of Philological Sciences, Visiting Researcher at Catholic University in Ružomberok (Ružomberok, Slovakia).

**Сведения об авторе:**

Хруль Виктор – приглашенный исследователь Католического университета в Ружомбероке (Ружомберок, Словакия).

**E-mail:** [victor.khroul@gmail.com](mailto:victor.khroul@gmail.com).