

## **New Religious Movements: the paradigm of the “new faith”**

**Ayrapetova A.G.**

Doctor of Psychological Sciences

The article examines the psychological aspects of New Religious Movements. Emphasis on the characteristics of the “youth” age group, which serve as the basis for the religious prejudices formation was placed. Specific features of New Religious Movements are considered. A brief overview of their functions in society is given. Information on psychological dominance, manipulation, pressure, and mind control as methods of influencing followers of New Religious Movements was provided.

Keywords: religion, faith, confessional direction, religious community, globalization, New Religious Movements, religious prejudices, negative attitudes, youth, religious experience, destructive religious organization, religiosity, radicalism, social connections, bipolar vision, group identity, mind control.

In the modern world tensions between confessional religious movements and newly formed religious structures in the format of sects, cults, and movements are growing. As a result of the increasing level of globalization the boundaries of religious communities have begun to come into closer contact, and in some cases even interpenetrate. Tensions between confessional and non-confessional religious communities often lead to increased xenophobic views and in some cases even to the escalation of interreligious conflicts. Thus, New Religious Movements have long been a topical issue not only in the scientific community, but also in the field of socio-political discussions [1].

The mentioned problem is considered in the works of E.I. Arinin, V.A. Achkasov, E.G. Balagushkin, A. Barker, M.R. Bignov, V. Bainbridge, J. Beckford, E.S. Elbakyan, P.S. Gurevich, L.I. Grigorieva, L.D. Gudkov, I.Ya. Kanterov, M.M. Krylov, D. Lewis, D. Melton, V.E. Morozov, A.N. Mchedlova, L.S. Perepelkin, T.S. Pronina, I.S. Semenenko, V.T. Sordas, G. Stelmakh, A.V. Shipilov, V.A. Shnirelman, V.A. Yadov and others.

Society in its historical development constantly undergoes changes that affect all its spheres. The current stage is characterized by an increasing tendency to commit crimes motivated not only by political and ideological, but also by racial, national, and religious hatred or enmity. Crimes of an extremist nature are based on religious prejudices and negative attitudes towards representatives of other faiths, which combined with a powerful psychological impact on young people gives impetus to antisocial manifestations.

The emphasis on deviant behavior with a “religious tint” among young people is not accidental. A person encounters religion in childhood, when he or she begins to learn about the world around them. Questions related to faith arise at children along with interest in other areas of life. But more extensive religious experience is formed precisely in adolescence. American psychologist Stanley Hall noted that adolescence is the highest point of religiosity [2].

Adolescence is characterized by increased emotional excitability, instability, and a sharp change in the emotional background. During this period, a stable self-awareness and “I” stable image - the central psychological neoplasm - are formed. This process is accompanied by a high level of personal anxiety, an unformed volitional sphere, and an unrealistic imagination. These aspects give rise to a number of problems, such as inadequate level of aspirations, the problem of self-awareness, unformed needs, the problem of personal growth, discrepancy between educational and professional interests, low social activity in the pursuit of social approval, etc.

All of the above sides contribute to either the conversion of young people to traditional faith, or is the basis for the formation of religious prejudices. The second aspect is actively used by leaders of New Religious Movements as a tool for further involvement of young people in their ranks.

Considering the problem of religious extremism and the manifestation of psychological aspects in it in different countries of the world, it becomes obvious that the surge in activity of destructive religious organizations is usually associated with political, social and ideological processes in society. First of all, these include the so-called global problems of humanity, clearly demonstrating the fragility of the surrounding world. The next factor is a complex of social and psychological problems that have given rise to a feeling in many people, especially young ones, of a hopeless life, pessimism, and the impossibility of establishing harmonious relationships in society, which has also created favorable conditions for the spread of new forms of religiosity.

Human nature is very complex, including historical, biological, psychological, cultural and social levels in their interweaving and interrelation. A person has always strived and will strive for self-expression. In this regard for many people religiosity opens up one of the possible paths in this direction.

The natural activity of human, the thirst for knowledge, changing needs, interests, desires, reproduced in the process of socialization, push the individual and entire groups to search for new forms of self-presentation of the personality. And since religiosity allows one to go beyond the existing world, it is natural that person, based on faith in the supernatural, tries to find an explanation for those facts that he could not explain from the standpoint of his knowledge and experience. New Religious Movements actively help in this way because organizational forms of religion that have arisen in modern society differ from traditional religions.

The history of the emergence of some New Religious Movements is associated with other previously existing religious organizations or denominations; others arose independently of those that existed earlier. Religious scholars B.Z. Falikov and E.S. Elbakyan consider that New Religious Movements are characterized by:

- radicalism of religious tradition renewal (with the exception of neo-pagans, who insist on their original traditionalism);
- doctrinal syncretism (combination of new and traditional beliefs);
- dominant role of their founders and leaders (often proclaiming themselves Deities or their messengers);

- instability of the followers' worldview (since they are usually first-generation believers and they tend to transition from one new religious movement to another, often the opposite);

- social "alternativeness", the desire to change the socio-political system (although in recent years there has been a gradual adaptation of a number of New Religious Movements, for example, the Krishnaites, to social reality) [3].

The paradigm of the "new faith" is built and "adjusted" in such a way that it practically or completely satisfies ideological quests. This psychologically contributes to the acquisition of a solid foundation that facilitates complete immersion in the "new faith".

New Religious Movements demonstrate good adaptability to mass popular culture. They persistently spread their ideas through professionally honed methods of marketing and advertising, and also skillfully exploit the weaknesses of democratic systems of modern states. And, finally, many of them merge with international business, the media, and often with organized crime and terrorism [4].

Despite all the negative characteristics that are attributed to New Religious Movements, their number continues to grow, especially due to the recruitment of young people. The popularity and demand for these structures is explained by a number of functions that they perform.

*Compensatory function.* Isolating a person from the world, New Religious Movements take on the role of a substitute for all social needs. They seek to compensate for the need for contacts, communication through a specific way of life in a religious movement. The leader and "brothers in faith" become a kind of social and spiritual compensation, an alternative to the lack of love, the loss of values, family, and familiar social connections. Thus, the means and goal Of New Religious Movements is the priority of the technique of psychotherapeutic disconnection from the surrounding reality. At the initial stage new members and supporters of New Religious Movements experience feelings of euphoria, emotional upsurge, their "chosenness", exclusivity, experience states of "expanded consciousness", "enlightenment", therefore it is in the psychotherapeutic aspect the compensatory function of new religious movements is most fully manifested.

*Ideological function.* New Religious Movements socially "cut themselves off" from society. In conditions of such isolation, a new worldview is formed - a social and moral ideal that determines the thoughts, behavior and feelings of the involving one and often deprives the ability to individually meaningfully perceive the surrounding reality. Thinking acquires a characteristic feature - a bipolar vision of the world: only "black" or "white", exclusively "enemies" or "friends".

*Regulatory function.* New Religious Movements constantly exercise control over all aspects of the lives of their followers, whose activity is possible only within a certain religious community.

*Communicative function.* New Religious Movements, on the one hand, contribute to the cohesion of the religious group itself, but on the other hand, forced isolation and the exclusion of the possibility of habitual social ties with society form

the inability to adequately and effectively build communicative ties outside the community.

It should be noted that religiosity for any person becomes a personal pattern accepted by the individual himself in order to explain his attitude to the world. But the question is what kind of religion it is: humanistic, which contributes to the realization of human potential, or authoritarian, which suppresses it [5]. In an authoritarian religion, individuals are completely subordinate to a Higher Power that changes their values. The ideals of control of an authoritarian religion, regardless of its form, serve as a justification for the means necessary to exercise control [6].

There is also a fundamental difference between believers in traditional religions and adherents of new religiosity. The followers of traditional religions are many generations of the population of a country, region, nation, or ethnic group. At the same time, their introduction to faith usually occurs gradually, through family upbringing, cultural and national traditions. In a broader sense, introduction to traditional religions often acts as an integral part of the process of socialization, the inclusion of the individual in a variety of life connections and relationships. The followers of new religious movements are mostly first-generation believers. Their introduction to faith does not occur in stages, but rapidly and is accompanied by abrupt changes in previous views, lifestyle and relationships with loved ones. In combination with skillful manipulation of a person's desire for group identity (ethnic, national, religious), which is used by members of New Religious Movements, the result is a clear scenario for replenishing a destructive religious organization with new adherents.

A person trapped in such a social segment is subjected to such psychological influence in a short time that in many cases he turns into a weak-willed instrument for satisfying the paranoid and manic goals of the leader of New Religious Movements. The previous personal identity is completely suppressed, all previous social connections are destroyed, the new follower is instilled with a negative attitude towards the entire society outside the religious group.

Leaders of New Religious Movements strive for complete psychological dominance. To achieve this goal, they hide their true intentions under a religious mask, and, using psychological pressure, try to completely subjugate the personality. Thus, the individual is consciously or forcibly deprived of the right to choose a worldview, forms of behavior, relationships with the surrounding society and lifestyle.

In New Religious Movements excessive dependence on the leader is encouraged not only in spiritual matters, but also in other areas that are in no way connected with religiosity. People involved in a destructive religious organization have their personality so suppressed that they lose the ability to make even simple choices on their own (for example, what color / material / length / ... clothes to wear). On this background, it is quite obvious that more serious issues, such as political views (who to vote for in the Presidential elections and whether it is possible to vote at all) or purely personal choices (who to marry / whom to marry) - demonstrate a complete inability to make an adequate decision.

In principle, even if a follower of a New Religious Movement is able to make his own choice, the leaders of the group still make decisions for him. This position of New Religious Movements leaders is explained by the fact that they are afraid of losing control of the most important moral position for them - is it possible to deceive, steal and kill for God and in the name of God. They answer this question in the affirmative. But at the same time they realize that a harmoniously developed young person with a clear social position, a system of moral principles, religious literacy and the ability to set priorities will answer this question negatively. That is why already at the level of making an elementary decision adherents are led to the fact that they are completely dependent in their choice on the leader of New Religious Movements.

Researcher of non-traditional religions and cults Kanterov I.Ya. points out another serious problem. Along with strict regulation of all aspects of the New Religious Movements followers' lives, their members use methods of mind control, which affects the psyche of those involved [7]. Analysis of this problem shows that many young people join New Religious Movements as a result of the impact of various methods of psychological manipulation and pressure on them [8]. Mind control (or "illegal influence" as it is sometimes called by foreign experts) is psychological manipulation using forced conversion (implantation of conviction) or behavior modification techniques without the informed (conscious) consent of the person to whom this technique is applied.

Modern reality forces us to admit that today society is constantly faced with intensive and massive use of the human psyche by antisocial individuals for criminal activity. It is the human psyche that is simultaneously the strongest and the weakest link. It is its weak side that is used not only by followers of New Religious Movements to attract new adherents, but also by recruiters of religious extremist organizations to replenish their ranks when manipulating the consciousness of young people. The psyche of any person is vulnerable to various methods of psychological violence. And if we take into account the real level of religious literacy (actually illiteracy) and psychological security (actually defenselessness) of modern youth, for whom factual reality is increasingly being replaced by the virtual world, it becomes obvious that many young people can become victims of manipulators from New Religious Movements.

### **Literature**

1. Idrisov A.Zh. The Problem of New Religious Identities in the Modern World / Dissertation for the Degree of Candidate of Philosophical Sciences - St. Petersburg State University. - St. Petersburg, 2023. - 367 p.
2. Hall G.S. The Religious Content Child-Mind. In N.M. Butler, Principles of Religious Education. New York: Longmans, Green, 1900, PP. 16-189.
3. Falikov B.Z., Elbakyan E.S. New Religious Movements. Moscow: Great Russian Encyclopedia, 2017. - pp. 242-243.
4. Dvorkin A.L. Sectology: Totalitarian Sects. An Experience of Systematic Research / A.L. Dvorkin. - Nizhny Novgorod, 2002. - p. 40-41.
5. Fromm E. Psychoanalysis and Religion. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950. - p. 21.
6. Wulff David M. Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary. - 2nd ed., New York by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997. - p. 597.
7. Kanterov I.Ya. "Destructive", "totalitarian" ... and so on // Religion and Law. - 2002. - No. 1. - p. 28.
8. Stephen Hassen Fighting Cult Mind Control. - Nizhny Novgorod, 1999; Volkov E.N. Methods of Recruitment and Mind Control in Destructive Cults // Journal of Practical Psychologist. - M., 1996; Pocheptsov G.G. Psychological Wars. - M., 2000.