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## **THE PHENOMENON OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITY OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE**

The challenges of the modern globalizing information society are forcing the Christian confessions to give a new meaning to the value orientations of missionary activity and to improve its forms and means. Thanks to the active development of the Internet, the Christian confessions receive new opportunities not only for the implementation of missionary practices aimed at deepening spiritual values among the believers of their religious communities, but also advantages in the dissemination of religious ideas, values, beliefs among non-Christians, therefore, the purpose of the article is to determine the features of the forms and directions of evangelistic missionary practices of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in the virtual space. The research methodology is based on the principles of non-confessionalism and worldview pluralism, with the involvement of systemic, comparative methods, analysis and synthesis. The conclusions emphasize that the problem of using network technologies for missionary activity is in constant dynamics, forcing the Catholic and Orthodox churches to actively respond not only to changes in value public orientations, but also to the active dissemination of technical innovations. The modern Christian Internet resources are focused mainly on the information function, however, the effectiveness of the missionary practices is ensured by the dominance of the communicative function. The modern Catholic missionary activity is focused on the idea of enculturation as the meeting of the Christian message with the non-Christian community in its cultural context. The Orthodox missionary activity is aimed at preserving and disseminating traditional national religious and cultural values of the Orthodox communities.

**Key word:** *missionary activity; religious Internet communications; evangelization; missionary Internet practices; missionary service; missionary disciplinmaking; concept of missionary activity.*

### **Introduction**

The relevance of the study is determined by the following factors. In the conditions of the formation of the modern information society, the emergence of the Internet and the development of information technologies have brought the missionary service to a qualitatively new level, because the world network acts not only as a source of information, but also as a powerful means of influencing public opinion. The dynamics of the development of Christian missionary Internet practices is determined by a number of factors: technical (constant improvement of computer technology), communication (intensification of virtual contacts at the interpersonal, group and mass levels), psychological (dissemination of technologies for manipulating public consciousness), worldview (the need to preserve Christian spiritual values in a changing globalization world), propaganda (considerable activity of destructive religious movements). The challenges of the modern globalized era require constant improvement of strategies and means of missionary activity of the Catholic and Orthodox churches on the Internet, which necessitates their further scientific analysis. The purpose of the article is to determine the features of the

forms and directions of evangelistic missionary practices of the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the virtual space. The described problem causes the need to solve the following tasks: to study the controversial issues of modern Christian missionary practices of evangelism in their dynamics, taking into account the challenges of our time; to compare the religious and cultural emphases of the Orthodox and Catholic missionary practices; to highlight the common and the different in their forms and directions of activity.

The scientific discussion on the strategies and means of Catholic missionary Internet practices is conditioned by a change in the church's values regarding mission on the Internet, which have been reflected in the messages of Pope Benedict XVI (2009; 2010; 2013) and the Pope Francis (2013; 2019). The article by J. Simic (2009) points to the need to rethink the Christian mission in the face of global challenges, and the studies by D. Arasa, L. Cantoni, L. A. Ruiz (2010) and L. Cantoni, E. Rapetti, S. Tardini, S. Vannini (2012) analyze the degree of involvement of the Catholic community to the Internet. Further publications on this issue (Lewis, 2014, Svaton, 2014) are focused on the analysis of ways to improve the

Catholic Internet practices in accordance with the official position of the church.

In particular, the idea of missionary discipleship, proclaimed by Francis (2013), is reflected in the publications by P. Phillips, B. Lewis, K. Bruce (2013). The concept of missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church is focused mainly on its goals, so the publications of Russian scientists (Ponomarev, 2016) and theologians (Ginkel, 2010, Vasilev, 2017) analyze the problems of missionary work on the Internet and propose ways of their solution. The structure and forms of activity of the Orthodox Internet media are presented in the studies by E. Lazutkina (2019) and E. Grishaeva, V. Shumkova (2018).

#### **Materials and methods**

The research methodology is based on the basic principles and methods of academic religious studies, namely: non-confessionalism and worldview pluralism, which made it possible to analyze and to compare various approaches to understanding the meaning and worldview orientations of the missionary activity of the Christian confessions; the use of the systemic method allowed the consideration of Internet evangelistic practices as an integral part of the modern concepts of the missionary activity of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches; the comparative method made it possible to single out the specific features of the missionary practices of Christian confessions, analysis and synthesis made it possible to highlight the general and special missionary activities of the Catholic and Orthodox confessions in the virtual space.

#### **Results and Discussion**

In the Christian tradition, the missionary activity is the embodiment of the ideals of apostleship, the preaching of Christ's ministry, the preaching of the faith of the world and the establishment of the church as the heir to the ideas of the apostles. The Christian theologians emphasize the Christocentric nature of mission as evidence of divine grace, based on preaching to awaken faith. In general, the modern Christian missionary activity includes evangelistic, educational and humanitarian components. The concept of "missio" in both Catholic and Orthodox missionary doctrines is interpreted as an indication of the plan for the Divine salvation of mankind: God the Father sends God the Son, and through God the Son the ascent of the Holy Spirit takes place on the disciples as messengers.

In the ideological principles of mission in the modern multicultural secularized world, the issues of the relationship between the concepts of "mission and nation" and "mission and culture" both for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are becoming more acute. Culture is always associated with cult, and the spiritual search of a modern person can be the most pronounced language of its sub-culture. The main purpose of the mission is to convert everyone who is outside the church, therefore, the missionary's task is to search in culture for a person's aspiration for the spiritual ideal, and as a result of missionary activity, a new religious and cultural tradition is created by filling it with updated spiritual meanings.

In the modern Christian missionary practices, there are two main forms of mission distinguished - external and internal. The main difference between these forms lies in the addressees of missionary service. The external mission is directed to non-church people or adherents of

other religions, and the internal mission is aimed at those who are already Christians, for a deeper understanding of their religion. Among the main advantages of the mission on the Internet are the following: an accessibility as a basic principle of the Internet; an independence from distances and time, because the user, being at a certain point in space, has the ability to view any pages or to communicate simultaneously with representatives of different cultures, which can be unlimited in a certain unit of time, who actively or passively participate in the communication process; speed of information dissemination and fast feedback; relatively limited financial investments without restrictions in the choice of resource content (creative freedom) with the provision of unlimited time for the selection of materials; the possibility of widespread use of the significant multimedia potential of modern interactive services; the opportunity not only to conduct a lively dialogue not only with fellow believers, but also to attract neophytes.

The idea of a renewed mission of the Catholic Church (New Evangelization), taking into account the challenges of today's globalizing society, was voiced in the message of Pope John Paul II "Redemptoris missio" (John Paul II, 1990). Its main thesis is the desire for the church to restore its missionary obligations. The encyclical proclaims the idea of religious freedom, evangelization is carried out taking into account the cultural traditions and values of other peoples. An enculturation as a key theme of the missionary activity of the Catholic Church is further reflected in "Evangelii gaudium", Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, and in Papal Encyclicals on work with new media. Among the leading ideas of "Evangelii gaudium", which find active support in publications on the use of the Internet as a means of the missionary activity, there is the "missionary disciplinism", which obliges all believers to be not just passive receivers of religious information, but to become missionary disciples and to take an active direct part in evangelization (Francis, 2013).

The topic of new digital media became the basis for the messages of Pope Benedict XVI for the World Communication Day. The message "New technologies, new relationships. Promoting a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship" expresses ideas on the extraordinary potential of new technologies if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity. "The desire for connectedness and the instinct for communication that are so obvious in contemporary culture are best understood as modern manifestations of the basic and enduring propensity of humans to reach beyond themselves and to seek communion with others. In reality, when we open ourselves to others, we are fulfilling our deepest need and becoming more fully human... These networks can facilitate forms of co-operation between people from different geographical and cultural contexts that enable them to deepen their common humanity and their sense of shared responsibility for the good of all. We must, therefore, strive to ensure that the digital world, where such networks can be established, is a world that is truly open to all." (Benedict XVI, 2009).

The message "The priest and pastoral devotion in a digital world: new media at the service of the word" notes the opportunity for priests to use new communication technologies to introduce people to the life of the Church. However, the priests present in the world of digital communications should be less notable for their media savvy than for their priestly heart, their closeness to Christ. This

will not only enliven their pastoral outreach, but also will give a "soul" to the fabric of communications that makes up the "web". The development of the new technologies and the larger digital world represents a great resource for humanity as a whole and for every individual, and it can act as a stimulus to encounter and dialogue, in particular, for believers. To priests, in particular, the new media offer ever new and far-reaching pastoral possibilities, encouraging them to embody the universality of the Church's mission (*Benedict XVI, 2010*).

The message "Social networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization" emphasizes the need for religious and cultural tolerance in the mission of the church on the Internet, because the social media thus need the commitment of all who are conscious of the value of dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation; of people who strive to cultivate forms of discourse and expression which appeal to the noblest aspirations of those engaged in the communication process (*Benedict XVI, 2013*).

However, the net contains not only positive but also dangers, as indicated in the message of Pope Francis "From social network communities to the human community": social networks, on the one hand, help us to better connect, rediscover, and assist one another, but on the other, lend themselves to the manipulations. The net is an opportunity to promote encounter with others, but it can also increase our self-isolation, can entrap us, make "social hermits" who risk alienating themselves completely from society. This multiform and dangerous reality raises various questions of an ethical, social, juridical, political and economic nature, and challenges the Church as well (*Francis, 2019*).

In the Concept of missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church (2007), the role of mission in the context of the challenges of the modern information society is to oppose information aggression against the Orthodoxy, the individual, family and society carried out by destructive cults and organizations; to master new information spaces for the development of the mission. To do this, it is necessary to actively master the information space, using all the variety of the latest information technologies (radio broadcasting, television, the Internet and print media); to provide missions with a proactive nature in the information space by creating a single databank of analytical and reference materials, accessible to any Orthodox missionary.

The readiness of priests to use the Internet for missionary practices is noted in the results of a study based on a survey conducted by Lorenzo Cantoni, Emanuele Rapetti, Stefano Tardini, Sara Vannini (2012) among the Catholic clergy in 52 countries of the world, in particular, it is noted that more than 72% of them consider the Internet to be an effective tool for evangelization.

In the modern Christian missionary practice, the most common are the five main forms (*Ginkel, 2010:131*): educational mission (social service aimed at the churching of the individual); apologetic mission (evidence of the truth of the doctrine of a particular confession); information mission (dissemination of information about the activities of the church); external mission (intercultural communication with representatives of other religious and cultural communities); reconciliation mission (proclaiming the possibility of reconciliation between representatives of different ideological views).

Disciplemaking issue in missionary Internet communications is highlighted by Bex Lewis, who notes that digital communication transcends spatial constraints, enabling effective remote preaching activity. Speakers can be invited to the ministry from all over the world (using tools such as Skype); one can participate in church services while at home (using tools such as live streaming). You can send donations through digital banking and share the fullness of discipleship in evangelisation through all types of media. Accordingly, believers are no longer limited to their geographic or "Sunday" lives, which allows churches to practice a community of full life (*Lewis, 2014*).

Peter Phillips, Dr Bex Lewis and Kate Bruce (2013: 5) emphasize the need to spread the missionary practice of intercultural learning, noting that the digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young. Social networks are the result of human interaction, but for their part they also reshape the dynamics of communication, for example, posting some brief reflections on Facebook about Sunday's sermon, mixed in with the general stuff of life, pushes those who communicate digitally to be open, to ask more questions. Being digitally engaged means that the missionaries need to be interesting, be relevant, and be honest. House groups through social media or Skype breaking down geographical or physical limitations, encouraging the housebound or house-locked to share their problems. These authors use such concept as a "digital disciple" - is someone who seeks to live out their Biblically-informed Christian faith in the digital space (*Digital Communication, the Church and Mission:2013: 8*). Church online work should not be a copy of traditional activities, the network is not about doing marketing services or singing religious hymns, it is about building a community. The net in religious communication has become a place for web search engines to move from content readers to community members; to move from passive receivers of information to active contributors to missionary work.

Among the main mistakes of missionary activity are the following: substitution of a common Christian mission for the corporate interests of a particular church; striving for massive and obvious success; transformation of missionary activity into ideological propaganda, in which the missionary himself plays a key role; ignoring the psychology of the "mission object"; inability to distinguish good from evil in the convictions of the interlocutor; "demonization" of the audience and fascination with own goodness (*Ginkel, 2010: 153*). The missionary shall have a fairly critical approach, a rational view of the credibility of his own arguments. It is necessary to look at yourself, at your faith through the eyes of those who not only take it, but who are also critical. The problems of religious communication on the Internet should also include the need to master the appropriate level of information culture - both technical (the ability to work with the appropriate software, and intellectual - the ability to religious tolerance in communication with representatives of other confessions).

In order for the mission on the Internet to be more effective, the active presence of the church in the information Internet space with the possibility of personal appeal to each user is important. On religious sites, the user can get acquainted not only with the official positions regarding the purpose of the activities of church structures, but also with the personal attitude of the representatives of the cult to the moral content of the Christian doctrine.

In order to develop the most effective missionary strategies, it is important to study the spectrum of value orientations of netizens.

The advantages of the religious Internet media in comparison with traditional media lie primarily in the possibility of building a hierarchical structure of thematic messages, which makes it possible to more effectively master the communicative space, after all, the correct understanding of religious messages for the general public of users requires, as a rule, historical and religious commentaries. The system of hyperlinks and the ability to organize materials according to the principle of "plot in progress" contributes to a better understanding of messages on religious topics.

Modern religious Internet content should be interesting, exquisite, debatable, free of moralizing. A missionary who works in the information space must have a good idea of who makes up his audience, what it is interested in, what thinks, how it communicates. In particular, among the users of the Orthodox Internet resources, Ye. Lazutkina distinguishes four types: 1) active members of religious communities; 2) unchurched believers, but who strive to become churched; 3) unchurched believers who refer to publications in narrowly thematic directions (baptism, funeral, holidays); 4) users of varying degrees of belief who are undecided about their beliefs, representatives of other confessions, atheists, etc. (Lazutkina, 2019: 359). Genre and thematic specificity, the choice of language means, in particular, the use of special vocabulary and church terms depends both on the target audience and on the purpose of the resource.

Regarding the use of the Internet by members of the monastic community, as noted by Daniel Arasa, Lorenzo Cantoni and Lucio Adrián Ruiz (2010: 118-120), the Catholic monasteries usually have an information website; e-mail is used primarily for the exchange of information within a religious community. The authors point out the following reasons for the lack of interest in active Internet communication: the contemplative lifestyle of the monastery, which does not support active communication, and the lack of professional staff and financial support for organizing an effective communication process. As for the Orthodox monasteries, from the analysis of the websites of the largest Ukrainian Orthodox monasteries - Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (<https://lavra.ua/uk/>), Pochayiv Holy Assumption Lavra (<http://pochaev.org.ua>) and St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery (<http://www.archangel.kiev.ua>), we can say that their websites perform mainly informational function.

However, the effectiveness of missionary Internet practices largely depends not only on the activity of priests and believers, but also on the use of the latest technologies in the design and further functioning of the websites. In particular, representatives of the Orthodox Internet community point to the following shortcomings of the Orthodox websites: static content, ill-conceived structure, lack of hyperlinks, minimum elements of interactivity, multimedia, problems with the promptness of updating information, gloomy unattractive design, difficulty in finding the information most demanded by users (Vasilev, 2017: 245). Therefore, it is necessary to develop the most informational, operational and objective websites, observing the following rules for the design and presentation of information: the website must be well structured, possess a simple and light design, information shall be published in small portions, have highlighted keywords, graphically

designed subheadings. The system of exchange of the websites with banners and links, as well as broadcasting news using RSS-technology will help to increase the traffic of the resource. In addition to the official, it is important to have a mobile application for a smartphone.

However, the Internet contains not only positive, but also dangers for religious communication, among which are the following: due to its anonymity, the Internet is a favorable environment for radical religious groups positioning themselves as legitimate representatives of existing church structures; in addition, the network structure contributes to the active spread of esoteric and quasi-religious movements. In particular, many people meet their religious needs on the Internet without being really associated with a particular religious community.

Religion in the Internet age can be viewed in two broad but interrelated aspects: as religion on the Internet and Internet-religion, where religion on the Internet represents information about religious institutions and groups using the Internet, while Internet-religion is understood as the exercise of religion through the Internet channels. In the Christian context, an Internet-religion is an Internet-based Christian community that uses a range of digital media to worship (Ponomariov A., 2016: 111-112). Religion on the Internet is mostly focused on the transfer of information on a hierarchical basis, while Internet-religion is predominantly unstructured, open and non-hierarchical interaction.

The Internet contributes to the transformation of forms of expression of religiosity, thanks to the opportunity to participate in various Internet communities, a person receives a "second religious identity" - after all, a person is no longer only a member of a specific religious community, but also a member of the world community who conducts discussions on social and religious issues, and virtual life in this case can be more informational and spiritually rich than life in reality. Various marginalized groups of believers are able to spread their own influence and to manipulate public opinion. On the Internet, it is possible to create simulacra websites, on the pages of which, on behalf of a certain religious community, groups which pursuing completely opposite ideological goals can appear.

### Conclusions

Thus, over the past decade, there have been significant changes in the use of the Internet for missionary practice. While in the 2010s attention was mainly focused on justifying the expediency of using religious Internet communications in missionary activity, in the middle of the decade the topic of scientific and theological discussions was the advantages of the dynamic communicative existence of the church in the network with regard to its static informational representation according to the hierarchical principle. The new decade actualizes the problem of networked religious information wars, which necessitates the forms and methods of ideological opposition of traditional Christian religions to the latest esoteric and quasi-religious movements.

The most effective forms of work for both Catholic and Orthodox missions on the Internet are the following: study of the range of values of network users, personification of religious messages, the need for missionary analysis of today's complex problems, active discussion in Internet communities on socio-religious issues, formation of the "digital disciplinmaking" system with the opportunity to

share personal experience of the Christian life for each believer.

The most effective means of work are the existence of a structured site with a convenient attractive design, focused not only on information, but primarily on the communication function, the possibility to organize materials on the principle of "story in development", the presence of hyperlinks, multimedia; in addition to the official website, it is also important to have a mobile application for a smartphone. The most effective means of work are the existence of a structured site with a convenient attractive design, focused not only on information, but primarily on the communication function, the possibility to organize materials on the principle of "story in development", the presence of hyperlinks, multimedia; in addition to the official website, it is also important to have a mobile application for a smartphone.

Modern globalization processes shift the religious and cultural emphases of missionary practices: while the Catholic Church focuses on the need to take into account the multicultural characteristics of the missionary practices among various ethnocultural communities with their inherent awareness of their own identity, ensuring them equality and tolerance, the Orthodox Church focuses on the preservation and dissemination of the values of national cultures that are genetically related to the Orthodoxy. The common task for the Catholic and Orthodox missions in the virtual space is to constantly improve the technical, personnel and financial support of the missionary activity. Putting missionary tasks into practice is possible only if each member of the church is aware of own personal missionary responsibility and understands that the spiritual transformation of human history depends on member's own choice.

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## **ФЕНОМЕН МІСІЙНОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ ХРИСТИЯНСЬКИХ ЦЕРКОВ У ВІРТУАЛЬНОМУ ПРОСТОРИ**

Виклики сучасного глобалізованого інформаційного суспільства змушують християнські конфесії переосмислювати ціннісні орієнтири місійної діяльності та вдосконалювати її форми і засоби. Завдяки активному розвитку Інтернет християнські конфесії отримують нові можливості не лише реалізації місійних практик, спрямованих на поглиблення духовних цінностей серед вірян своїх релігійних громад, але й переваги у поширенні релігійних ідей, цінностей, переконань серед нехристиян. Метою статті є визначення особливостей форм та напрямів євангелізаційних місійних практик католицької та православної церков у віртуальному просторі. Методологія дослідження базується на принципах позаконфесійності і світоглядного плюралізму, із залученням системного, порівняльного методів, аналізу та синтезу. У висновках підкреслюється, що проблема використання мережних технологій задля місійної діяльності знаходиться у постійній динаміці, змушуючи католицьку та православну церкви активно реагувати не лише на зміни ціннісних суспільних орієнтацій, але і на активне поширення технічних новацій. Сучасні християнські Інтернет-ресурси зорієнтовані, переважно, на інформаційну функцію, однак, ефективність місійних практик забезпечується домінуванням комунікативної функції. Сучасна католицька місійна діяльність орієнтована на ідею інкультурації як зустрічі християнського послання з нехристиянською спільнотою в її культурному контексті. Православна місійна діяльність спрямована на збереження і поширення традиційних національних релігійно-культурних цінностей православних спільнот.

*Ключові слова:* місійна діяльність; релігійні Інтернет-комунікації; євангелізація; місійні Інтернет-практики; місійне служіння; місіонерське учнівство; концепція місіонерської діяльності

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