
FICTION AND SPIRITUAL SEARCH: THE POST-SOVIET RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the ways religious identities are shaped in post-Soviet Siberian cities. In the theoretical part, the main dimensions of cultural determinants, shaping the narratives of autobiographical interviews under scrutiny, are presented. Then, the text focuses on the turning points as a catalyst for the spiritual search. One of these points is books. The analyzed samples provide us with the descriptions of the “virtual reality” that follows the declared initiation of spiritual search by the respondents. Finally, the author signals how the historical variables influenced the autobiographical narratives after the sequence of socio-political events that unfolded in Russia in 2012 – 14 (from the repressions after the *Bolotnaya protests* by the annexation of Crimea to Russia’s war against Ukraine).

Keywords: individual religiosity, autobiographical interviews, Siberia, Russia, spirituality of literature, post-Soviet religious identity

“Every American takes a Bible and every Russian dies with Dostoevsky. We couldn’t read the Bible in the Soviet Union, but Dostoyevsky was not taken from us”: this is how one of the respondents, interviewed within the framework of the research discussed in the present paper, described his spiritual path.

This paper is part of a broader research project, carried out over the course of eight years, focusing on the post-Soviet religious identities in large Siberian cities. Yet, in this paper, the scope of the study is narrowed down to a discussion on the main dimensions of cultural determinants shaping the narratives in the autobiographical interviews under scrutiny. Then, we move on to the exploration of the turning points in the autobiographical narratives of the selected category of respondents. More precisely, the turning points are understood as events or factors serving as catalysts for the declared spiritual search of the respondents (and thus: of the protagonists in the

autobiographical narratives identified with them). Therefore, we attempt to develop a simplified typology of these factors and show that one of them is books (although not the most strongly represented quantitatively, yet qualitatively significant and culturally productive). We divide the books (or the texts in general) described by the respondents into two categories, namely religious and esoteric literature as well as fiction books. For the purposes of this paper, we focus only on the last subtype. Furthermore, we study the descriptions of the “virtual reality” that follows the declared initiation of spiritual search. To that end, we list the most frequently mentioned books and authors who would allow the opening of the “second dimension”. Finally, we discuss in greater detail the historical variables which influenced the frequency of the described topics and the qualitative nature of the autobiographical narratives after the sequence of socio-political events in Russia unfolding in the years 2012 – 2014 (from the repressions after the *Bolotnaya protests* by the annexation of Crimea to Russia’s war against Ukraine, started in Donbas).

*The basics of conceptualization: spiritual, religious
and confessional identity, agents of socialization, specificity
of conversions in post-Soviet conditions*

This paper should be understood as a report, outlining further research perspectives and drawing attention to important socio-cultural threads. Due to text size constraints, the theoretical considerations regarding the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the definitions of terms such as religious conversion or religious identity in the post-Soviet reality are reduced to a minimum. The implementation and testing of concepts related to these terms as well as their operational definitions will be presented in a separate paper. The same applies to the historical context of the described phenomena, covering the religious policy and repressions from 1917 to 2017, as these problems constitute parts of a broader research project.

However, it is worth noting that in the aforementioned project, we treated religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon, distinguishing between individual conceptualization of the universe and institutional legitimacy of spirituality (Morawiecki 2018: 36 – 38). We also discussed the ways of defining the agents of religious socialization (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 97) in both the Soviet and post-Soviet conditions (Panchenko 2011: 138), and put forward an assumption regarding the incompatibility of the “U-curve” revealing the correlation between age and religiosity (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 103) in the case of the described category of respondents. We proposed to recognize the existence of such identities as Soviet and post-Soviet religious and confessional identities (Morawiecki 2018: 41 – 44). Capitalizing on the theories developed by J. Zigon and A. Ładykowska, we agreed on understanding the conversions not only as “leaving one religious group and entering another”, but also as entering a religious world from which the interlocutors were previously deprived or even unaware of its existence (Ładykowska 2011: 45; Pelkmans 2010). The so-

cio-cultural conditions under which the conversions took place provided a stimulus to develop a custom-designed typology of conversions presented in this paper. More precisely, we divided conversions into hard (radical) and soft ones, and the soft conversions contain a number of subtypes such as permanent switching, religious relocations and evolutionary conversion (Morawiecki 2018: 46).

For the sake of clarity, it should also be noted that within the framework of the discussed project, we distinguished different dimensions of the post-Soviet identity: spiritual, religious and confessional dimensions. These dimensions have certain common sets, but they cannot be treated equally and do not have to be subsets. Moreover, there may be some tension between the dimensions (it means that, for example, an individual confessional identification is not always entirely contained in a religious one; thus, it cannot be considered as a subtype of it). The topic of books, discussed in this paper mainly concerns the spiritual dimension, while the other two dimensions may retrospectively diversify the types of the studied narratives.

It is worth adding that the study on the individual identity was carried out by collecting, comparing and typologizing qualitative indicators. The concept of identity is understood in this study as the “system of social actor’s self-definition” (Bokszański 2002; Paleczny 2008: 29), which is conditioned by historical and cultural specificity, and as “a set of the actor’s ideas, judgments and beliefs about himself” (ibid), which is constructed in the course of self-narratives (Burzyńska 2004: 53).

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that the autobiographical narratives enable one to “impart a comprehensive meaning and coherence to the complex combinations of events, intentions, actions of heroes and unforeseen circumstances that make up the story” (Rosner 1999: 7). It is precisely in this context that the narrative is defined as “the human ability to organize events and activities into overall meaningful structures evolving over time” (Rosner 2003: 12). Usually the autobiographical narratives are relatively stable within the individual spheres of life (Trzebiński 2002: 44), yet they cannot be considered fully autonomous: the self-narratives are conditioned by “our position in society” and the “tradition, constituting the historical context for individual life” (Rosner 2003: 29). The use of the category of narration understood in this way seemed promising and applicable within the scope of the present research. In the very beginning, however, it was important to accept the openness and unfinished description as inherent characteristics of the qualitative methods. Therefore, one should not believe in the ultimate “coherent and integrating power of the narrative” (Burzyńska 2004: 56).

The specificity of the deliberate sampling selection and historical variables

Since 2010, we have analyzed the identity narratives of inhabitants of large Siberian cities, representing a generation “on the edge”, i.e. from the 1970s to the first

half of the 1980s. Thus, the goal of the present study was, first, to identify the determinants impacting the creation of the autobiographical narratives of the aforementioned generation of people, and, second, to attempt to explain how the indicators of the separate dimensions of the post-Soviet identification complex are represented in the narratives under scrutiny. With these two goals in mind, we conducted an analysis of the narrative structures in the autobiographical interviews. The measurement data was completed with interviews with informants and with cohort interviews. For the study of the interactions between religious communities, we also implemented participatory action research and non-participating observation. However, the latter methods, which by their very nature are rather subjective and soft, yet allowing for deepening the measurement, do not apply directly to the narratives analyzed in this paper.

It should also be clarified that respondents who declared significant religious experiences as representatives of Catholic parishes or representatives of other groups interacting with the Catholics were examined in this study. We focused on the biographical relations of respondents living or moving to large cities: first, Krasnoyarsk, isolated in the Soviet times (the “red city of engineers”); second, the more intellectual and more distant from the center of political power Tomsk, and third, the industrial city of Ulan-Ude, specific for its pre-Soviet ethnic and confessional reasons. The selection of inhabitants from large cities allowed us to reach respondents who did not participate in the intergenerational religious transmission. In other words, we wanted to reach people who did not have access to primary religious socialization (for example, in the rural parishes of German or Polish communities). It was of paramount importance to separate the spiritual and religious identification from the ethnic one. The basic empirical data include approximately 150 hours of biographical interviews, collected in the years 2010 – 2012 (also with panel interviews in individual cases), and over a dozen cohort interviews, which were all conducted to reveal possible new trends in 2016.

Both at the level of conceptualization, operationalization, and finally, during both measurement stages, we took into account three levels of variables determining the respondents. More precisely, the main dimensions of cultural determinants shaping the narratives of presented autobiographical interviews can be divided into the following categories:

- cultural and social determinants of a given region (kray, oblast, or autonomous republic)
- cultural and social determinants at the meso-level (Russian cultural conditions)
- global trends at the mega-level.

The determinants belonging to each of these dimensions can potentially correlate with confessional determinants and, as such, they can even cause tensions and conflicts of values between denominational identification and competing centers of socialization at the regional, -meso or -mega levels.

To be more precise, the aforementioned determinants manifested themselves during the measurements in the following ways:

– mega: pluralism, positive valorisation of globalization, but above all, cultural, religious, scientific and economic exchange, characteristic of modernizing Russia; these trends were most visible in the first decade of the 21st century; however, they were still reflected in the interviews conducted in 2010 – 12;

– mega: religious integrism, withdrawal from universalist concepts and from dialogueism, aversion to syncretism; it should be remembered that the hardening of narratives was characteristic not only for Russia, it also included Islamic countries, and in Europe: Hungary and Poland, among others; the trend provided further arguments invalidating the secularization theory (Norris and Inglehart 2006: 27) and exemplifying the concept of desecularization (Martin 2011: 31).

– meso: the nationalist and integrist intensification had a unique specificity in Russia, resulting from sociopolitical conditions (Knorre 2012); the conservative shift towards a unified identity resulted in a stronger than before favoritism of the Russian Orthodox Church (RPC) in the political, legal and economic dimensions (Kuropatkina 2009: 241; Verkhovsky 2009: 169); in the sociological and cultural dimension, the described tendency confirmed the validity of the concept of the “Orthodox consensus” (Agadjanian 2011: 17; Furman and Kaarianen 2007); it should be added that within the frames of the conducted measurements, the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in political and social activities was clearly visible;

– micro: homogenization of the discourse and political life in the regions, a regression of the civil society, the first repressions of religious minorities (Prava cheloveka v regionah 2008; Makarov 2008: 3; Pipija 2015).

However, the structure of the biographical interview implies that the first narrative sequences usually provide indicators allowing one to identify the attributes of retrospective historical variables. The study of the generation “on the edge” made it possible to obtain autobiographical narratives of people subjected to primary and secondary socialization in the Soviet era. The interlocutors graduated from the Soviet schools, they grew up in the structure of “*optyabryata*”, including also pioneers and members of Komsomol. However, those respondents experienced a rapid erosion of the forced secularization model in the second half of the 1980s (Froese 2004: 35 – 40). One could refer to this process as the collapse of an unfinished paradise after the death of religion. The experience of decay correlated with the decision to commence a spiritual search and with the desire to exceed its own mundane, existing condition.

*Social vacuum, tabula rasa and virtual dimension
as determinants of initiation of the spiritual search*

In the analyzed interviews, an image of the “flowery orchard of Russian spirituality” (Filatov 2009: 8) was constantly repeated. This regularity was observed regardless of the religion of the respondents. The description of the same period, that is the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, was accompanied by the

conviction of the “social vacuum” (Suchanek 2003: 504; Barker 2007: 132), which Alexandr Verkhovsky described as “the social tabula rasa” that could never exist in empirical reality (Verkhovsky 2009: 161). As expected, the interviews enabled one to reconstruct the autobiographical scenography of the Soviet Union and distinguish between the most frequently occurring socialization agents (including religious and anti-religious socialization). The interviews also confirmed the significance of the experience of the collapse of the USSR, alongside the collapse of the Soviet symbolic world. This deconstruction was all-encompassing, embracing all spheres of respondents’ lives (as well as the lives of the biographical protagonists of narratives created by the respondents), which overall justify to call it a cosmic catastrophe. The experience of the total catastrophe was accompanied by a repeatedly expressed, overwhelming, and universal for all cultures desire to restore the coherence of one’s own biography (Barnes 2012: 434). This personal collapse used to be described as the feeling of losing the cohesiveness of the empirical dimension and the degradation of the “first scene of life” (*dim* \mathfrak{R})¹. The deconstruction of the scenery, the chaotic interactions and the incomprehensible redefinition of the roles of actors aroused suspicions of the existence of “another world” and, consequently, led to the opening of the “virtual dimension” *dim* \mathfrak{S} ² (Kharitonova 2007: 221) or of the second scene.

We should emphasize at this point that the associations with the fundamental and well-known works of Erving Goffman are related only to the theater poetics applied in this text (the metaphor of the stage and the façade, the study of interactions between the actors). The interpretation of the biographical interviews proposed in the present paper does not fit into the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. Similarly, despite the superficial associations with Vladimir Propp, we do not treat biographical narratives as a closed system with a finite number of variants (Lévi-Strauss 1997: 181). In addition, what Goffman calls “external space” is not directly taken into account in our analysis of the data (Goffman 1953: 3). Meanwhile, the model of the two scenes created for the present study made it possible to observe the protagonist, the encountered actors, and, finally, the costumes and scenography on two different levels. In the conviction of the respondents, the access to the latter would be possible thanks to communication with *dim* \mathfrak{S} (in other words: respondents become convinced that there is a “different reality” or “different dimension” that nei-

¹ *dim* \mathfrak{R} is the dimension of reality perceived by the respondents (and thus: by the protagonists of their autobiographical narratives) as the empirical dimension. Events from this dimension, described in the respondent’s self-narrative, take place on the first stage. It is worth emphasizing that the presented concept of dividing into two scenes as well as the symbols denoting both dimensions and interactions related to them are my original authorship and were created as a result of the conceptualization of this research project.

² *dim* \mathfrak{S} is the dimension of reality perceived by the respondents (and thus: by the protagonists of their autobiographical narratives) as the virtual (fantastic, imagined) sphere that they call also “esoteric”, „subtle world” (тонкий мир), “deeper” dimension. They believe they get access to it by religion or by their individual spiritual search. When analyzing self-narratives, we call this dimension the second scene. It is on this stage that the scenery and characters both from books but also from visions, dreams and fantasies are located.

ther they nor the actors belonging to their current reference group can see; it is this imaginary dimension that becomes the second stage to which they begin to seek access). The need for this communication arose from the motivation, which I called “magical” (Davies 2012: 88) in the case of all confessions. However, the sequences closer to the respondents’ present time contained both the „magic” motivation and the artistic motivation of „enchantment”, along with the postulate of a constant and unwavering effort to remain in the virtual dimension or to maintain communication with the virtual dimension (ibid.: 103).

However, let us focus on the stage when the narratives under study first mention the existence of the second scene (“extra-empirical” world, “esoteric dimension”, “what’s on the other side”) and when the protagonists make their first attempts to gain access to dim \mathfrak{I} . Speaking about the factors contributing to the very initiation of their spiritual search, the respondents most often mention the following elements or events:

- borderline experiences: diseases, misfortunes and personal failures that begin to form chains, fatalistic sequences;
- fiction books generating existential questions, as well as awakening the desire to understand the images and symbols contained in the texts;
- religious and “esoteric” publications; moreover, personal memories, religious “afterimages” from childhood, as well as significant others, appearing in adulthood, may also lead to the search.

Initiation of the spiritual search by examples of fiction

Now that we have identified the actors of the scene, we are in a position to discuss them in a greater detail. They appear in biographical descriptions as significant others, influencing the choice of the further direction of the spiritual journey. However, cultural products (along with actors of the scene \mathfrak{I}) play an equally important role in the initiation and implementation of the spiritual search. Most of the respondents mention books. Religious literature may be provided by donors (\mathfrak{R}). Protagonists, on the other hand, often come across fictional texts during their studies. So fiction makes them aware of the existence of symbolic areas and cultural layers that have not been explored so far. These areas are sometimes completely hidden from the protagonist or the very access to them is limited. The respondents were unaware of their handicap, but at the same time they seemed to feel certain incomprehensible confusion. The discussed measurements showed that radio and TV broadcasts (more often than not anti-religious programs, but also religious programs broadcast outside the USSR) could cause similar confusion.

Further spiritual searches could also be stimulated by the reception of paintings and the study of history: in such cases the respondents often talk about a deepening interest in a particular religion, usually Orthodox or Catholicism. However, we found that literature is most often represented in the collected data from both quan-

titative and qualitative perspective. And so, the Orthodox priest Vladimir Arshinov begins his description with the sentence: “Books were my spirituality”. Let’s look at other samples of the analyzed data. The first, not the most numerous, but relatively clearly standardized type of descriptions that appeared close to the initial, canonized parts of the interviews was the descriptions of the first religious symbols encountered in childhood (e.g. repetitive images of a grandmother praying in the corner, icons and sacred elements of the scenery, incomprehensible, causing confusion). The Roman Catholic Father Oleg from Krasnoyarsk says:

“I read the Iliad and the Odyssey as a child. After this reading, I entered my great-grandmother’s room once. On the walls I saw the pictures she was praying to. I asked her about these icons and she answered that it was the crucified Jesus Christ. I saw Roman soldiers around. However, my great-grandmother explained to me that it was mainly the Jews who were to be blamed, that they had killed Jesus, they crucified him. There was something stinking about that translation. (...) But that was the first seed.”

The frequently used phrases, repeated also in other interviews, are exactly “sprouting grain”, “anxiety”, „confusion”, “pinching”, “scratch”, “fissure”. Anna Vinogradova from the Catholic parish in Krasnoyarsk recalls:

“I was 10 – 12 years old, I lived in Yakutia. I loved reading Turgenev. In the “Noble’s Nest”, the main character, Liza, dreamed of going to a monastery. It really appealed to my imagination. And then I read Alexey Tolstoy and Nikolai Gogol. You know, all those creepy mystical stories. They raised questions about faith. Something in my head was hurting me. Some grain, elusive speck. Suddenly I noticed that when people cram into a crowded bus they groan “My God.” A kind of atheistic country, clear as crystal, and here are the words ...”

Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases, the time of university studies is indicated as the starting point. For example, a Roman-Catholic deacon Andrey Andreychenko says: “When I started studying, the world opened to me”. This rule has also been confirmed by validation interviews conducted in 2016 in Tomsk. The mentioned books are usually taken from the canon of Russian and World literature of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Among others, the respondents refer most often to the works by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Alexei Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Lermontov, but also Marina Tsvetaeva, Mikhail Bulgakov, Marcel Proust. Works from the second half of the 20th century are cited much less frequently, and if so, they represent Soviet science-fiction stories. An example of a statement referring to more contemporary novels may be the description of the literary socialization presented by the Krasnoyarsk pastor, the leader of the Protestant movement “Vinogradnik”. However, also in this particular case, the quotation of Sergei Dovlatov serves as a reference to Fyodor Dostoyevsky:

“Have you read Sergei Dovlatov? He describes how they transported him to the operation room, already in exile. The surgeon asks him: “what book should we bring you?” Dovlatov: “I want Dostoyevsky.” And the surgeon is confused: “No Bible?” Because every American takes a Bible and every Russian dies with Dostoyevsky.

We couldn't read the Bible in the Soviet Union, but Dostoyevsky was not taken from us. (...) The assimilation of Christianity takes place in our country, that is, in the Russian intelligentsia, through the classics of literature. (...) The first religious experience was precisely the purchase of the academic edition of Dostoyevsky. I devoured everything, including the scraps and notes. I felt like I was flying. For me, the father of the Church was Dostoyevsky."

A Catholic from Ulan Ude, Valery Tykhiev, says in turn:

"Thank God they were publishing Dostoyevsky in the Soviet Union. (...) It wasn't really available in the bookstores. But my mother was a real fanatic; she bought these books wherever she could. Anyway, it was fashionable in intelligentsia circles: to buy out all by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and besides, Theodore Dreiser. And at school, we talked about *Crime and punishment*."

Many times, the protagonists begin to search for their own spiritual key to understand reality. They do this by analyzing marginal threads, looking for characters identified as belonging to religious reality (in other words: they are looking for signs, symbols, clues, actors that would be related to the lost/hidden religious world or, more broadly, the spiritual world). This happens when they become aware of the systemic handicap in access to cultural capital. The Orthodox Vladimir Aleksandrovich Golova recalls: "I read such a book, *Father Arseniy*, it touched me, forced me to search". And Svetlana Vladimirovna Serova (Roman Catholic parish) adds:

"I have swallowed all Russian and most of European literature. I caught everything about God. I did not realize it back then, but I was getting deeper and deeper into religion through fiction. I was absorbing Lermontov".

Others respondents also recollect analyzing footnotes, comments, text margins. And so, for example, the Catholic from Ulan Ude Andrey Mukhrayev recalls: "I relied on these footnotes in a Soviet textbook and started praying. It may be ridiculous, but that was my first prayer". In turn, a Roman Catholic priest Maksym Popov from Krasnoyarsk says:

"The desire to pray grew. I was constantly bothered by how Catholics do it, how do they pray properly? I got a lot of atheistic books. I was looking for anything about Catholicism. Most of them were written by priests who had left the priesthood. I learned from them that the Catholics pray in Latin. So I got down to work. In Lilya Woynich's book, *Insect*, I found a Latin prayer at the end and learned it. I carried it with me and read it all the time. It is difficult to say how correct that was. But it did help. Later in the seminary, I found out that I was reciting a hymn to the dead".

Obviously, atheistic literature could be perceived as an education in prayer and a vehicle of transferring a person into the virtual dimension. Thus, literary texts can become guides themselves, but also a medium that facilitates reaching the Bible, the Gospel, and other religious texts. However, it can also happen that the significant others, the guides, are not donors positioned/located in real space (\mathfrak{R}), they are not even literary characters (\mathfrak{S}), but the significant others become the authors of the novels; they constitute the figures introducing and welcoming you to a fantastic dimension. This dimension manifests itself through the books existing in the physical

space. Thus, the books are considered as props in this case, but also as separate, equal entities, enabling the transition to $\dim \mathfrak{S}$, and even allowing the dimensions to merge ($\mathfrak{S} \equiv \mathfrak{R}$)³. This penetration (“immersion”, “sparkling”) is equated with a mystical experience. Let us provide perhaps one of the most significant, if not the most impressive description of the spiritual search by Svetlana Serova:

“From the very beginning, all I really loved were books. So I went into all these demons, into Lermontov. Besides, Tsvetaeva was with me. (...) Meeting with the text gives me pleasure. For me, the text is the substance most filled with life. I can touch it, I can see its colors, I can hear its melody. I communicate with the text, and thanks to the book I talk to its creator. I don’t know what exactly it is. Scientists have now created a whole range of communication concepts, but this would probably need to be explored even more. Perhaps then we will understand what actually happens when it starts sparkling between the worlds of the reader, the book and its author”.

Summing up, the search for signs, images and religious experiences in literature, as we have already emphasized, used to be motivated by personal attempts to understand symbols, characters, images, so that people become aware of their own cultural deficits. A rarer, yet very interesting motivation pertains to the desire to find descriptions of states (mystical experiences, borderline experiences) in literature, descriptions similar to those previously experienced by the respondent. Svetlana Serova also notes:

“I began to find descriptions in literature similar to what I have experienced myself. (...) There are processes taking place in me that do not suit me, I do not want them at all. However, I have already agreed to have them activated in me. They are happening regardless of me. I know that they are needed and that they are caused by someone, who sees more than me”.

The presented example includes two motives that usually appeared separately in the narratives under study, namely the religious emotions experienced through reading fiction and the personal mystical experiences (i.e. the belief that the respondent entered the “other dimension”) perceived as a radical, borderline experience.

Summary of the interview analysis – homogenizing and diversifying determinants

In conclusion, it is worth reiterating and emphasizing that when we made the decision to conduct qualitative research, we resigned from using somewhat harder,

³ $\mathfrak{S} \equiv \mathfrak{R}$ is therefore a situation in which respondents stop separating both dimensions (two scenes): “I don’t know if it’s really happening”, “I don’t know if it was a dream or they came for real”, “I lost ability of controlling visions”. This situation is described by them as undesirable, because it makes it difficult to function in the current environment (home, work). Respondents in Buryatia called this condition a shamanic disease. Christian respondents did not have a religious language that would allow them to name their experiences, but they described it extensively.

more standardized methods (used, for example, in psychobiological experiments, statistical analyses or survey techniques) in favor of reportedly less reliable but potentially more accurate measurement, that is, qualitative analysis of interview data, which enabled for deeper and denser sampling (Flyvbjerg 2005: 61). This seems to be particularly important also taking into consideration the fact that the present research covered narratives intended to describe socio-cultural processes that elude the declarative survey indicators. Thus, the examined threads cannot be compared quantitatively due to the incompatibility of the research methods. For this reason, we consciously resigned from providing the percentage distributions of the particular types of descriptions of spiritual search. A soft analysis, however, made it possible to notice which of the themes were marginal and which the dominant ones were. The main goal of the present study is to draw attention to the motives that were culturally significant and important for the described generation.

At the same time, our findings, but also the uncontrolled observation of the socio-political events in Russia, confirm the earlier and more general qualitative descriptions. For example, the Agadjanian description of a makeshift reconstruction of religion using unrelated elements and fragmented sources (such as the respondents' chaotic search for religious themes in literature, including the books of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy) has been confirmed (Agadjanian 2011: 21). We found that exactly these writers were mentioned most often in the analyzed interviews (such a dependence took place regardless of geographic variables and confessions, excluding shamanists). Such references can be treated as individual elements of the "cultural toolbox" the interlocutor was provided with in the course of the socialization process (Martin 2012: 44). Therefore, other authors mentioned in the interviews were usually also included in the canon of the Russian literature from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Hence, we noticed the confessional correlation that determines the lack of references to the classics of the 19th century literature among shamanists. In the same context, another relationship should be noted, namely that reading fiction was compared by the respondents to the act of prayer. However, it was observed only in the cases of Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians.

Finally, reading "literature prayer" used to help overcome the feeling of loneliness (searching for strong spiritual experiences in books, including mystical ones, similar to those experienced by the protagonist). The spiritual search for signs, descriptions and religious motifs in paintings, books, radio broadcasts, films, papers, and oral transmissions was motivated similarly. An interest in Western European painting (only among Catholics), but also in studying history (among Catholics and Orthodox Christians) could help not only in the initial formation of a religious identity, but also it could contribute to the formation of a confessional identity.

New historical determinants – completion of the measurement and future research perspectives

All in all, the studied narratives constitute a closed chapter. This has been clearly demonstrated by the cohort interviews implemented to validate the research and reveal possible new trends in 2016. Importantly, the longitudinal interviews showed the intensification of references to the Soviet symbolic world in the religious context. The descriptions of the Soviet reality appeared to be generally positively valued. The mere fact of such valorization should not be surprising and does not show any new trend: in the basic collection of interviews from 2010 – 2012, unequivocally pejorative descriptions of the Soviet socialization in the context of spiritual search were also rare. Nevertheless, the data from 2016 showed that respondents, active in their religious communities, postulated the return of the “Soviet authorities”, pioneering structures, being “close to God as we were close to Lenin”. Moreover, in the same context, Catholic and Protestant respondents referred to the positive role played by the dominant Orthodox Church as it attempted to counter “Western moral decay.” At the same time, the topics analyzed above in the present paper were marginalized. The threads of religious integrism, a harder and more homogeneous identity, nationalist threads and Soviet resentments have become more explicit in the studied narratives.

The observed trend confirmed the suppositions of some Russian scientists and observers of social life put forward a few years earlier. Even before the annexation of Crimea they emphasized the fact of limiting the activities of intellectual communities within the framework of the Russian Orthodox Church and the unification of the state religious policy. This process was part of a wider effort to regulate all spheres of political and social life. During the measurements, the phenomenon of affiliation religion with “church affairs” intensified (церковность), corresponding to increasing nationalist tendencies, culminating in 2013. The postulates of “unanimity and spiritual unity of ecclesial awareness” and “unity of the Russian nation and state” grew in importance. It was at the time when we started the research that some Russian sociologists, but also experts on religion, began to pay attention to the intensification of centralist tendencies. According to them, the state administration would “balance between choosing an authoritarian and democratic model of the state” (Makarov 2008: 3), and the Russian Orthodox Church would be prepared for a new role “for the implementation of some strategic goals” (Verkhovsky 2009: 169). At the same time, however, the NGOs and religious communities themselves were increasingly defending the rights of believers in common courts, the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation and the European Court of Human Rights. However, after the measurements were completed it turned out that the ECHR judgments ceased to be binding on the Russian legal system. This fact was part of a wider tendency to strengthen state control not only over religious organizations (especially in the case of foreign funding, or “related to the West”, and also Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, groups considered “extremist sects”, and finally: cultural insti-

tutions or bloggers), but also all social initiatives. This in turn was associated with the implementation of censorship mechanisms in social networks. Such censorship (and hence self-censorship as well) was also mentioned by politically uninvolved parishioners from the observed communities. They mentioned the extinction or liquidation of independent research and journalistic centers as well (including those that were perceived as friendly to minority religious communities). We also noted unofficial statements of non-Russian Catholic clerics who were afraid of not getting a visa or even of deportation. The faithful of other confessions spoke about the “return of the catacombs”, “a new time of trial”, as well as repressions affecting those involved, among others in defense of the rights of religious minorities (including activists helping us during the research). It also turned out that the historical legitimization of the political power could be accomplished with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church not only – as Verkhovsky wrote – to avoid the reproduction of the symbolic structures from the Soviet times, but that both symbolic resources can be used simultaneously (all the more that these collections are not disjoint). At the end of a broader research project, we even put forward a supposition that the analyzed period may turn out to be the end of the new thaw, initiated in 1991, in retrospect. Regardless of the further course of events, it is worth recalling the description of Luydmila Alekseeva, who wrote about Russia after the death of Joseph Stalin: “The realization of the tragedy of the past took place somewhere in the depths, only rarely reaching the surface of official literature and press. (...) The lack of self-knowledge turned out to be the basic barrier of social self-reflection. The means of exchanging ideas and information were completely monopolized by the state. The meticulously designed control system covered not only the press, but also fiction. (...) As a result, the society of a huge country has lost its true image of its past and present. (...) History has been rewritten. Whole layers of ideas, facts and names have been removed from it, and political programs other than official ones have disappeared from memory. The problems bothering Russians earlier were forgotten. (...) Society has been atomized. (...) »We live, not feeling the ground under our feet, no one hears us more than a dozen steps away« (Osip Mandelstam)”⁴ (Alekseeva 2012: 208 – 9). After the sequence of events of 2012 – 2014, and even more clearly after February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, the history in Russia began to be rewritten again. The means of exchanging ideas and information are being monopolized once again by the state before our eyes. So here we are. “We live here, not feeling the ground under our feet”.

⁴ All translations from Russian and Polish were made by the author of this article. The exceptions are the lines by Osip Mandelstam, translated by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago.

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