SCE members gather in 2015.

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The Society of Christian Enlightenment: From “Heretical” Blog to Heretical Offline Community

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On February 21, 2012, the feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot organized a performance, *Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away*, at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Participants danced and made the sign of the cross at the ambon and solea for less than a minute before being escorted outside the building by guards. This episode provoked public debate and led to the arrest and prosecution of three group members. The Russian Orthodox Church considered the performance blasphemous and called for Pussy Riot’s prosecution. Some church leaders even advocated severe punishment. Meanwhile, a few advocates argued that Pussy Riot’s *Punk Prayer* was little more than a radical yet modern expression of its views.

For two Moscow professors and Orthodox believers, Il’ya and Yana Braznikovy, *Punk Prayer* was a catalyst for launching public debates about the modernization of the Russian church. The Brazhnikovys organized a group called the Society of Christian Enlightenment (the SCE or *Obshchestvo Christianskogo Prosveshchenia*) in 2012. Their aim was to create an independent forum for theological debates that would carry forward the legacy of the religious-philosophical meetings organized between 1901 and 1903 by the writers Zinaida Gippius, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, and Vasily Rozanov. Most of the intellectuals who joined the SCE had been active churchgoers in the early 2000s before beginning to criticize the clericalism of the Moscow Patriarchate. At SCE meetings, speakers raised issues they considered

important for the modernization of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the ordination of women and the Church's engagement with feminism and socialism, and elaborated an alternative theological discourse proudly described by some of them as "heretical." The SCE's activities illustrate how the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy are evolving as new means of communication alter the social conditions of theological discourse.

It is important to emphasize that the SCE was a group of conservative Orthodox intellectuals: prior to 2009, some of them had advocated for the engagement of the Russian Church in the political domain and had supported monarchy. Yet their conservatism is interwoven with a postmodern way of thinking. They regard a postmodern interpretation of Orthodox tradition as the key to recovering "true" apostolic Orthodoxy. Since they consider strict observance of church prescriptions to be the invention of modern society, they propose to deconstruct the Church's rituals and dogmas in order to be closer to the non-institutionalized communes of early Christians. This conservative approach formed the basis for what they call a "radical" interpretation of Orthodox tradition.

Before the SCE was founded, these intellectuals developed and promoted their interpretations of Orthodox tradition primarily online, since there was no other public space for discussing radical or modern approaches to Orthodoxy. From 2012 to 2015, however, nine in-person meetings were held in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, each including between eight and fifteen participants. These offline meetings enabled SCE members to develop their "radical" interpretations of Orthodox tradition and to build a common "heretical" identity through discussion. Meanwhile, as a tiny group of intellectuals, the SCE members continued to rely on digital technologies to expand the geographical outreach of their meetings (through Skype connections), to communicate with each other between meetings, and to disseminate their views to the wider society.

This article is concerned less with the content of SCE beliefs than with the group's relationship to various forms of communication. I approach the SCE as a hybrid phenomenon shaped by social interactions offline and online communication. I analyze how digital technologies have contributed to the development of the SCE and why it became so important to them to organize offline meetings. First, I will show that online communication was a necessary step toward the emergence of the SCA as a "heretical" community. Second, I argue that the development of the SCE equally reflects the experience that digital technologies do not meet members' religious needs. Most of the SCE members were driven together by a desire to build an offline community that resembled a monastery or parish, where "heretical identity" would be recognized by others. The rise of the SCE is therefore a revealing illustration of both the power and the limitations of online communication.

Tradition, Individualism, and Digital Media

The emergence of digital technologies has challenged and transformed religious authority, as various scholars have noted. For example, Peter Horsfield points out that digital media have changed the distribution of religious knowledge by providing "for equal distribution and circulation of theological ideas developed by the theologically uneducated as for the theologically educated."[1] Online access to religious texts

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[1] Peter Horsfield, "'A Moderate Diversity of Books?' The Challenge of New Media to the Practice of Christian Theology," in *Digital Religion, Social media and Culture: Perspectives, Practicies and Futures*, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 254.

makes it easier for individuals to interpret religious ideas on their own, leading to a democratization of religion and making visible the plurality of vernacular religious beliefs.[2] To make sense of how the Internet enables an expanding variety of religious positions, Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi describe it as a liminal "third space," where formal structures of religious knowledge and practice are revised and transformed reflexively by religious users.[3] As a result of the interactive character of the online environment, religious authority tends to shift from institutions to diverse internet users, who project themselves and their opinions into the online market of religions.

It is important to place the online visibility of personal religious positions in a broader context. Modern social transformations such as enhanced reflexivity (that is, individuals' increasingly active shaping of their own identities) and a general crisis of institutions have contributed to more individualized interpretation of religious traditions.[4] A person may now choose, from among a variety of religious ideas and practices, the ones that seem most suitable for his or her lifestyle, discarding those that are burdensome. From this perspective, digital media provide religious people with the resources to rethink their own religious views and make individualistic approaches to religion more visible in the public sphere.

Following these theoretical premises, I analyze how the emergence of the SCE has been shaped by a combination of online and offline factors. Before the Society's formation, its members were searching for an interpretation of Orthodox tradition that fit better with their philosophy and lifestyle. Frustration with offline social interactions led them to move online. The Internet furthered their theological search by providing unrestricted access to religious knowledge and by strengthening networks of Orthodox Internet users.

Before the SCE: "Radical" Interpretations of Orthodoxy Online

Before the Russian state's first attempts to establish control over the digital sphere in 2011, the Russophone segment of the Internet—sometimes called Runet—was a place for free debate on political, social, and cultural issues. Its communication culture resembled the late Soviet tradition of dissidence and "kitchen table discussions," forms of debate which were accessible to only a small number of people.[5] Despite hierarchs' criticisms of secular online culture, Orthodox believers used Runet as a space for open debates on theological topics and problems such as the rapprochement between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state.[6] As some Orthodox bloggers expressed in their posts, online discussions became an outlet due to the lack of open debate inside the Church and in the secular public sphere.

Most of the future SCE members were active Runet users and were recognized as online religious experts. In comparison with print media, the Internet opened new perspectives for them to develop their "radical" interpretations of Orthodoxy. It provided them with quick and cheap ways of disseminating their religious-philosophical and literary works outside institutional control. Having a keen knowledge of Orthodox tradition, they sought to enlighten their audience. The various digital communication platforms helped them to create and maintain heretical networks.

In the early 2000s, Il'ya Braznikov launched the website *pravaya.ru*, an independent forum for Orthodox analysis of political, cultural issues, and Orthodoxy,

[2] Mia Lövheim, "New Media, Religion, and Gender: Young Swedish Female Bloggers," in *Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 153–68. Stefan Gelfgren, "Why Does the Archbishop Not Tweet? How Social Media Challenge Church Authorities," *Nordicom Review* 36 (2015): 109–23.

[3] Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, "Media Theory and the 'Third Spaces of Digital Religion'" (Boulder, Colorado: Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, 2014). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287644204_The_Third_Spaces_of_Digital_Religion.

[4] See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

[5] Tine Roesen, Vera Zvereva, "Social Network Sites on the Runet: Exploring Social Communication," in *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication*, ed. Michael S. Gorham, Ingunn Lunde, and Martin Paulsen (New York: Routledge, 2014), 72–87.

Il'ya Braznikov at an SCE gathering.

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where "free and radical positions could be voiced at an expert level."[7] Together with political analysis, it publishes philosophical and theological critiques on eschatology, Orthodox mysticism (both modern and postmodern), Christianity and socialism, liberation theology, the Russian state and monarchy, the modernization of Orthodoxy, feminism, and other issues. At one point, *pravaya.ru* collaborated with the Moscow Patriarchate, but in 2009 the site became known for its critique of Metropolitan Kirill as a candidate for Patriarch. Braznikov mentioned that during this period, some priests published anonymously on the website, as these views could not be voiced in official church media.

Roman Bagdasarov, an SCE member, served as an online expert on Orthodoxy, having studied Orthodox symbols and having been an editorial board member of the traditionalist journal *Волшебная гора*. His incentive for going online was to develop his own missionary strategy where he could explain how Orthodoxy met the demands of today. SCE members Vladimir Golyshev, Il'ia Morozov, and Igor' Bekshaev—who also maintains the website *Во Едину От Суббот*, dedicated to Orthodox theology—have gained popularity as LiveJournal bloggers. Other SCE members work as journalists or editors-in-chief in secular and religious media and are invited as speakers by media outlets.

The SCE members acknowledge that online discussions have affected their religious views. Andrey Vorokh, a SCE member, has credited the Internet with advancing his knowledge about Orthodoxy by providing opportunities to discuss spiritual topics with other believers through email and on blogs. Eventually, he began to publish his ideas on Orthodox websites such as *pravaya.ru*. He was subsequently invited to participate in SCE meetings. From Il'ya Braznikov's point of view, online visibility was one of the core criteria for choosing SCE participants. He and Yana Braznikova did not personally know all participants in advance, but invited them because they followed their blogs and had online conversations. The Internet thus facilitated the consolidation of SCE participants by linking these alternative Orthodox intellectuals into a network.
Bagdasarov has acknowledged that online discussions about Orthodoxy stimulated him to search for a new style, "free from the usual etiquette and pious forms of writing."[8] He has also described online communication as a sort of mystical experience: in a disembodied online environment where everything is text, the Scripture becomes an interlocutor in an interpersonal dialogue. Vorokh has reflected on his experience of religious debates on Runet in his essay "Digitalized Faith and Hurt Feelings."[9] He concludes that absent the legitimizing authority of a pastor, Internet users feel that their own religious dispositions have become distinct

[6] Mikhail Suslov, "Holy Fools in the Digital Age: Strategies of Self-Positioning in the Russian-Language Orthodox Blogosphere," *Demokratizatsiya* 25.1 (Winter 2017): 62–84. See the analysis of Father Andrei Kuraev's online activities in Hanna Stähle, "Between Homophobia and Gay Lobby: the Russian Orthodox Church and Its Relationship to Homosexuality in Online Discussions," *Digital Icons* 14 (2015): 49–71.

[7] Il'ya Braznikov, "Когда Утопия Воплощается," *Pravaya.ru*, January 26, 2014, http://www.pravaya.ru/look/23349.

[8] Written Interview with Roman Bagdasarov, July 10, 2019.

[9] Andrey Vorokh, "Оцифрованная вера и оскорбленные чувства," *Gefter.ru*, May 19, 2017, http://gefter.ru/archive/22215.

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from the "collective experience of the Church." Radically different interpretations of Orthodox tradition might appear on equal footing with the canonical theological narrative of the Church. By changing how the Orthodox message is communicated, the Internet is leading to a new experience of Orthodox tradition.

To sum up, discussions on Runet were indispensable in paving the way for the SCE's offline meetings. The Internet linked like-minded Orthodox intellectuals through far-reaching interactions. It provided them with a stimulating environment where "radical" interpretations of Orthodox tradition could be developed outside institutional control. Nevertheless, despite the importance of online media, it soon became apparent that the group had certain needs that could only be met offline.

Longing for Face-to-Face Talks in the Digital Era

When I interviewed Yana Braznikova in October 2016, she stated that for some users—certain residents of Moscow, for example—the online environment did not seem to broaden the mobility of their ideas but actually to restrict it. She maintained that face-to-face communication was essential as it allowed interlocutors to "get together in an intimate circle of like-minded people and have such a close, intimate conversation, where you, in fact, will be understood, where you hope to be understood."[10] She viewed online and offline communication as antithetical. According to Braznikova, one cannot be oneself on a blog, because a blogger must adapt to the preferences, opinions, and intellectual level of the audience. From her perspective, offline meetings enabled SCE members to have meaningful personal interactions that would have been impossible online.

Meeting in person, SCE members were able to elaborate a common "heretical" identity. It is worth mentioning that their positive interpretation of heresy was initially shaped online, in 2010, by Vladimir Golyshev, before being taken up by the SCE during offline debates. On his LiveJournal blog, Golyshev described heresy as a tool that might improve Christianity. For him, a heretic was "a true Christian" who, following Christian precepts, denounced Russian Orthodox Church clergy—whose way of life contravened Christian principles—and broke away from the Church. As

[10] Interview with Yana Braznikova, October 6, 2016, Moscow.

Yana Braznikova and Vladimir Golyshev at an SCE gathering.

Golyshev put it, "I even want to call my heresy KHRISTOSLOVIE"—that is, Christianity.[11] In a similar vein, SCE member Roman Zaitsev presented heresy as a kind of holy foolishness, a way out from the unctuous orthodoxy of the institutional Church to a more direct encounter with Christ. The kind of radical break from institutional rules that characterizes both heretic and holy fool entails a loss of "spiritual comfort," Zaitsev argued, but it is the only path to finding the God who has been forgotten by the Church: "What seem like heretical views appear to me, I come out of confines that the Church has built for me, and suddenly . . . there is God all around. And God is in me, and tears flow."[12] The concept of heresy thus articulates a common identity of the SCE members as those unafraid to criticize the Russian hierarchy and to develop radical theological interpretations for expressing spiritual experience.

The "heretical" identity elaborated during the SCE's offline meetings consists of two core discourses: first, an anticlerical critique of the Russian hierarchy, and second, the construction of a theology without the Church.

In making their anticlerical critique, the SCE members—most of them former churchgoers—frequently refer to their traumatic experiences in parishes or monasteries. By comparing the Russian Orthodox Church with a theater, a simulacrum, or a Potemkin village, the SCE members emphasize that it is preoccupied with its own material well-being and political influence but empty inside: "There are no saints in [the Church]. . . . There is no spirit of Christian love in a parish. In a monastery, there is no example of asceticism, purity, disinterested ministry. All this is absent; the church is the bearer of neither ministry, nor asceticism, nor righteousness."[13]

According to SCE members, the church hierarchy asserts ideological control over believers by imposing strict frames of Orthodox thinking and lifestyle. Those believers who risk questioning it can find themselves expelled from the Church. Yana Brazhnikova argues that the monopolization of the sacraments facilitates the control of the hierarchy, as the Church presents confession and communion as necessary preconditions for theosis, but requires that one follow certain rules—defined by the hierarchy—before receiving them.[14] It thus creates a situation of dependency or even submission of the laity to hierarchy. As Arthur Aristakisyan puts it, the hierarchy seeks to control believers' relationship with Christ.[15]

As a way to escape from hierarchical control over one's relation with Christ, the SCE members strive to develop a theological approach where a church's spiritual guidance is worthless. First, the SCE members posit that theology is not a set of inherited dogmas but something that necessarily springs from a personal encounter with God. To that end, Golyshev proposes that in one's spiritual life one should follow the heart first and foremost—for example, by comprehending the Gospel through the passages to which the heart reacts. Dmitry Akhtyrsky develops this emotional approach further: "As Jesus appeals above all to the 'inner human,' to his primordial sense of truth, freedom, and love, then our 'inner human' must be the unique criterion for evaluating certain texts."[16] Golyshev suggests that all Christians should write their own Gospels, since no two people's experience of mystically meet-

[11] Vladimir Golyshev, "ХРИСТОСЛОВИЕ: 'лексус' глазами апостолов," personal LiveJournal site, December 9, 2010, https://golishev.livejournal.com/1532082.html.

[12] Roman Zaitsev quoted in "Православная Анархия," transcript of the fourth meeting of the SCE, *Pravaya.ru*, November 30, 2012, http://www.pravaya.ru/experiments/22920.

[13] Vladimir Golyshev quoted in "Православная Анархия," transcript of the fourth meeting of the SCE, *Pravaya.ru*, November 30, 2012, http://www.pravaya.ru/experiments/22920.

[14] Yana Braznikova quoted in "Богословие Освобождения Вместо Духовных Скреп, Часть I," transcript of the eighth meeting of the SCE, *Pravaya.ru*, August 21, 2014, http://pravaya.ru/experiments/23499.

[15] Arthur Aristakisyan quoted in "Богословие После Pussy Riot," transcript of the first meeting of the SCE, *Pravaya.ru*, June 12, 2012, http://www.pravaya.ru/experiments/22706.

[16] Dmitry Akhtyrsky, "Все—Боги," *Pravaya.ru*, January 30, 2013, http://pravaya.ru/look/23382.

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SCE members gather in 2015.

ing Christ can be expressed through the same words; he understands literature as one way of finding Christ.

Second, SCE members put forward theological arguments against the sacraments of baptism, confession, and the Eucharist as they have been established by the hierarchy—not by Christ, since these sacraments were not precisely described in the Gospels. According to the SCE, the hierarchy consciously exaggerates the importance of these sacraments in order to keep parishioners in fear and to control them. Aristakisyan and Bagdasarov describe the Eucharist as a repetition of the Last Supper, when the disciples broke bread with Christ and communed with each other. Some SCE members consider their offline meetings to be a Eucharist, where they share food with fellow Christians as at the Last Supper, and if there is no bread and wine, chips and beer can be used for this "Eucharist" instead. From this perspective, face-to-face interactions served as an equivalent of rituals in church.

Offline SCE meetings enabled its participants to elaborate a new, common Christian and, on the whole, non-Orthodox identity. Their success in this regard has been related to two interrelated factors. First, supported by others of like mind, the SCE participants share their traumatic experiences of parishes and monasteries in a close, intimate circle, by criticizing the Russian hierarchs. From this perspective, the offline meetings can be viewed as a means of overcoming trauma, facilitating the SCE's consolidation. Second, face-to-face discussions in this close circle serve as an equivalent to rituals in church and can be viewed as an attempt to create an offline religious community that provides an alternative to "traumatic" Orthodox parish life, and where its members can feel free to express their "radical" views.

These arguments demonstrate how the SCE has come to depend on offline gatherings. Nonetheless, even its offline meetings are still entangled with Internet technologies. In order

to expand the geographical reach of its "heretical" ideology, the group's meetings have included Skype participants. Beyond Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Rostov, and Yekaterinburg, there have even been associate members in Berlin and New York. To cover an even wider audience, Braznikov posts transcripts and videos of meetings on *Pravaya.ru*, LiveJournal, and Facebook. From this perspective, the Internet is the same for them as the cathedral doors were for Luther.

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The SCE can be understood as the effort of a tiny group of outcast Orthodox intellectuals to come back from the "digital exile" to physical reality. Before the society's formation, these intellectuals were active primarily online, as offline public space was seldom available for discussing Orthodox tradition in a "radical and modern" way. They used the Internet as a mean for developing and disseminating their "radical" interpretations. Pussy Riot's 2012 *Punk Prayer* was a turning point. Il'ya and Yana Braznikovy interpreted this performance and the ensuing reaction as a sign that debates about the modernization of the ROC in offline public spaces were, in fact, possible. Following the creation of the SCE, offline meetings came to be of special importance for its members since they recognized the internet could not fully satisfy their religious needs. Face-to-face interactions have functioned as a substitute for rituals in church—something that was not possible in the disembodied online environment. Besides intellectual exchange, offline meetings in a close, expert circle have enabled SCE members to be recognized by like-minded believers and to shape a common "heretical" identity. ❄

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