
THE ATTITUDE OF MODERN STUDENT YOUTH FROM THE NORTHERN CASPIAN REGION TO RELIGIOUS TRANSGRESSION

**Mikhail Sergeevich Topchiev^{*}, Elena Vladislavovna Khlyshcheva,
Vyacheslav Sergeevich Dryagalov and Rafik Khammatovich Usmanov**

Astrakhan State University, 20A Tatishcheva St., Astrakhan, Russian Federation

(Received 3 March 2021, revised 22 May 2021)

Abstract

The present article aims to determine the attitude towards religious transgression demonstrated by modern student youth on the territory of the Northern Caspian region of Russia (the Astrakhan Region, the Republic of Kalmykia and the Republic of Dagestan). In the course of the study, the main reasons, mechanisms and consequences of transgression processes are identified. The study results demonstrate that the student youth of the Northern Caspian region is overall informed of the presence of such processes in the sphere of their direct contacts and is sympathetic to the process of religious transgression and people who have gone through it.

Keywords: religion, safety, Russia, sociology of religion, religious freedom

1. Introduction

Change of religion, adoption of faith or its loss, and therefore, the formation of a new religious identity is no longer something exceptional. The times of massive forcible conversion from one religion to another in the process of conquest or missionary activity are long gone but people's need for finding a new religion for themselves remains [C. Hackett, M. Stonawski, M. Potančoková, V. Skirbekk, P. Connor, S. Kramer and D. McClendon, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>]. Religious affiliation has ceased to be a mandatory cultural code of a person prescribed by identity; its change is becoming a fairly common occurrence [1].

As part of a comprehensive study of the transformation of the post-transgressional religious identity of modern youth in the digital space, in this article, we set the goal of identifying the main vector of student attitudes towards religious transgression in the modern poly-confessional Northern Caspian region.

^{*}E-mail: topchiev.mikhail@mail.ru

For the study, we chose students since they are open to change, use digital technologies, and at the same time, are susceptible to the influence of the family and peers. We localized our interest to students of the Northern Caspian region. The region is the crossroads of three world religions. The Northern Caspian region includes the Republic of Dagestan, where Muslims predominantly live (32%), the Republic of Kalmykia, where the majority of the population is Buddhists (37.6%) and the poly-confessional Astrakhan region with a predominance of Orthodoxy (46%) [Research service 'Sreda', *Arena. Atlas of Religions and Nationalities of the Russian*, 2012, <https://sreda.org/arena?mapcode=code13113>]. Due to its territorial location and proximity to Asia, the Northern Caspian region is rather conservative in terms of confessions, which has a certain impact on young people, primarily through the older generation.

2. Literature review

The terminology used to refer to this process in the Humanities varies. Initially, scientific research [2] introduced into the scientific vocabulary and actively used the term 'religious conversion' (lat. *conversio* transition to another path) referring primarily to the adoption of a religion, i.e. finding faith, and less often to the transition from one religion to another, usually Christianity. In his widely known work 'The Varieties of Religious Experiences' (1902), William James laid the foundation for the systematic study of religious conversion in a primarily psychological way [3] which was then developed in the sphere of religious identity studies [4].

In parallel with the term 'religious conversion', a conceptually different approach was developed, which gave rise to another term - 'religious switching'. The first attempt at a detailed description of this phenomenon was undertaken by R. Stark and C. Glock [5]. In this context, switching was viewed not as finding faith but as a transition from one religion to another. Researchers predicted that in the long term, an increase in the number of conservative Churches focusing on traditional religious family education will contribute to 'switching' to traditional Churches in people who were previously converted to 'new religious movements' [6-8]. The studies using this term are more specified and focus on individual confessions [9, 10].

Statistical data published by the American 'Pew Research Center' [<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>] shows that in the period 2011-2016, there has been a very impressive 'interfaith Brownian movement' associated with a change in religious orientation to which we referred in our previous studies using a postmodern term 'transgression' [11]. The terms 'religious conversion' and 'religious switching' examined above factually leave beyond the scope of the study one more form of changing religious identity, which is no less relevant and widespread in modern society [<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>]. This variant involves a transformation of religious faith both in the form of a transition from belonging to any confession to the 'unaffiliated' status and the

adoption of atheism. We introduce the term ‘transgression’ to refer to all processes associated with the change of religious identity since it initially implies ‘going beyond one’s Self’ that we have previously discussed in greater detail [12]. From our point of view, the aforementioned terms have certain limitations. The term ‘transgression’, on the other hand, is more flexible in use. In this regard, we understand religious transgression as both simple switching, transition/conversion, religious conversion, the loss of faith, and the acquisition of an atheistic worldview, as well as a rather complex and large-scale process of a free religious search of a rhizome nature. According to the previously mentioned Pew Research Center, in the period 2011-2016, primarily the number of ‘unaffiliated’ individuals, free, not tied to a particular confession has been growing as a result of conscious choice. Thus, religious transgression is not a special type of transition but rather a state of society and an individual ready for any repeated changes in the religious sphere. People who have undergone religious transgression form a new, complex post-transgression identity containing phantom elements of the previous identity and differing from the prescribed identity.

To achieve the goal of the study, we chose an approach to transgression as a system covering all types of transformation of religious identity. This distinguishes our study from the aforementioned works. We considered more local types of transition: conversion, switching, predominantly confessional. In accordance with this goal, the following research tasks were solved:

- to analyse the awareness of modern youth about the facts of religious transgression, which will provide information about the prevalence of this phenomenon and its ability to violate the existing status quo;
- to consider religious transgression as a system: to identify the reasons for the change of religious affiliation, the coming to faith or its loss, the mechanisms of this process and its consequences;
- to reveal the level of students’ tolerance in relation to the act of religious transgression.

Solving the set tasks allowed us to characterize the changes that have taken place in post-transgressive religious identity and will allow us, in the future, to predict changes in the level of conflict potential in the Northern Caspian region.

3. Methods and procedure

To meet the set goal and meet the aforementioned objectives, complex sociological studies were conducted from December 2019 to March 2020. The regions selected for the studies include the Astrakhan region, the Republic of Kalmykia and the Republic of Dagestan.

The object of the study is represented by 816 students of higher education institutions of the studied region: the Astrakhan State University (Astrakhan), the Caspian Institute of Sea and River Transport (Astrakhan), the Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov (Elista) and the Dagestan State University (Makhachkala). The distribution of respondents by the year of study is

as follows: 1st year - 21%, 2nd year - 26%, 3rd year - 23%, 4th year - 18%, 5th year - 12%. The geographical distribution of the sample (by the region of the respondents' residence) is: the Astrakhan region - 55.5%, the Republic of Dagestan - 37.5%, the Republic of Kalmykia - 7%. The subject of the present exploratory sociological study is the level of religiosity, awareness of the cases of religious transgression in the Northern Caspian region and the attitude of youth towards these processes. The deployed sociological methods include a survey in printed and electronic form (a quantitative method) and a series of in-depth interviews (a qualitative method).

The sample size of the quantitative study is 816 students of higher education institutions in the Northern Caspian region including the Astrakhan region, the Republic of Kalmykia and the Republic of Dagestan. The distribution by gender is 36.6% male respondents and 63.4% female respondents. The implemented sampling method is targeted sampling using typical representatives with the main selection criteria including the respondents' region of residence, age and sex. The research toolkit and matrix were developed by the authors of the study. The processing and analysis of the collected data were carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 statistical package. The data analysis included a linear distribution of the respondents' answers to the survey questions and understanding the parameters of the contingency tables.

The data of the quantitative survey were supplemented with a series of in-depth interviews. Their main goal is to identify the mechanisms of religious transgression and the influence of the Internet on the change of religious affiliation and also to highlight the factors in the formation of post-transgressive religious identity. For this, we conducted seven face-to-face interviews with students of various courses and educational institutions, lasting from 45 to 55 minutes. An interview guide was developed, consisting of 23 questions divided into four blocks. To achieve the set goals, we used a targeted selection of respondents who changed their religious affiliation and did not participate in the quantitative survey. When limiting the search within the framework of targeted selection, the snowball method was used, the purpose of which was to find new interview participants by them being referred to by those who already participated in the interview. The interview was conducted in the format of a conversation, when there were no time limits and the guide's questions were supplemented with various clarifying questions. Qualitative interviews were processed by transcribing the audio recordings of interviews with the indication of intonation elements followed by a meaningful analysis and 'thick' description of the results, as well as the use of the triangulation method.

4. Results

In the course of the study, we set the task of clarifying several aspects: the level of awareness of religious transgression among the youth, the causes and mechanisms of religious transgression, as well as the attitude towards the

transgression of others which largely determines the nature of the formation of a new post-transgression identity.

The level of awareness of the facts of transgression among youth was high. 51.3% of the respondents did encounter such a phenomenon. The high percentage of awareness of the cases of religious transgression is possibly related to the peculiarities of the poly-confessional environment in which the study was conducted, as well as changes in young people's value system, the influence of the virtual space, an increase in the general level of knowledge about religious systems, etc. The majority of respondents indicated that these processes occurred mainly in the 'distant circle' - among the acquaintances of their friends (54.5%). 12.3% of the respondents refer to the 'close circle' - the fact of transgression was encountered by them among family members and close relatives (Table 1).

Table 1. Social distance from the facts of transition.

No.	Question	Answer options	%
5	Where exactly have you encountered the situation of transition from one religion to another?	In my family	4.8
		In my relatives' family	7.5
		Among the friends and acquaintances of my family	17.8
		Among my friends	12.5
		Among the acquaintances of my friends	54.5
		I have changed my religion myself	1.9
		I am currently in the process of changing my religion	1.0

In studying the processes of religious transgression, we accounted for the psychological aspects of this process but primarily examined it as a social phenomenon. As a result of the analysis of the series of in-depth interviews and the survey data, we identified the most relevant reasons for religious transgression at the present moment.

Table 2. Reasons for changing religious affiliation (*multivariate*).

No.	Question	Answer options	In total (%)	From the answers (%)
12	What reasons do you think make believers transition from one religion to another? (you can choose no more than 3 answer options)	Influence of relatives and close friends	24.0	13.0
		The influence of a spouse	31.6	17.2
		Conscious choice	51.1	27.8
		Curiosity	5.6	3.1
		The initial choice of religion was influenced by parents in childhood	23.7	12.9
		The influence of fashion	8.9	4.8
		Disappointment with the previous religious affiliation	25.0	13.6
		Difficult to answer	12.8	7.0
		Other	1.3	0.7

Among *the reasons for religious transgression*, most respondents indicated conscious choice - 51.1%, the influence of interfaith marriage - 31.6%, and disappointment in previous religious affiliation - 25% which is partially supported by the results of in-depth interviews (Table 2).

According to the study results, the most formalized reason for religious transgression is interfaith marriage. It is considered as the main reason for the change of religion in the American scientific discourse [13, 14] since in this form of marriage, a religious transition is most likely. The transition is committed either under duress or voluntarily to harmonize the marriage [15] since it is easier for couples with the same religious beliefs to reproduce “the religious capital” [16]. In European countries, such a transition is predominantly committed by men [17]. In the multi-ethnic regions of Russia where the practice of interfaith marriage is widespread [18], it is women who most often change their religion when marrying Muslim men. In such marriages, conflicts may arise due to the difference in the confessional affiliation of the spouses [19, 20]. Nevertheless, in the interfaith environment of the Northern Caspian region, mixed marriages are common.

Another significant reason indicated by the informants is the protest against the religion assigned at birth accompanied by disappointment in the previous religious affiliation. In most cases, it is linked to the rejection of religion as an institution which our informants confirm: *“Islam is a very serious and strict religion, following all canons, traditions, and ceremonies is mandatory. And this is not for me. I am a vegetarian, I have tattoos, and it is not welcome in Islam...”* (informant No. 7); *“...perhaps, the awareness of religion, in general, was reached. It has just been a business for a long-long time, a common way to make money out of people ...”* (informant No. 2)

Considering the mechanism of the change in religious views itself, the analysis of a series of in-depth interviews allowed us to conditionally indicate several stages of this process that do not depend on the direction of the transition:

1. questioning the ‘correctness’ of one’s religious views;
2. searching for confirmation or refutation of one’s doubts on sacred texts and conversations with believers and clergymen (if the doubts are not confirmed, the process of religious transgression does not progress);
3. a decrease in the previous religiosity level (a refusal to observe religious rituals and visit houses of prayer);
4. acquaintance with a new religion: reading religious literature, talking with clergy, attending services, etc. (in the case of a transition to religious indifference or atheism, religious views are reviewed from a secular person’s viewpoint);
5. the search for answers to personal life questions in the texts of the ‘new’ religion;
6. ‘applying’ the new religious affiliation to one’s worldview (in cases of indifferentism and atheism, a critical attitude towards any religion is formed);
7. final departure from the ‘old’ religious affiliation;

8. the procedure of the official adoption of a new religion and the formation of a new religious identity (in cases of disbelief and atheism, a complete rejection of religious self-identification occurs).

In cases of transition to religious indifference or atheism, several informants described a clear mechanism of the destruction of their religious identity: "... stage 1 is doubt, stage 2 is a refutation or confirmation of your doubts, stage 3 is understanding everything you did before. And then you just stop believing in all this and live on as a secular person ..." (informant No. 6); "First, it was a refusal to go to church on major religious holidays, then contradictions in the perception of Orthodoxy started to appear. Then there was a sort of passive attitude towards religion as a whole, and then I stopped believing completely ..." (informant No. 2) The transition from one religion to another, according to the informants, appears to be somewhat more difficult than a mere departure from faith: "... It was a long transition, for 9 years I had been viewing myself as a believer of a different religion but not religious. That is, I had faith in my soul but I did not follow any religious cults and rules. But then, over the course of 9 years, I have started following them. And every year I become stricter and more and more correct in observing these religious canons ..." (informant No. 3)

The attitude towards the fact of religious transgression among the regional youth is predominantly positive or neutral (Table 3). Based on the data of our studies conducted in 2015 and 2019 [11, 12], we can assume that such an indifferent attitude towards transgression may be due to the insignificant influence of religion on the life of modern youth which allows them to not consider religious transition as a serious obstacle to communication.

Table 3. Attitude towards religious transgression.

No.	Question	Answer options	In total (%)	Christianity (Orthodoxy) (%)	Islam (%)	Buddhism (%)
15	What is your attitude towards people who have changed their religious affiliation?	Positive	10.5	10.9	11.0	7.0
		More positive than negative	6.1	6.1	8.1	7.0
		Neutral	68.1	72.1	57.3	74.4
		More negative than positive	2.5	3.6	2.7	2.3
		Negative	1.6	1.2	1.8	2.3
		Difficult to answer	11.2	6.1	19.1	7.0

Perhaps, this is determined by the fact that the digital generation is more focused on legal freedoms than older and, therefore, recognizes the right to change religion for any member of society. Only 12.5% of respondents consider it a mistake (Table 4).

Table 4. The respondents' attitude towards people with a new religious identity.

No.	Question	Answer options	%
19	Do you believe that people who changed religious affiliation made a mistake?	Definitely made a mistake	4.8
		More likely made a mistake	7.7
		More likely did not make a mistake	21.3
		Definitely did not make a mistake	20.0
		Difficult to answer	46.2

While accepting the facts of religious transgression in general (Table 5), an overwhelming majority of the respondents (79.5%) was not ready to take this path. Moreover, men were less ready to change their religion (3.8%) compared to women (9.7%). We believe that this difference is related to the fact that the main reason for religious transgression in women is the transition to the confession of the future or potential husband and it is men who often initiate the transition of spouses to their religion.

Table 5. Possibility of changing religious affiliation.

No.	Question	Answer options	In total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
13	Do you consider it possible that you may change your religious affiliation?	Definitely yes	1.9	0.3	2.8
		More likely yes than no	5.6	3.5	6.9
		More likely no than yes	16.8	17.3	16.5
		Definitely no	62.7	67.1	60.2
		Difficult to answer	12.9	11.8	13.6

Describing their post-transition religious identity, in-depth interview participants viewed its formation as a complex process with serious deep worldview changes: "... I have a fundamentally different view of Islam and the world around me..." (informant No. 4); "... my attitude towards others and others' attitude towards me has changed..." (informant No. 5); "... there is an accelerated comprehension of everything that you have been doing before all this and the picture of the world in your eyes is radically changing..." (informant No. 6); "The picture of the world has changed, that is, everything that I perceived before the change of religion, now I see it differently, from a different angle, so to speak..." (informant No. 1).

Based on the results of the series of in-depth interviews, we can identify the conditional factors of a new post-transgression identity:

1. the formation of a respectful attitude towards the representatives of other confessions;
2. the emergence of new alimentary and vestimental markers;
3. an increase in the level of religiosity and, as a result, the formation of a more stable religious identity;
4. a deeper understanding of the meaning of sacred texts and rituals;
5. lifestyle change;
6. self-awareness as 'a part of the community'.

Thus, we can see that the attitude of the student youth of the Northern Caspian region towards religious transgression in general and the emergence of people with a new post-transgression identity in their close circle is flexible and tolerant.

5. Conclusions

The parameters set by this study allowed us to comprehensively consider the religious transgression in the youth environment of a polyconfessional region. We identified the level of prevalence of transgression processes and the nature of the attitude towards transgression in the student environment. Almost 50% of the respondents had faced acts of transgression, and mostly in a close circle. This means that the process of transgression itself has become quite commonplace even for such a conservative region, with a high percentage of Muslims living in the Northern Caspian region. As demonstrated by the results of our study, the attitude of the youth of the Northern Caspian region towards religious transgression can be considered tolerant. More than half of the respondents believed it to be a conscious choice. Although only 10% saw changing their religion as a real possibility, most respondents did not consider a transgressive transition a mistake.

We analysed religious transgression as a system, identified and structured the causes and mechanisms of transgression and outlined the main features of post-transgression religious identity. Based on the study results, we saw the possibility of typologizing the trajectories of the course of religious transgression, which we will do in further research. The results of our analysis will form the basis for constructing a model of religious transgression.

In this study, it was especially difficult to conduct in-depth interviews with persons who had committed a transgression, since, due to the intimacy of the problem, only one-fifth of those who had previously agreed to a full-fledged interview eventually participated.

Despite the fact that, on the whole, all the tasks set by us in this study were completed, the problems associated with the possible confessional nature of transgression processes in the region remained unsolved, which requires separate consideration.

Acknowledgement

The study was funded by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation (Project No.18-78-10064) 'Transformation of the mechanisms of formation of the post-transgress model of religious identity in the modern information space'.

References

- [1] L.A. Ashkinazi, *Izmerenie religioznosti (Religiosity measurement)*, Proc. of the 6th All-Russian Sociology Congress. Sociology and Society: Global Challenges and Regional Development, Russian Society of Sociologists, Ufa, 2012, 4665-4673.

- [2] M.P. Strickland, *Foundation of Christian belief Studies in the philosophy of Religion*, Nobel Press, Moscow, 2012, 257.
- [3] W. James, *Mnogoobrazie religioznogo opyta (The Varieties of Religious Experiences)*, Akademicheskii proekt, Moscow, 2019, 415.
- [4] M. Vlieg, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, **30(3)** (2019) 323-344, online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2019.1628459>.
- [5] R. Stark and C. Glock, *American piety: The nature of religious commitment*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, 246.
- [6] A. Hu and R.J. Leamaster, J. Sci. Stud. Relig., **54(1)** (2015) 79-99, online at <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12168>.
- [7] S.A. Schnitker, J.L. Ratchford, R.A. Emmons and J.L. Barrett, J. Res. Pers., **80** (2019) 38-42, online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2019.04.004>.
- [8] M. Wiesenber, Public Relat. Rev., **46(1)** (2020) 101817, online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101817>.
- [9] T.V. Dorofeeva, The Humanities and Social Sciences, **2** (2017) 28-40.
- [10] O.I. Sgibieva, Science Journal of the Volgograd State University. Series 7. Philosophy, **16(1)** (2017) 80-85, online at <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu7.2017.1.9>.
- [11] M.S. Topchiev and V.S. Driagalov, Human. Community. Management, **17(4)** (2016) 61-82.
- [12] E.V. Khlysheva, V.S. Dryagalov, M.S. Topchiev, A.P. Romanova and M.M. Bicharova, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **16(1)** (2020) 119-130.
- [13] A. Bugay and R. Delevi, Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, **5** (2010) 1464-1470, online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.309>.
- [14] J.P. Choy, J. Comp. Econ., **48(3)** (2020) 729-748, online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2019.12.007>.
- [15] D. McClendon, J. Marriage Fam., **78(5)** (2016) 1399-1421, online at <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12353>.
- [16] B.A. Phillips, *Intermarriage in the Twenty-First Century: New Perspectives*, in *American Jewish Year Book*, A. Dashefsky & I. Sheskin (eds.), vol. 117, Springer, Cham, 2017, 31-119, online at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70663-4_2.
- [17] B. Collet, Ann. Am. Acad. Polit. SS., **662(1)** (2015) 129-147, online at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716215595388>.
- [18] D.A. Chernichkin, *Otnoshenie k religioznoi transgressii v polikonfessionalnom regione: ekspertnoe mnenie (Attitude towards religious transgression in a multi-confessional region: expert opinion)*, Proc of All-Russian (National) Scientific Conference: Relevant problems of modern society, V.P. Stepanov & S.M. Gubanenkova (eds.), Modul-K, Orel, 2019, 233-239.
- [19] M.S. Kafidova, *Problemy semeinykh otnoshenii, vznikaiushchie v mezhkonfessionalnykh brakakh (Family relationship problems arising in interfaith marriages)*, Proc. of All-Russian Scientific and Practical Conference: Digital Transformation of the Economy and Society - Prospects, Challenges and Competencies, Samara State Economic University, Samara 2019, 541-545.
- [20] E.I. Chebotareva, *Soglasovannost zhiznennykh i semeinykh tsennostei suprugov v mezhetnicheskikh i mezhkonfessionalnykh brakakh (Correspondence of life and family values of spouses in interethnic and interfaith marriages)*, Proc. of the 8th International Scientific and Practical Conference: Psychological problems of the modern family, Ural State Pedagogical University, Yekaterinburg, 2018, 384-392.