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Postdoctoral thesis

## **MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGION IN UKRAINE (1991–2011)**

### **Abstract**

The goal of my work is to analyze the relationships between representatives of conservative religious movements with the world of media. Media and religion are becoming active participants in public life, when

ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, of the entire culture <...> Under such conditions it should come as no surprise that religion — in all its various manifestations — has become increasingly successful. Religion operates through media channels that are, from the outset, products of the extension and secularization of traditional religious practices<sup>1</sup>.

“Conservatives and media” theme requires attention, because in the post-modern era positivistic theories of inevitable secularization concede the recognition of the role of religion as an alternative for political and pan economical concepts. Easier access to electronic communications and Web 2.0 tendency equalize the chances of recognized religions and religious currents without State support to successfully disseminate their ideology.

Mediatization of public sphere of life is the growing importance of mass media in various fields of human activity to the extent that media became a significant factor in agenda setting, representing public persons, articulating and solving problems. Mediatization of religion points to the transformation of the religious sphere under the laws of media. The main consequence of this process is the return of religion into public sphere of post-secular countries through the media. In examining the specifics of religious communication in postcolonial States one should ask: can we talk about mediatization of religious sphere of Ukraine in the Western sense of the term? What elements and factors are shaping this process? How do these trends affect the structure, role and tasks of communicational system of Churches, their publicity and PR activities? The analysis of religious communication should consider both its discourse and technological aspects.

The best material for such research is media of Ukrainian Protestants. Targeting media messages to different audience groups, their stylistic and content differentiation, attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Groys B. (2009) Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction / *e-flux journal* # 4, P. 1.

social issues, grounding journalistic ethics on the ideals of freedom, transparency, democracy, rule of law and human rights make the communicational system of these Churches presentable enough for analyzing large-scale processes like mediatization.

Formation of Protestant communication of Ukraine is defined by two groups of factors. Out-Church factors are onset of freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, the search for civic ideology, ideological devastation after Communism; the rehabilitation of religion, mass interest in the sphere of faith, the demand for religious information; disintegration of families, immigration, unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, “social orphanage”, divorces, collapse of the Soviet social assistance system.

In-Church reasons include the type of Church structure common in Ukraine denominations (Lutherans, Reformers (Calvinists), Mennonites, Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Charismatics), late Protestantism theology, profound roots of the Protestant movement, which allow foreign scientists to call Ukraine “the Bible belt” of Eastern Europe, the Protestant tradition of journalism in the Ukrainian lands of the previous time. Protestant theology of communication mainly discusses the problems of missiology — the ways of delivering Evangelical message to potentially each member of society. Mission is an existential needs of evangelical denominations. Interchurch debate is caused not by the necessity to testify one’s faith, but by its methods.

We conditionally single out “conservative” and “progressive” groups of disputants. Historically the “conservative” wing of believers was formed earlier.

Inability to obtain higher education, to profess their views, participate in public life led those believers to separate deeply from the “sinful world”. Slavic Evangelicals inherited this trend from the European Anabaptists.

Conventionalism is understood as proving originality of a denomination and working out a hermetic subculture with fixed cultural level, manners, habits, appearance, specific verbal phrases, euphemisms, etc. Subculture gets absolutized, accomplishing for signs of a born-again believer; subculture gets declared to be a model for the entire history of Christianity, finding its source almost in the apostolic era. Its test of time, a sufficient quality for traditionalists, is supported by significant evidence that it is this way of life has allowed the Church to preserve its existence in times of persecution.

In the period of freedom of conscience, not all believers were able to adapt to new conditions. Many of them became disoriented with the absence of “enemy”, who has provided social guarantees, taking away the Church’s independence. Loss of sense of time deepened due to the uncertain status of religious communities, “anti-sects’ hysteria” in the secular media. Under these circumstances the refusal of Church leaders to communicate with the press and to try to clarify their position deepens conflict with society. “Conservatives” claim that excessive openness to the world make the Church vulnerable to the sin.

“Progressives” argue that the denomination’s encapsulation deprives the Church of opportunities to take advantage of freedom for its purpose — Christian witness and discredits the Evangelical Christians in the public opinion. “Progressives” referred to the invasion and expansion as the major strategy of the eschatological Church and call for Christians to spread their influence in the sphere of politics and sports, art and fashion, journalism, marketing and jurisprudence. The “progressive” ideology is most consistently developed by the youngest Protestant generation — the Charismatic movement.

The ambivalence in the Ukrainian Protestants’ perception of the media is expressed in the idea that the positive assessment of the technological progress of the representatives of these Churches and their extensive use of communication media (especially in missionary work) adjoins to consistent critical reflection on the nature and effects of communicational means. The representatives of these denominations are unanimously opposing the media of immoral and occult character.

Their attitudes to specific media can be divided into two major positions with different influence. The first is an optimistic pragmatism: a means has no importance; the efficiency of the mass media is universal. Broadcasters should above all have sincerity of motivation and activity in the use of the media. Second position is a prejudiced conservatism — a total critique of contemporary culture and a ruthless “expertise” of new technical means. Thus, we have a paradox: total suspiciousness of conservatism makes it a critical explorer of contemporary culture. In order to criticize the technical progress one should have an eye on it. This helps in rejecting the (so far) inappropriate and in putting technical innovations at the service of one’s tasks.

Protestant media face broad public support in times of instability, disorienting and need of new information. They played the most important role in the post-Perestroika period when

the New Testament from *The Gideon's brothers* mission reached almost every Ukrainian home. Currently the expanding of these media' audience occurs due to people who are experiencing personal turmoil: serious illness, drug or alcohol addiction, death of a relative, bereavement, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, conflicts with family, friends and are looking for a friendly round and possibilities for self-fulfillment, in short, who encounter difficulties that are not solved with usual means. Under these conditions, a person becomes ready for a change, considers the prospects of "unusual" behavior. Religious media are especially important at the phase of getting rid of prejudices and getting acquainted with a religious movement and later at strengthening of neophyte's convictions. Protestant media appear to be a religious "market" where the recipient selects an information product according to his needs. Intellectuals are especially characterized by that feature: they frequently consume information product — read books and magazines, visit the websites — without joining a local community.

The Ukrainian Protestants' media perform many functions: informing, training, integrating, entertaining, developing public relations, educating, organizing. Ukrainian Protestants are at culture war with producers of occult and immoral media content. In the private sphere a believer's denial to consume unacceptable information may lead to competition of communicational means for his attention up to the physical destruction of the *sinful* media (such as burning of occult literature). In the public sphere the Church community seeks to capture the information horizon of its members. In recent years Protestants are trying to protect public morals through participation in civic and political organizations. They appeal to media workers with official statements, take part in legislative activities, litigation; communicate with the journalist community, organize "round tables", etc.