

S.M. KLIMOVA AND G.V. MARTYNOVA

College Students' Attitudes Toward Religion

(Sociological Notes)

Data on Russian students show that there is a large gap between declaring oneself a believer or identifying oneself with a religion and actually participating in it. Students are in favor of keeping religion and politics separate, and so in general show very weak support for recent statements about making Russian Orthodoxy the new state religion.

The rise of the present generation of young people in their twenties came during the 1990s, when the vacuum of form was being hastily filled with just about any content. At that time a fashion for churchly themes, traditional and nontraditional religiousness, arose. In the opinion of Deacon Andrei Kuraev, the most prominent phenomenon of religious life in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not a rebirth of the Orthodox religion but rather a rapid rise of occult-

Svetlana Mushailovna Klimova is a doctor of philosophical sciences and a professor at Belgorod State University (BSU). Galina Vladimirovna Martynova is a student at BSU.

ism. In his article, “The Characteristics of the Religious Situation in Russia” [Osobennosti religioznoi situatsii v Rossii], published in the collection *Culture and Religion: Lines of Connection* [Kul’tura i religiia: linii sopriazheniia] in 1994, he writes:

Essentially, paganism these days is the most widely prevalent form of religiousness and just about the same as a state religion (in any case, the routine issues of *Vesti* do not end with stories from the life of Orthodox and Muslim communities in Russia but rather with astrological horoscopes). . . . Even among people who call themselves Orthodox, when it comes to any situation of choice the majority of them do not go to a priest or to church literature for advice, but, instead, to horoscope casters and “faith healers.”

To what extent has the situation changed in the religious worldview of young people in the first few years of the twenty-first century? We will attempt to find out by examining results of a survey carried out among students at Belgorod State University in May and June 2007.

The general aggregate population consisted of all students age twenty in their third year of study (about 600 people). The aggregate sample population consisted of 236 people. The selection of the respondents to be included in the sample population was made in accordance with the principle that members of the general population had the opportunity to be included voluntarily in the sample population. Using a special questionnaire, the survey was conducted in seven faculties, among which there was equal representation of the humanities faculties—philology, the faculty of personnel management (FPM) and law—and the natural science faculty—physics and mathematics, the faculty of geology and geography (FGG), and medicine. In addition, the survey was also participated in by fifty-five students in the faculty of social theology (FST). The sample of the faculties was differentiated into the “prestigious” faculties—the faculty of law, FPM, and medicine—and the “nonprestigious” faculty—FGG, philology, and physics and mathematics (the basis of the division was the principle of the amount of tuition to be paid in these faculties). In addition to their general training, the students who were surveyed had, by the time of their third year of study, been made acquainted with just about all of the disciplines in the

general humanities cycle (philosophy, culturology, esthetics, the history of world religions, and so on). Many faculties included a course in the principles of Orthodox culture (POC).

The overwhelming majority of the respondents—94.9 percent—are between nineteen and twenty-one; 75 percent are female and 25 percent are male.

The survey reflects the opinions of a group of young people who were born during the period of transition in our history and who are being formed under the new conditions of culture and civilization.

Let us look at the distribution of the answers of members of the different faculties.

The first question, “What is religion as you understand it?” offered the following alternative answers: a belief in one God; a belief in the immortality of the soul; a belief in oneself; a belief in forces in the beyond; a belief in a higher cosmic intelligence; a belief in any supernatural forces; and other.

Among the students in the faculty of physics and mathematics, a belief in one God was reported by 53.3 percent, while belief in oneself was reported by 46.7 percent. There is an obvious tendency for the students in just that faculty to have a heightened sense of self-esteem. What is at work here, evidently, is a definite set of attitudes toward oneself as someone who is special, intellectual, and able to run his life independently. The percentage of those who believe in forces on the other side, cosmic intelligence, and the immortality of the soul is, respectively, 20 percent, 20 percent, and 26.7 percent.

The answers of the students enrolled in the faculty of geology and geography are strikingly different and thus reliably reflect the essence of religion as a belief in one God (85.4 percent). The rest of the answers occur on just about the same low level of assessment, including the respondents’ self-assessment of their own importance.

The data that reflect the opinions of future medical people are quite specific. Among them, 85.4 percent defined the belief in one God as the essence of religion, while only 19.35 percent acknowledge the immortality of the soul. The rest of the answers do not add

up to much in the overall picture of the respondents' interpretation of the essence of religion.

Among the students enrolled in the humanities, there is no dramatic difference among different faculties. The percentage of those who believe in one God is higher than in the case of the students enrolled in the natural sciences, while the percentage of those who reported belief in themselves is considerably lower. In the faculty of law the figure is 14.2 percent; in the faculty of personnel management it is 19.2 percent; and in the faculty of philology 11 percent. The lowest percentage of those who believe in one God is seen in the "professional faculty" FST—69 percent; they also have the highest percentage of belief in themselves—21.8 percent.

In the answer choices "Other," the following answers stood out: belief in spiritual equilibrium and harmony; belief in what you cannot explain (physics and mathematics); the theology students added a belief in the Trinity, the salvation of the soul, and God in oneself. There is not a single answer that has anything to do with occultism.

The purpose of the next question was to determine the respondents' attitudes toward belief. The distribution of their answers is presented in Figures 1 through 4. Judging from the data that were obtained, the era of atheism is a thing of the past, but the students' religious consciousness has not yet been clearly formed.

We see a uniform similarity in answers to the third question, "What religion are you?" Among the students in the natural sciences about 95 percent considered themselves Orthodox believers; among the humanities students the figure is 100 percent. One is struck by the dramatic difference (5.5 percent) between those who designate themselves as Orthodox and churched. On the other hand, both those who are waverers and those who are nonbelievers identify themselves with the main ethnic faith and call themselves Orthodox.

For most respondents, the Orthodox religion is first and foremost a historical and cultural tradition, which is what prompts them to identify themselves easily with that religious faith. It is obvious that these ideologemes are already firmly fixed in their consciousness: Orthodox faith—Russian culture—traditions—family.

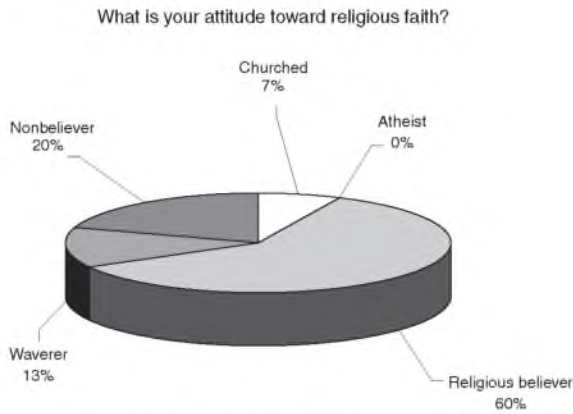


Figure 1. **Answers Given by Students of Physics and Mathematics (%)**

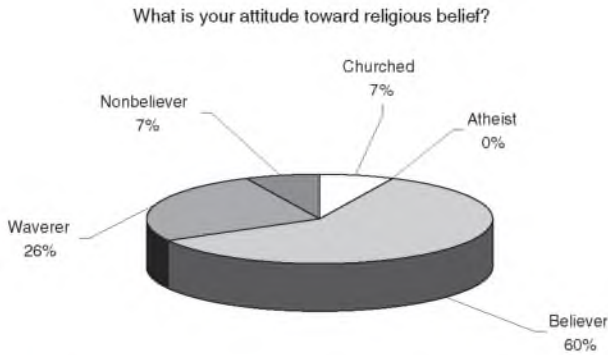


Figure 2. **Answers Given by FGG Students (%)**

In response to the question “Who helped you to turn to religion?” answers were distributed as follows: parents—62.5 percent (in the case of science students, henceforth S) and 72.3 percent (humanities students, henceforth H), and 60 percent in the case of FST; school or the course in “Principles of Orthodox Culture”—13.56 percent (S) and 7.8 percent (H), and 9 percent FST; missionaries or priests—1.9 percent (S) and 0 percent (H), 3.6 percent FST; friends—5.3 percent (S) and 3.9 percent (H), 5.5 percent FST; and other (found it difficult to answer)—23 percent (S) and 19 percent (H), 32.7 percent FST. It is obvious that the main

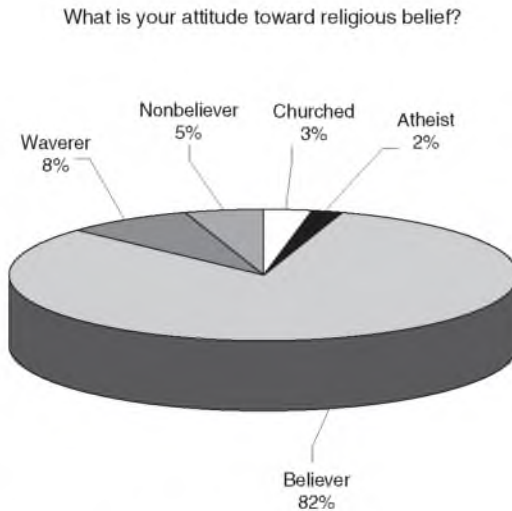


Figure 3. **Answers Given by Medical Students (%)**

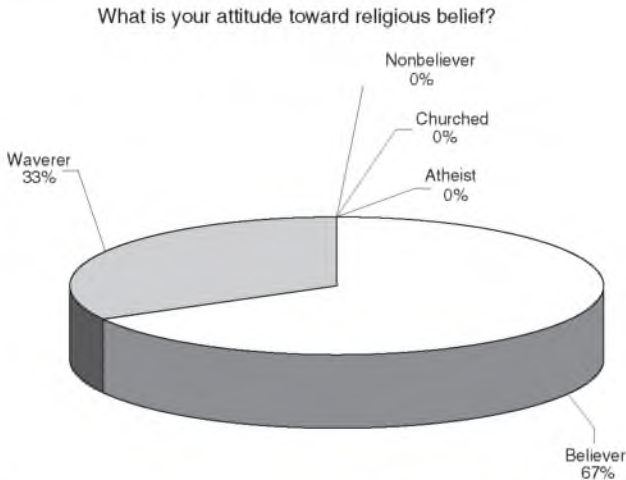


Figure 4. **Answers Given by Students in the Faculty of Law (%)**

conduit of religiousness in society remains the family, which bears the main burden of exposing young people to religion, including the church. This confirms the view of contemporary religiousness

as *traditional*. The missionary work of the church itself has come to be reduced to a minimum, and priests do not have an influence on young people. It is curious to note that the course "Principles of Orthodox Culture" played a more positive role for natural science students and a less important role for humanities students.

The question "What is God in Christianity?" relates to particular elements of knowledge of Orthodox dogma. These are the answers: the Trinity—37.7 percent (S) and 37.5 percent (H); a higher intelligence—21.9 percent; moral law—12.5 percent; a world soul—14.1 percent; a supernatural power—21 percent (S) and 12 percent (H); conscience—8.6 percent (S) and 7.9 percent (H); love—25 percent (S) and 28 percent (H); other—4 percent. The level of the respondents' knowledge of dogma is not very high and is just about the same among the natural science students and the humanities students, although the latter should be able to exhibit broader knowledge in the field of religious studies. Only one third of the respondents know the chief dogma of the Orthodox faith: God as Trinity and God as Love.

It is interesting to look at the students' opinions regarding the place that religion ought to have in the state: the Orthodox religion should be the state religion in Russia and the Orthodox Church should enjoy state privileges—22 percent (S), 18 percent (H), and 27.7 percent FST; all religions ought to be equal before the law—49 percent (S), 55 percent (H), and 47.2 percent FST; religion ought not to interfere in the affairs of the state—45 percent (S), 46 percent (H), and 25.4 percent FST. The activity of religious faiths ought to be confined solely to the sphere of religion—3.8 percent (S), 1.3 percent (H), and 3.6 percent FST. Religious denominations ought to take active part in the social and political life of society—5.7 percent (S) and 3.9 percent (H), and 9 percent FST. Religious denominations represent a new ideology that firmly establishes spirituality and morality in society—3.8 percent (S), 2.6 percent (H), and 9 percent FST. Not a single respondent chose the alternative answer "All religions ought to be abolished." And so, the respondents do not think it would be right to proclaim the Orthodox religion as the state religion or, much less, to confer special privileges on the Russian Orthodox Church. From their

point of view, religion should retain the status of an autonomous entity, although the number of respondents who would be in favor of confining religion solely to the sphere of religious issues or, conversely, expanding religion's participation in public life, is equally small. The responses provide evidence that the respondents do not have a very good understanding of the status, role, and functions of religion in contemporary life. At the same time, no one came out against religion.

Humanities students and natural science students gave about the same answers to the question, "Should the Orthodox religion have priority over other religions in our country?": 45 percent said "yes" and 55 percent said "no." Among FST students 60 percent were in favor—such are the fruits of professional training in the Orthodox religion. Of that number, 84 percent are theology students, 46.6 percent are future social workers, and 33.3 percent are future philosophers.

A question that caused some difficulty was: "What role is being played by the activities of the new cults and associations?" The activities were seen as useful by 7.7 percent (S) and 7.8 percent (H), as neutral by 19.2 percent (S) and 25 percent (H); as harmful by 26 percent (S) and 28.5 percent (H); and 47.1 percent (S) and 39 percent (H) found it difficult to answer.

"Does the Orthodox Church need to be reformed?" The majority of the respondents, again, found it difficult to answer: 63.6 percent (S) and 67.3 percent (H); the answer "no" was given by 26.9 percent (S) and 4.6 percent (H); the answer "yes" was given by 5.7 percent (S) and 11.6 percent (H). It is obvious that the questions that relate to the church and with activities of nontraditional religions are not of much interest to our respondents. Clearly, this is not due to any dissatisfaction with the church today but rather to a lack of knowledge of the problems of the church as a social institution.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents consider themselves baptized Christians—90.4 percent (S), 93.5 percent (H), and 94.5 percent FST. Other rites that are also essential for people of the Orthodox faith—confession and communion—are observed much less often. Moreover, students in all faculties take communion more often than they go to confession: even those enrolled in the

FST, of whom 58.2 percent take communion and 47.3 percent go to confession, although according to the canons it is not possible to take communion without confession, but it is possible to go to confession without taking communion. In response to the question, "Do you observe fasting?" most students answered—71.1 percent (S), 72.7 percent (H), and 56.4 percent FST.

About the same distribution is observed in answers to the question "Do you read religious literature?": 8 percent answered "yes"; 55.7 percent (S) and 53.2 percent (H) answered "no"; 34.6 percent (S) and 40.2 percent (H) answered "sometimes." Let us note that the humanities students do not read the literature that much more often than the natural science students do. Among the latter, medical students predominate: 40 percent of them sometimes read church books (33 percent in the faculty of physics and mathematics, and 22 percent in the faculty of geology and geography).

After the well-known letter that academicians wrote to the president of Russia protesting what they saw as the Russian Orthodox Church's inappropriate interference in the affairs of the state, heated disputes broke out anew concerning the introduction of the course "Principles of Orthodox Culture" in schools and universities as a required subject. Most respondents think that the course ought to be offered as an elective—57.7 percent (S), 70.1 percent (H), and 40 percent FST. Moreover, the opinion that the instructor of that course should be a priest is held by 38.4 percent (S), 31.1 percent (H), and 30.9 percent FST. A total of 58.6 percent (S), 66.2 percent (H), and 78.18 percent FST think that the instructor should only be a teacher who is a believer. About 5 percent of all respondents say the instructor ought to be a scientific atheist.

In summarizing the results of the survey, it is easy to see in the minds of young people a synthetic combination of *traditional and formal religiousness*, which corresponds in full with the current state of the period of transition. We are seeing an orientation toward a traditional worldview, from whose standpoint religious belief, the Orthodox faith, are associated directly with people's perception of ethnic self-identity. Traditional religiousness is represented in ways that are quite traditional: universal baptism (not a matter of choice), an absolutely unequivocal correlation between religious

belief and the traditional people, religious belief and family, the definition of religious faith as a way to unite and consolidate society. In present-day society it was easy to “restore” the archetype of traditional religiousness as an attribute of our own history, as a factor of culture and identity. Traditional religiousness always was present in our culture, in semilattent form, and all generations of [ethnic] Russians acted as unconscious carriers to varying extents. The tradition was also passed down to the younger generation, but with a content that has become even more emasculated in the period of transition, and has been turned into a simulacrum of belief, ersatz religious faith. The lack of actual religious practice (the absence of being churchd), and the low level of actual religious knowledge lead to the conversion of traditional religiousness into mere formal religiousness.

One of the common features of religiousness among today’s young people is its passive nature, with no relation to church. On the scale of values, for example, going to church is certainly not more important than finding entertainment. This kind of religiousness that is not related to church is a phenomenon that the German sociologist T. Luckmann has given the name “invisible” or “private” religiousness. Under our own conditions, this is manifested in the fact that young people, who have grown up with no real association with the Orthodox tradition, believe in the possibility of personal belief in God and communion with God without the mediation of church and priests. And so, the tendency to prefer private life has also taken the upper hand in the sphere of religion.