

Internet generation in religious cyberspace: worldview challenges of the digital age

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the analysis of the peculiarities in the perception of religious cyberspace by the Ukrainian Internet generation. The relevance and novelty of the research consists in determining the specifics of the religious cyberspace functioning in the context of the spiritual and intellectual needs of the Internet generation, clarifying the essence of worldview challenges that the globalized digital age poses to young people in the religious cyberspace. The peculiarities of the religious cyberspace formation in the Ukrainian and world context are analyzed. It is noted that functioning of the virtual religious space can be considered through several key aspects: online worship, virtual prayers, educational programs of spiritual development, platforms for discussing religious topics and sharing experiences in social networks, electronic libraries, digital missionary programs, virtual pilgrimage, the use of various mobile applications for prayer practices, etc. The peculiarities of the digital religion phenomenon are defined as a dynamic process in which religious groups and individuals adopt digital technologies and adapt to them depending on their values and capabilities. The essential features of the Internet generation, the specifics of its intellectual and spiritual requests, and self-presentation in religious cyberspace are analyzed. The challenges and dangers produced by religious cyberspace in the modern globalized era are characterized. The Conclusions state that religious cyberspace provides the Internet generation with unique opportunities for spiritual growth, learning, communication and active participation in religious life, however, the safe use of religious cyberspace is possible through digital culture and continuous self-education. Among the measures of counter social manipulations and religious extremism in the online space are educational programs aimed at raising awareness of different religions and culture, which promotes tolerance and mutual understanding, development of media culture and critical thinking among users of religious cyberspace, active use of social media to spread positive and truthful religious content, creation of mechanisms for checking facts and exposing disinformation in the religious sphere.

KEYWORDS

religious cyberspace, digital religion, cyber religion, online religion, Internet generation, social networks, cyber governance, religious information wars.

Introduction

The active development of the modern digital age contributes to the formation of a new dimension of communicative reality, which not only provides unlimited opportunities for information search and self-presentation in the network, but, above all, serves to unite people according to their interests, value system, ideological or religious beliefs. Therefore, the main goals of religious Internet communication in the digital age are the integration of individuals into social groups and communities united by a specific religious ideology, which is carried out by individual religious communities through their information and commu-

nication structures – media centers, electronic libraries, educational Internet portals etc. The active development of the digital age is characterized by the formation of a new generation – the Internet generation, formed by digital technologies, which perceives the surrounding reality through the prism of social networks and represents its social participation by active interaction in cyberspace, which determines the relevance of the research problem.

Studying the specifics of the religious cyberspace perception by the Ukrainian Internet generation and those worldview challenges produced by the new digital reality determines the purpose of this study. The purpose deter-



mines the following tasks: determination of the religious cyberspace specifics, features of its functioning; elucidation of the essence of the religious cyberspace perception by the Ukrainian Internet generation; defining the specifics of countering worldview challenges facing the Internet generation in religious cyberspace.

Research methods

The theoretical basis of the study were the works by foreign and Ukrainian scientists, who emphasize the need for a comprehensive study of the religious cyberspace functioning peculiarities. The specifics of scientific research necessitated the involvement of the following methodology: a systemic method that permitted considering religious cyberspace as an integrated system of information and communication relationships; the heuristic method was applied in the process of searching for the source and theoretical base of the studies; logical method – when building the research structure; comparative analysis – to identify essential features of various scientific approaches to the analysis of the digital culture's problem; analysis and synthesis – in the process of presenting the main content of the work; generalization – when writing the conclusions of the work. The method of collecting sociological information in the form of an electronic questionnaire for students specialized in "Philosophy" was used to illustrate the individual positions presented in the work.

Results and Discussion

As the Pontifical Council for Social Communication notes, the Internet permits religious information and teachings of the faith to overcome all barriers and borders. The Internet has the great potential to overcome distance and isolation by bringing like-minded people together in virtual communities of faith to enable them to encourage and support each other. Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot replace real human interaction, it can complement it, attract people who use the Internet, to a fuller experience of life in faith, to enrich their religious life. It also serves as a means of communication of the Church with special groups – with youth, the elderly, people with limited physical capabilities, with followers of other religions – with all those with whom it would otherwise be difficult to maintain contact (*Church and The Church and the Internet. Document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, 2015: 182-183*).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, active involvement of Ukrainian religious organizations in the Internet space has begun. Among Christian communities, the Internet is mainly used for missionary and propaganda activities, therefore various religious organizational structures – dioceses, parishes, monasteries, educational institutions create their own websites, thanks to which intra-church information exchange takes place, and their information policy is developed both with the believing community and with the secular social environment. Among the main fields of missionary Internet activity of Christian denominations in Ukraine, the following can be distinguished: catechism, religious upbringing and education, formation of electronic libraries, missionary pilgrimage activities. Religious cyberspace allows us to enter new spheres of existence and modes of activity, helps establish online relationships and alternative forms of online identity, raises important issues about the social psychology and ethics of Internet use, the relationship between "online" and "offline" forms of religious interaction, as well as the relationship between the

"real" and the virtual. Thanks to participation in various Internet communities, a person finds his second identity, in particular, a religious one, because, being in an informational cyberspace saturated with various religious denominations, a person is able to expand his own spiritual world and become more tolerant of other religious beliefs and values.

Digital religion opens up new opportunities for believers and religious organizations, allowing them to adapt to modern technological changes and spread their ideas on a global scale.

In foreign scientific opinion, the following scientific approaches to the study of digital religion are distinguished: mediatization of religion, which emphasizes the undeniable role of traditional and modern media for the formation of religious experiences, when the mass media are the main source of information about religion, dominate and determine the social order, including religious; media mediation in understanding and assimilation of religious experience; the combination of traditional social power structures and religious identities, which, thanks to media representation, leads to rethinking of the role of religion on the Internet. Based on these approaches, it is possible to build four types of religious online spaces: religion on the Internet, online religion, traditional religion and innovative religion (*Siuda, 2021*).

Giulia Evolvi suggests a distinction between cyberreligion, online religion and digital religion, defining digital religion as not simply referring to religion as performed and articulated online, but pointing to how digital media and spaces are shaped by religious practice. That is, digital religion should be perceived not as a given, but as a process in which religious groups and individuals accept digital technologies and adapt to them depending on their values and capabilities (*Evolvi, 2022*).

Digital religion is a neologism developed over the past few decades that shows how digital media and spaces are shaped by religious practices. This concept reflects the relationship between religion, media and culture. Some examples of such interactions are cyber, online or electronic churches, religious radio and blogs, online prayers, online or electronic Bible studies, virtual pilgrimages, televangelism (*Mansour, 2022*).

The Internet has changed the forms and means of worship: the availability of a large amount of available religious information provides the opportunity to study, assimilate, analyze and explore religion conveniently, at one's own pace, which has led to a more personalized approach to religious practice; religious groups were able to move their churches and temples into virtual real estate, leading to digital religion and hyper-mediated religious experiences; the presentation of certain religious currents in cyberspace revealed the fallacy of their ideas and led to the downfall of religious affiliation. As a result, the Internet changed the forms and means of practicing religion, created new opportunities for personalized religious practice, formed the phenomenon of digital religion, and also increased the possibilities of its interpretations (*Munir et al., 2023*).

The Internet is more widespread and democratic due to its open communication channels; any user can create and upload content, interact with other users and businesses, blog, react, publish and repost. This means that people have more opportunities to express their opinions and more access to participation in the creation and distribution of media, which naturally should destabilize the existing power structures of media production and distribution

and give more power to individuals and communities. The strength of social networks lies in their ability to "participate" (Tsuria, 2021), which facilitates the rapid transmission of religious information and popularization of religious experiences.

The active use of Internet communication opportunities by religious organizations is caused by the absence of barriers, the rapid coverage of a mass audience, and the powerful manipulative influence of the virtual world on the subconscious. The significant potential of using personal Internet sites is due to the privacy and accessibility of digital communications, which permits to significantly expand the religious influence on society, especially among young people.

Today's youth belong to the Internet generation, born around 1990-2010 and have the following defining features: they have full access to the Internet and social media during adulthood, they use the Internet and social media to obtain and disseminate information.

With greater and easier access to information, the Internet generation is also often referred to as the generation

eager for knowledge and change in the world. Often these are active young people who quickly spread their own opinions on the Internet and engage in various discussions. Although, many researchers also state the negative features in representatives of the Internet generation, because as a result of excessive immersion in the world of digital technologies, young people develop a "clip" thinking (the ability to perceive and process information only in small portions), which significantly reduces the ability to analyze and concentrate attention (Lomachinska, Hryshyna, 2024).

At the same time, representatives of the Internet generation are highly ambitious and self-confident. They are more realistic in their assessment of events and phenomena, they are more knowledgeable and informed about what is happening in the world. Their information consumption is more ethical, and they have "more freedom of expression and more openness to understanding different types of people. This broad outlook on life gives the Internet generation a unique perspective in understanding others while trying to stay true to themselves, their values, and their goals (Generation Z..., 2021). (fig.1)

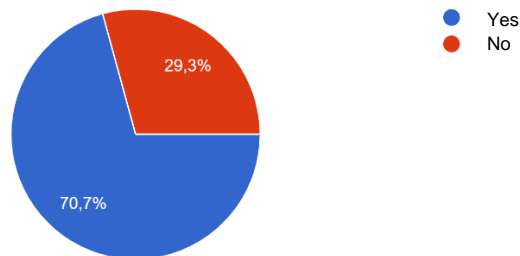


Figure 1. Distribution of answers to the question "Чи доводилось Вам шукати інформацію про релігійні об'єднання на відповідних сайтах / соціальних мережах?"

Based on an online survey of Grinchenko University students aged 16 to 25, it is possible to assert a certain interest of young people in religious issues: more than 70% of respondents searched for information about religious associations on relevant websites and social networks:

In today's digital world, young people can receive religious information and participate in religious activities at any time and from any place, and the use of smartphones

and mobile applications makes religious content more accessible and integrated into everyday life.

More than 85% of respondents gave a positive answer to the question of whether there are people in the environment who belong to a certain religion and religious association, which indicates a fairly high level of religiosity in Ukrainian society (fig.2).

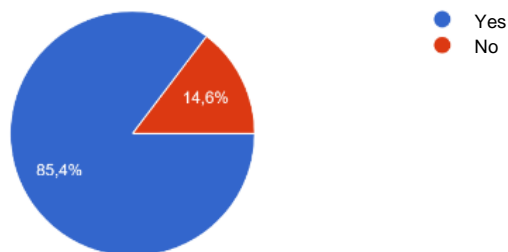


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to the question "Are there people in your environment who belong to a certain religion and religious association?"

At the same time, 48% of respondents gave a positive answer to the question of whether these people use the Internet sites/social networks of their denomination, or get information about important events/news from there, which

indicates that they are still insufficiently aware of the advantages of the virtual life in their own religious community (fig.3).

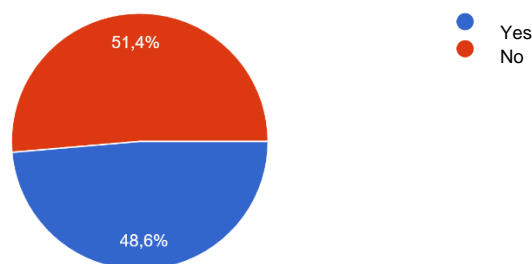


Figure 3. Distribution of answers to the question "Do these people use the websites/social networks of their denomination, or do they get information about important events/news from there?"

Religious communities are beginning to actively use social networks and the blogosphere: today it is possible not only to present certain religious Internet publications there, but also to perform missionary work, participate in certain groups, and discuss topics of religious content. Back in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the World Day of Social Communication, called on Catholic priests to preach the Gospel with the help of all available technical means, including blogs. In addition, he has his own channel on YouTube and a profile on the social network Facebook (*Kozyriatska, 2017: 30*).

The spread of religious ideas through media content – subcasts, YouTube videos, blog articles popularizing religious teachings and practices – ensures the expansion of missionary and propaganda activities of both traditional religious communities and newer religious associations.

The development of cyberspace contributes to the involvement of various forms and means of popularizing one's religion in order to attract new followers. Yes, more than 56% of respondents have come across advertisements of religious associations on the Internet (fig.4).

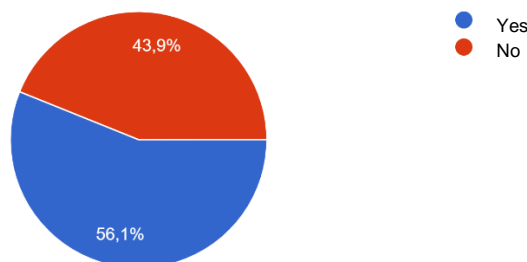


Figure 4. Distribution of answers to the question "In the last three months, have you seen advertisements about religious associations on the Internet?"

Particularly popular in the religious segment of the Internet are groups and pages in Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, where believers can interact, share content and organize joint events.

However, Facebook and Twitter are mostly used by older people, and the Internet generation is more visually oriented, which is reflected in the widespread use of social networks such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. These social media produce a dynamic social self that manifests itself in the interplay of the independent self rhetoric self-image creation, and religiosity, and they also become a space for religious engagement. An important feature of the digital technologies developed through social media is the replicability through which the Internet generation can insert their digital subjectivities into them. The Internet generation is a technologically savvy and highly visual generation, so it expresses its religiosity through visual technologies (*Epafras et al., 2020*).

One of the social networks where representatives of the Ukrainian Internet generation actively distribute and receive new information is Instagram – a social network that allows users to take photos, apply filters to them, and also distribute them through its service and a number of other social networks. Instagram is a popular social network that is widely used to spread religious ideas and strengthen religious communities, in particular by developing creative and visually appealing content that is easily perceived by a youth audience. On Instagram, religious organizations

share images and videos that reflect religious events, celebrations, services, rituals and the daily life of believers. Religious leaders perform live broadcasts of sermons, religious services, which allows believers to participate in religious events in real time, regardless of their location. Accordingly, Instagram provides a powerful tool for religious organizations and believers, allowing them to efficiently spread their ideas, attract new members and maintain active interaction with the existing community.

As the survey showed, it was on Instagram that representatives of the Internet generation most often encountered information about religious associations (fig.5).

Religious subcasts and video channels on platforms such as YouTube, where spiritual topics are discussed, sermons and interviews with religious leaders are particularly popular. Online courses, webinars, videos and articles offer young people an in-depth understanding of religious topics, helping to expand their knowledge and spiritual horizons. Author blogs covering religious issues, studies and publications devoted to the personal stories of believers and digital missionary programs are also gaining popularity.

Modern digital technologies contribute to the creation of virtual religious spaces where people can pray or participate in religious activities. The essential features of the virtual religious space can be considered in the context of its main functions: worship (online services that believers can view on websites or through social networks; video conferences or chats where believers can pray together in real

time) missionary and propaganda (subcasts, videos on YouTube, articles in blogs popularizing religious teachings and practices); educational (webinars and online courses on the study of sacred texts, religious history, etc.); informational (electronic libraries that provide access to digital copies of sacred texts, books, articles and scientific studies

on religious and religion-knowledge issues); communication (virtual platforms for discussing religious topics, organizing joint events, supporting and sharing religious experiences); social and charitable (organization of volunteer events via the Internet).

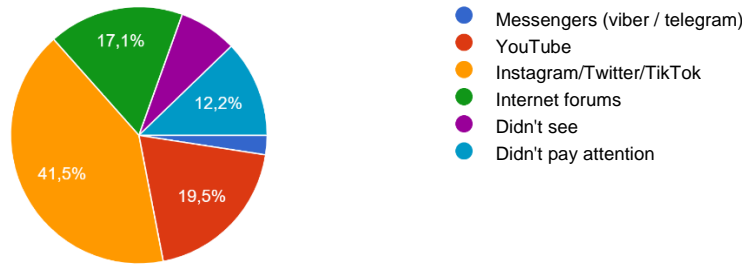


Figure 5. Distribution of answers to the question "On which resources have you most often seen information about religious associations?"

26 Challenges for religious communication are certain features of the new media: technology, lack of censorship and reliability checks, dialogical and mass character. Due to their nature, indestructibility and pervasiveness, new media make it impossible to control religious information in them, however, they are a quick resource for its dissemination.

Religious communication in new media is presented in social networks, blogs, public Internet television (Petrushkevych, 2017:30)

27 Regarding support from religious Internet associations, the opinions of the respondents were divided: more than 56% gave a positive answer, while at the same time, almost 44% denied the possibility of such support (fig.6).

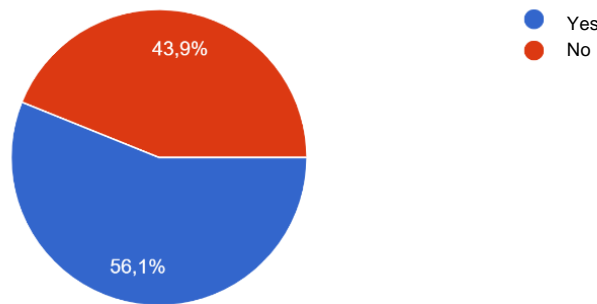


Figure 6. Distribution of answers to the question "Do you think that you can find support in religious online associations?"

In general, we believe that it is quite possible to find spiritual support in religious Internet communities, because they offer many opportunities for spiritual development, communication and support. In particular, religious forums and discussion groups allow believers to discuss various spiritual issues, share experiences and receive advice from other community members; social networks offer platforms for communication, exchange of ideas and support among believers. Online consultations with spiritual leaders provide an opportunity to receive individual spiritual support and advice. Religious Internet resources provide access to online libraries with sacred texts, religious books, articles that can be useful for spiritual development. These forms of virtual interaction help believers feel part of the

community, receive support and inspiration, despite the physical distance. The only thing that matters is finding the community or platform that best suits your personal spiritual needs and views.

However, the development of cyberspace has not only positive, but also dangerous factors in its development, because the Internet has become not only a platform for interreligious dialogue, but also a way of spreading quasi-religious ideas.

The latest religious associations operate quite actively in virtual cyberspace: more than 67% of respondents gave a positive answer about the presence of their advertisements on the Internet (fig.7).

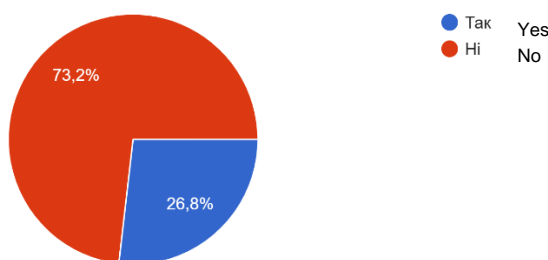


Figure 7. Distribution of answers to the question "In the last three months, have you seen advertisements of the newest religious associations on the Internet?"

of speech for believers. It is also worth noting the political function of religious cyberspace, which reflects the general problems of relations between different churches and the state's position on inter-religious, inter-denominational and inter-church conflicts, which was emphasized by Ukrainian religious scholars at the nascent stage of the Ukrainian segment of the Internet (*Fylypovych, 2001: 89*).

Cyberspace is revealed to us as a new field that allows us to deepen the understanding of fundamental human rights, which necessarily includes the issue of religion, as a recognized factor contributing to the stability and security of society. In a broad sense, cyber security should be aimed at a culture of transparency that will contribute to the development of an open and inclusive society. This includes concern to prevent radicalization in cyberspace based on religious or ideological divisions. Accordingly, education and dialogue are two key elements in developing a cybersecurity policy for religious cyberspace. Cyberspace offers a huge space of opportunities for the development of dialogue, which will allow to better familiarize all members of society with their worldview and thereby contribute to stability and preservation of social peace (*Roszak; Sasa, 2022*).

However, religious cyberspace, like any other online environment, has its risks. They can be classified according to the following groups: informative (the spread of false or distorted religious teachings can mislead believers, the spread of extremist or radical ideas); psychological (religious organizations can use psychological methods to manipulate public consciousness, in some cases, participation in religious online communities can lead to cult addiction, when a person loses critical thinking and a sense of self-identity; in addition, excessive involvement in online communities can lead to isolation from the real social environment and deterioration of personal communication skills); security (the use of online platforms can lead to the leakage of personal information that can be used for fraud or other abuses, there is also a risk of encountering cybercriminals who can use religious platforms for phishing, blackmail or other crimes); economic (using spiritual beliefs to obtain financial benefit from gullible believers).

To the question about the presence of manipulations on the websites of religious organizations, all interviewees answered as follows (fig.8).

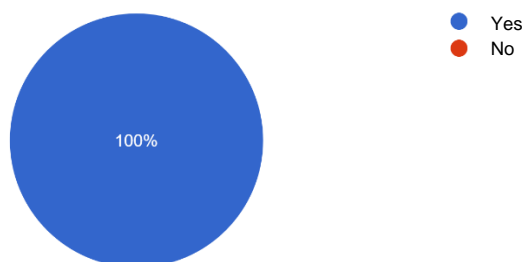


Figure 8. Distribution of answers to the question "Do you think that religious associations resort to manipulation on their websites / social networks?"

In the era of global digitalization, the problem of digital authoritarianism also appears, which is especially dangerous for countries where religion and politics merge, forming the phenomenon of cyber governance.

There is a global debate about where laws should and should not intervene in religious online space. The intrusion of religion into politics in context usually begins with the right intentions of regulating cyberspace in the interest of citizens. However, over the years both politicians and political movements have exploited the relatively weak legal framework for their party interests. Thus, in most cases we see an active monopolization of the sphere, which uses both religious and security justifications to limit the space for the opposition and civil society, while at the same time reclaiming this space for itself and its allies. Having full control over the alternative space, populists reproduce offline social politics there. In essence, this results in populist authoritarianism migrating into the digital realm (*Yilmaz et al., 2022*).

Among the most common methods of government intervention in religious cyberspace are blocking access to certain religious websites or platforms that contain unwanted or prohibited information; removal of religious content in social networks that contradicts state policy; introduction of laws regulating religious content on the Internet, including requirements for registration of religious organizations, prohibitions on certain topics or types of expression; use of artificial intelligence technologies for automatic

detection and analysis of censored religious content; monitoring of user activity in religious online communities, including analysis of messages, interaction and participation in discussions, etc.

In general, government intervention in religious cyberspace can have serious consequences for religious communities, limiting their freedom of expression, reducing access to information, and putting community members at risk of persecution or discrimination.

In the conditions of today's global confrontations, the most dangerous manifestations of social manipulation in religious cyberspace are religious information warfare – a communicative technology of influence on mass consciousness, which aims at the radical transformation of the existing social system of religious ideas, values and beliefs. The advantages of using propaganda in religious cyberspace in comparison with the usual methods and technologies of influence on mass consciousness include: speed, economy, concealment of the source of influence, complexity of presentation and perception of information, the distribution of specially selected information (including disinformation), the remote nature of the impact and the scale of the consequences. People may lose support from their community because of differences in opinion or active participation in conflicts. Aggressive rhetoric and propaganda on the Internet can contribute to the radicalization of individuals, which can lead to extremist actions and ter-

rorism, and some religious conflicts can escalate into physical clashes and violent actions, which threatens national security.

An active counter to social manipulation in religious cyberspace for the Internet generation is digital culture aimed at raising awareness, promoting dialogue and tolerance, as well as strengthening moral and ethical principles (Lomachinska, Lomachynskyi, 2024). For the safe functioning of religious cyberspace, educational programs, seminars and courses aimed at raising awareness of different religions and cultures that promote tolerance and mutual understanding should be disseminated, as well as the creation of online platforms and forums for interreligious dialogue where representatives of different religious communities can discuss common values, problems and ways to solve them.

Media education of users of religious cyberspace becomes a means of forming media competence, as well as the skills and abilities of their practical application. Digital media literacy can help a healthier approach in social media and act as an incentive in the fight against the spread of fake information, and the introduction of state programs for the development of digital and media education, the formation of individual criticality in the perception of media texts should become an efficient mechanism for countering today's informational challenges. To achieve a high level of media culture in religious cyberspace, it is necessary to master a systematic worldview, to practically master the methodology of a systematic approach to the analysis of phenomena, to form the ability to store and replenish one's own knowledge for its efficient use (Lomachinska, Lomachynskyi, 2022). An efficient means against manipulation is to increase the level of critical thinking among users of the religious segment of the Internet through educational programs that help analyze and evaluate information from various sources and the active use of social media to spread positive and true religious content, which contributes to the creation of constructive discourse.

Conclusion

Virtual religious space is a digital environment created for religious practices, communication between believers, learning and spreading religious ideas. It may include websites, mobile applications, social networks, forums, virtual and augmented reality, and other digital platforms. The virtual religious space functions thanks to the widespread use of modern digital technologies, which permit religious organizations and individual believers to maintain communication, perform religious practices and develop spiritually regardless of physical distances. Religious cyberspace forms new forms and means for religious communications, in particular, it promotes the creation of online communities in social networks for the exchange of religious experience and support; promotes digital religious practices - online services, virtual pilgrimages, applications and platforms offering audio and video materials for meditations, prayers and other spiritual practices.

For the Internet generation, religious cyberspace provides unique opportunities for spiritual growth, learning, communication and active participation in religious life. This environment promotes greater engagement and interaction, helping young people find their place in the world of spiritual values and practices in a rapidly changing and technologically saturated world. Religious cyberspace provides an opportunity to get acquainted with various religious traditions and practices, which promotes tolerance and understanding, however, it can become a basis for the

spread of various forms of religious intolerance and extremism.

The safe use of religious cyberspace is possible thanks to digital religious culture and constant self-education, which contributes to the improvement of methods for meeting informational needs in the spiritual sphere and creates additional opportunities for the formation of the foundations of religious spirituality and religious tolerance. Digital religious culture is aimed at forming interreligious dialogue and tolerance, as well as strengthening moral and ethical principles. The active use of social media to spread positive and truthful religious content contributes to the creation of constructive discourse in the religious sphere, and also creates prerequisites for countering religious conflicts.

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Інтернет-покоління у релігійному кіберпросторі: світоглядні виклики цифрової доби

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Стаття присвячена аналізу особливостей сприйняття релігійного кіберпростору українським Інтернет-поколінням. Актуальність та новизна дослідження полягає у визначенні специфіки функціонування релігійного кіберпростору в контексті духовних та інтелектуальних потреб інтернет-покоління, з'ясування сутності світоглядних викликів, що ставить перед молоддю глобалізована цифрова епоха у релігійному кіберпросторі. Проаналізовано особливості становлення релігійного кіберпростору в українському та світовому контексті. Зазначено, що функціонування віртуального релігійного простору можна розглядати через кілька ключових аспектів: онлайн-богослужіння, віртуальні молитви, освітні програми духовного розвитку, платформи для обговорення релігійних тем та обміну досвідом в соціальних мережах, електронні бібліотеки, цифрові місіонерські програми, віртуальне паломництво, використання різноманітних мобільних додатків для молитовних практик тощо. Визначено особливості феномену цифрової релігії як динамічного процесу, у якому релігійні групи та окремі люди приймають цифрові технології та адаптуються до них залежно від своїх цінностей і можливостей. Проаналізовано сутнісні риси Інтернет-покоління, специфіку його інтелектуальних та духовних запитів, самопрезентації в релігійному кіберпросторі. Охарактеризовано виклики та небезпеки, які продукує релігійний кіберпростір в сучасну глобалізовану епоху. У висновках зазначено, що релігійний кіберпростір надає Інтернет-поколінню унікальні можливості для духовного зростання, навчання, спілкування та активної участі у релігійному житті, однак, безпечне використання релігійного кіберпростору можливе завдяки цифровій культурі та постійній самоосвіті. Серед заходів з протидії суспільним маніпуляціям та релігійному екстремізму в онлайн просторі – освітні програми, спрямовані на підвищення обізнаності про різні релігії та культуру, що сприяє толерантності та взаєморозумінню, розвиток медіакультури та критичного мислення у користувачів релігійного кіберпростору, активне використання соціальних медіа для поширення позитивного та правдивого релігійного контенту, створення механізмів для перевірки фактів та викриття дезінформації у релігійній сфері.

Ключові слова: релігійний кіберпростір, цифрова релігія, кіберрелігія, онлайн-релігія, інтернет-покоління, соціальні мережі, кіберуправління, релігійні інформаційні війни.

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