

# DEATH IMAGES IN RUSSIAN YOUTH SUBCULTURES

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## ABSTRACT

The problem related to the attitude of modern Russian youths to death has become extremely urgent due to a dramatically sharp increase in juvenile suicides in Russia committed in 2017. The widespread in the information space of sect-like movements, as well as ‘suiciders’ clubs’ (‘death groups’) has led to tightening the legislation of the Russian Federation. The article analyses the relationship between young people’s religious activity and their attitude to death on the whole, and to suicidal behaviour in particular. The author meticulously analyses death images common for definite youth subcultures. Thanatological topics are especially accentuated in a number of cultures (goths, emos etc.), while in some cultures they are represented in an undetected, amorphous manner (hipsters, hikikomoris, vanillas etc.). Special attention in the article is paid to Russian youth nonpagan movements within the framework of thanatological images and suicidal practices. Alongside with this, the common characteristics for all youth subcultures pertaining to death are distinguished: gamerisation and desacralisation of death, syncretism and the eclecticism of its images. The conclusion is made concerning the interrelationship between new (postmodern) religiousness and young people’s attitude to death formed in the information society.

***Keywords:*** *thanatological topics, youth subcultures, gamerisation, desacralisation, death groups*

## INTRODUCTION

A dramatic increase in suicides among teenagers and young people shook Russian society in 2017. Mass media sources regarded this wave as an ‘epidemisation’ of suicides connected with the existence of ‘suiciders’ clubs’ within the Internet-sphere, or ‘death groups’ as they got to be called. The turmoil concerning these groups led to the necessity to toughen the legislation. Thus, in June 2017 Federal law № 120-FL ‘About introducing amendments into the Criminal code of the Russian Federation in connection with implementing additional mechanisms of countering an activity aimed at motivating children to suicidal behaviour’ was signed.

It goes without saying, there is a certain mass hysteria concerning these death groups, fuelled by the so-called ‘journalists’ investigations’. This, first of all, worsened objective research of the peculiarity of youngsters’ attitude to death, including violent death and suicides. Secondly, vice versa, it gave rise to an increase in suicidal attempts of imitative nature among teenagers, which is defined and explained by the described by D. Fillips ‘Werther syndrome’. Domestic statistics insistently demonstrate a decrease in the number of suicides in the

country on the whole within the period of 1992 up to 2016 [1], however, there are no data concerning age groups or gender peculiarities of such types of deaths. Still there is no consensus among suicidologists (psychologists and medical professionals) concerning the question of death groups' influence on teenage suicides. Although the majority of researchers (N. Uzlov, E. Stryapunina, A. Rahimkulova, V. Rozanov) insist on the increase in exactly youth suicides together with a decrease in suicides among other age groups and analyze such a form of suicide as a 'communicative cyber suicide' [2]. This fact reveals the phenomenon that the development of the Internet and other communication sources has determined to a large extent teenagers' suicidal behaviour in modern society.

Within the framework of this paper we concentrate on sociocultural reasons for youth suicidal attitudes and analyze the changes in the attitude of young people to death on the whole (not only their own, but somebody else's as well). We also suppose that a qualitatively new attitude to death existing nowadays in the contemporary mass society, the variety of death images represented in youth culture are conditioned by the change in religious consciousness and building new (postmodern) religiousness.

Notwithstanding the rise in secular tendencies worldwide, tanatological problems are tightly connected with religious ideas and values. Any religious affiliation aiming at answering the question about divine reality cannot but touch upon the problem of human death and after death existence.

For instance, the formula concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes central in Christianity. The church regards the saving act of Jesus Christ in exactly victory over death: "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (I Corinthians. 15, 26). Death in Christianity is regarded not as punishment, but as an opportunity: "for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians.1, 21). Within orthodox patristic tradition introspection concerning death is associated with the necessity of its adoption theses, the absence of fear in the teeth of death and even delight from the acceptance of the inevitability of the end. "The soul of a just man at death starts exuberating because it longs for peace after separating with the body" (Venerable Efrem Syrin).

There are peculiar characteristics common for Russian culture that are conditioned by its ambivalent character because of the synthesis of orthodox and pagan traditions. The given ambiguity is revealed through the image of death as well. For instance, Russian iconography fixes 'the movable status' of the personified Death that may be represented as both devil's apprentice and 'a dispassionate instrument of death'. Within the domestic folk culture in comparison with the West European culture the inevitability of death and the absence of fear of death have long existed, whereas 'an uncompromising attitude to death' used to be the characteristic of Russian intellectual thought. Death was perceived as the 'sinister stigma of the primary tragedy' (G.Florovsky), as a 'consequence of dependence on blind forces of nature'

(N.Fedorov). Several tendencies got intersected in Soviet society: negating individual mortality, belief in scientific triumph that went parallel to a deep introspection concerning the problem of death (N. Trubnikov, A. Demichev) [3].

Belief in scientific progress has become one of the domineering characteristics of the contemporary global civilization. The attitude to death in the modern world and its various aspects (pain, disease) is generally constructed within bioethics. Death loses its existential problem status that has a deep meaning for every living being.

Death image among contemporary young people has undergone deformation conditioned by a deep inter-generational chasm, poor awareness of the orthodox traditions and Russian culture basics, widespread prevalence of mass culture with vital values as top priority, forming information-communicative space and the apology of scientific-technical achievements. It is relevant to realize that a modern Occidental culture young man up to 30 years old rarely confronts death manifestations due to his juvenility and civilizational conditions (absence of wars, epidemics). That is why the sensation of personal death, the finiteness of an individual being accompanied by despair (according to S. Kierkegaard) are not typical reactions of the youth to the problem of death and suicide. We suppose that religious values deformation in modern Russian society as well as a decline in religious activeness can be considered the factors determining the change in the attitude of the youth to death. A number of research (E.M. Kleiman and R.T. Liu) showed that a high level of being churched (the frequency of church attendances) proves to be a long-term defensive factor against suicides [4].

Various forms of the attitude to death are observed within modern youth subcultures (starting from idealizing death image up to distancing oneself and complete resentment of the idea of death, from fear of death to laughter at it). Subcultures with a prominent religious orientation, i.e. those that are, in fact, religious movements (rastafari, neopagan), regard the problem of death within the context of their own philosophical views and doctrine.

Although Rastafarianism does not represent a complete teaching, belief in reincarnation still remains one of the common characteristics for all the groups. However, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that orientation on definite life attitudes and vital values instead of abstract and metaphysical ideas is common for Rastafarianism and the youth subculture based on it. The central idea of Rastafarianism becomes ‘I & I’ principle not for nothing, it can be defined as personified pantheism: Jah is found in a person and the surrounding world. Belief in reincarnation means that all the elements of nature are tightly connected with each other and can turn into each other. Although the idea of reincarnation gets a mystic meaning in some Rastafarianism groups [5].

Within the last two decades some youth groups have been existing in the context of neopagan movement. Little is known about paganism connected with early Slavs, which gave modern neopagans a wide room for imagination. It has already been established that early Slavs’ obsequies differed both territory-wise (different tribe groups possessed their own) and chronologically (which

underwent changes with the development of religious perceptions) [6]. A lot of data were borrowed from Arabic travelers works (al-Masudi, ibn Fadlan), which contributed to creating among neopagans a peculiar attitude to death and suicide. Suicide, having a ritual character, is called ‘co-dying’ and is not perceived as death. “A woman ascending to a fire or killing herself used to come over to the other world with the deceased husband or ..... regenerated in this rite. There is no and cannot be death by itself for the pagan tradition. Life was perceived as a ray direction moving spirally from point A to point B”. Contemporary neopagans opposing Christianity interpret a ritual suicide as a ‘beautiful tradition’ with a long-lasting history that has various ways of expression’[7].

It is possible to highlight apart from properly religious youth subcultures those ones that have no religious component but the death cult is vividly represented. Primarily, these are goths and emos.

As for goths, the romantic attitude to death is common for this youth subculture, its clear-cut aestheticization and fetishisation, fatalism and mystic attitudes rising from dark, mysterious images borrowed from gothic novels of the nineteenth century, an attempt to recreate the image and mood of the Victorian epoch. However, goths are rather reserved about suicidal practices in comparison with emos. In emo culture (with a vividly distinguished tendency to emotional impulses) the image of ‘elevated death’ is promoted, while the topic of suicide and violence takes the central place (for instance, music bands performing emo-music). For this reason, suicidal attempts used to be really widely-spread among the representatives of this subculture during its proliferation.

On the one hand, modern youth subcultures have neither a clear cut religious component (vanillas, tumbler-girls, hikikomoris and others), nor tanatological problematics. Nevertheless, suicidal risk is triggered among the representatives of these subcultures due to the popularity of a depressed state (vanillas), romanticizing depression (tumbler-girl) and the pursuit of self-isolation (hikikomoris).

Thus, it is possible to state that there are various images of death and models of the attitude to it depending on a definite youth subculture.

All these models are culture-determined. For instance, idealizing death as a cultural reaction is not extraordinary in the history of civilizations. A deep-rooted melancholy peculiar to the Renaissance era culture caused not only interest in tanatological topics, but even to some extent ‘obsession with death’. Renaissance romantic aspects, as well as Baroque culture determined death as being both a frightening and desired beginning. Ph. Aries determines a new death image within his own cultural concept – a ‘beautiful and instructive’ death not deprived some theatricality (which is the influence of Baroque culture) based on the breakup of a human being. The image of a ‘beautiful and elevated’ death uniting the split up hearts is formed under the influence of romanticism of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century [8].

Besides romanticizing death there is in modern culture the image of some abominable, horrifying death. This image, that started to be formed in the Medieval era, is represented in modern mass culture through such a genre as horror. A number of authors claim, ‘horror metaphysics’, ‘fear ideology’ become the foundation of modern culture, while ““death” is regarded as the only absolute God”. “Not only crisis of faith, but of any common ideals and eternal moral values and absolutes on the whole necessarily became the most significant, domineering point of the view of the world” [9].

It would be not fair to single out only idealizing death and fear of death as the only reactions relevant for the contemporary mass culture. The history of civilizations can give a lot of examples as illustrations of death being accompanied by laughter. Undoubtedly, it was not modern humor, as this laughter was of ritual nature. Laughter accompanying death is “a magic means of life creation” as V. Propp remarked [10]. Its aim is to establish relations with the living and the deceased people’s worlds. Ritual laughter, deeply rooted in the pagan tradition, did not fit in the Christian ethical system. This type of laughter celebrating life and contributing to neglecting death contradicted the basic Christian idea: “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5, 4). Weeping (or mourning) in Christianity used to be a means of realizing one’s sins, thus, the means of remembering death. At the same time ritual laughter of pagan culture becomes the symbol of sin within the Christian ethics: a reserved smile becomes a Christian to a larger extent.

Modern mass culture cannot exist without laughter: laughter becomes its ‘main esthetic dominant’. Modern society after postmodern esthetic is even called ‘a humorous society’ in which, however, laughter disappears as a result of negating social and religious values, it becomes a simulacrum creating the atmosphere of peace, freedom and any other meanings [11]. The comic within modern mass culture tackles all the spheres, including the religious one (the phenomenon of ‘comic’ or ‘parodical’ religions can be given as examples here, an abundance of caricatures and anecdotes related to religious topics, producing in films and books funny images of angels, demons, the devil and even God (film ‘Dogma’).

Negating the Christian image of death and Christian laughter ethic caused a specific reaction to death – ‘laughter at death’ observed in mass culture works (films “Death Becomes Her”, “Warm Bodies”, “Zombieland”, etc.). This mocking at death can also be traced through youth creativity: carnival splashes in youth subcultures (flashmobs, performances, happenings), as well as graffiti works, buskers’ installations rather often touch upon problems related to death.

Contemporary ‘laughter at death’ is by no means ‘the dialectic inside of the sacral’, but only an attempt to deprive tanatological problematics of any religious meaning, distort the definition of death, turn it from one of the main problems of human existence to an object of mocking, thus, distancing from reflections concerning its self-finiteness.

Within the period of 2006 until 2016 a major study concerning young people's moral values had been carried out in Nizhny Novgorod and the Nizhegorodsky oblast'. The NN oblast' ranks among the model regions in the Russian Federation, particularly, it can be considered the subject-indicator of a number of significant social and cultural processes, as the main statistical indicators copy the all-federal figures. Within the framework of the research under consideration a separate experiment aimed at revealing religious values of the youth was conducted (2014-2016). The respondents were senior secondary school students of schools, colleges and higher educational establishments ( 2500 people were questioned in 2014, 2700 people – in 2015, 2500 – in 2016). A number of theses and questions were specified during the subsequent focused interviewing of separate representatives of young people (325 people were interviewed within the three-year-period). During the conducted research the respondents' vision of their religious identity, the meaning and role of Russian Orthodox Church in society were clarified, as well as the attitude of the younger generation to separate ideas, for instance, to death and after-death existence was revealed.

On the whole, every other respondent (50%) is interested in the problem of death to this or that extent. В целом, каждый второй респондент (50 %) в той или иной степени интересуется проблемой смерти. Some groups of young people (especially spread among schoolchildren and young girls) have a tendency to romanticize death and suicide. However, either an attempt to distance oneself or 'laughter at death' become the most common assumptions while discussing the problem of death.

Fear is not the dominant reaction of young people to tanatological problems. Meditations concerning death arise in connection with bioethics aspects (euthanasia, transplantation, diagnosis concealing).

The research also revealed that the idea of life after death is becoming the central one among contemporary Russian young people. It can be distinguished not only among religious youths, but also among those attributing themselves to atheists (17, 3%), as well as those who do not believe in paranormal processes and phenomena (15, 8%). It is revealing that the idea of afterlife was widely interpreted: from belief in reincarnation up to the idea of zombie-apocalypse, etc. Alongside with this, 26, 11% of orthodox Christians, 31, 4% of outconfessional churchmen and 20% of atheists believe in transmigration of souls.

Change in the attitude to death is conditioned by religious values deformation that gave rise to the change in moral guidelines as well. According to the opinion provided by T.I. Varzanova, belief in Christian formula of judgement of Heaven remains the major indicator of religiousness and moral consciousness [12]. In the orthodox tradition sin and death are intermeangled: death was given by God for sin, people are entitled to individual judgment, while at the end of times – to the last one. However, belief in hell and paradise, sin and come-back was common for 50% of the

respondents in 1997, only 34, 6% of people share this assumption in 2014, at the same time this figure sharply dropped to 26, 3% in 2016.

It is to be noticed, the modern younger generation absolutely excludes everything connected with embodiment from the sphere of religiousness. Thus, the central concept of depravity in Christianity resting on such manifestations of embodiment as death, laughter, sex is annihilated in mass consciousness.

Notwithstanding such numerous models of attitudes to death and death images within youth subcultures, it is vital to highlight a number of common characteristics. Firstly, it is desacralisation of death, depriving it of a certain metaphysical trait proving the importance and relevance of mortality of any human being. Hence, in our view, the absence of a devout attitude to death can be mentioned. Alongside with this, death is still not treated as something natural, usual, and mundane. It is possible to agree with Ph. Aries supposing that modern society “has made a stand against death”, that it “is ashamed of death and fears it”, “behaves as if death does not exist” [8]. All the considered models concerning the attitude to death (romantisation, laughter, fear) are directed at desacralisation of tanatological images. Secondly, any death image is eclectic: it is constructed from mass culture images, pseudoesoteric and religious movements, scientific and quasicientific facts and findings. Thirdly, the process of death ‘gamerisation’ can be witnessed. In our point of view, this fact is regarded as one of the main modern tanatological images characteristics, thus, it needs to be considered more thoroughly. Undoubtedly, the game as a socio-cultural phenomenon has been essential in society from ancient times. The development of Internet-communications has led to developing a new type of (in-game) mindset and contributed to implementing gaming technologies in practically all spheres of human activity (business, study, politics, religion, etc.). In compliance with the opinions provided by N.D. Uzlov and M.N. Semenova the key characteristic of modern society (postmodern society) is transgression, i.e. overreaching the permissible and statutory. In addition, researchers state the fact that transgression is also considered as one of the most vital traits of any game [13]. Transgression becomes the most significant characteristic of communication within the Internet-space, allowing a person to choose various roles and behaviour models, easily overstepping the border between the real and the virtual Self. This fact conditions a wide development of different Internet communities, more reminding sects practising various severe ‘gaming’ practices, including suicidal games. The specificity of such consciousness, used to constant transgression, is such that it is rather difficult for adolescents to draw a borderline between fact and fiction. Life is regarded as one of game levels, whereas death is interpreted as one of game trials. Death gamerisation is the characteristic of not only Internet-communities, but also of a number of religious subcultures, for instance, the described above heathens (pagans).

## CONCLUSION

Polymorphy and eclecticity of death images formed in youth subcultures are conditioned to a great extent by a peculiar world orientation defined as postmodern sensitivity. Such an outlook on the world is revealed in axiological pluralism, combining different cultural traditions and norms reflected through the following concepts: chaos, simulacrum, hyperreality, cultural rhizomorphousness and superficiality. A new type of religiousness called postmodern religiousness is formed within the framework of the considered world outlook. The radical deconstruction undertaken in postmodernism gave rise to boundary displacement between the sacral and the profane. Postmodern religiousness is based on deification of the previously mundane, as well as secularization of the sacral. Active neomythologisation existing in the modern mass culture space contributes to this process. As it has been mentioned above, the tanatological circle of problems is tightly connected with religiousness, being part of the religious view of the world. Religious values deformation cannot but tackle the perception of death and afterlife images. Thus, the reforms in Europe in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and Great Schism of the Russian Church in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century ‘releaved people of the fear before death’ causing a mass suicide rate (it can be illustrated by the ‘ashes’ phenomenon in Old Belief). To sum up, preventing teenage suicides must include the analysis of young people’s religious orientations.

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