

Religious Conversion as a Way to Overcome Loneliness

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Abstract—The article is devoted to the study of how religious identity and belonging to a religious community of a resident of a megalopolis become a life strategy for overcoming loneliness, contribute to the development of an independent life trajectory and the choice of stable value orientations. The text presents an analysis of the autobiographies of those who have chosen religious identity as their lifestyle strategy as a way of life and a way of self-determination. The methodological basis of the research is a combination of the theory of multiple modernities and the method of biographical interview.

Keywords—*religious conversion; loneliness; biography; biography method*

I. INTRODUCTION

The presented research is aimed at studying how religious identity and belonging to the religious community of the metropolis residents become a life strategy for overcoming loneliness, contribute to the development of an independent life trajectory and the choice of sustainable value orientations. The problem itself and its formulation are actualized by the peculiarities of modern societies of the second Modern period. Loneliness as a phenomenon and category of social acts as one of the Central features of societies that have undergone modernization, and as a consequence of the atomization and individualization of social life.

These newly identified characteristics of the phenomenon suggest that loneliness is not only a special psychological experience of the individual consciousness, but also a social experience of modernity. It seems promising to conduct a sociological study of the phenomenon of loneliness based on the analysis of autobiographies of those who chose their life strategy religious identity as a way of life and a way of self-determination. The study of such an object is due to the fact that religious conversion in adulthood requires the individual to reassess the values of his previous biography and determine his life guidance for the future.

Moreover, as long-term sociological studies of conversion show, religious conversion is often associated with the awareness of socio-cultural loneliness and the desire to get out of it, making a choice in favor of traditional religious consolidations and models of life strategies.

The study of the theme of loneliness began in the second half of the 20th century. This topic was the responsibility of psychologists. The definition of the phenomenon was based on the individual's emotional experience. He was marked through "abandonment", "isolation", "lack of communication." Then the attention was paid to this topic by representatives of other Humanities. With the occurrence of this phenomenon in the field of sociology, scientists faced the problem of operationalization of a complex and intuitive phenomenon.

In the 21st century, the problem of loneliness, due to the spread of the phenomenon, drew the attention of American sociologists. Professor Sherry Turkle devoted her research to this phenomenon. Her work focuses on the relationship between the internetization and robotization of society and the growth of the number of people who certify themselves as single. She pays much attention to the study of the processes of interaction "man-machine", "man – Internet environment" and "man - high technology".

In her opinion, the wide prevalence and availability of high technologies that mediate human communication leads to two main problems: 1) changing the quality and quantity of communication, replacing it with "short, reduced (emotionally) interaction 2) the loss of the ability of adults to "live human communication", their inability to develop such a skill in their children. These two factors lead to an increase in the number of single people.

Another American researcher Eric Kleinenberg studies loneliness in the context of strategies for building an individual's living space. His attention is focused on social technologies and conditions that allow modern man to live alone for a long time. Under loneliness he, thus, understood the rejection of marriage and birth of children, sees the cause in the life of the strategy. The combination of high levels of income and education with a broad behavioral repertoire in the field of building personal relationships, makes conscious loneliness a very attractive life choice for young Americans, as it opens up a wide range of other trajectories of building a biography: getting several educations, career growth, a large number of trips and others. According to the interview materials given by Kleinenberg, respondents believe that conscious loneliness is the key to the realization of these trajectories. The life strategy chosen by such respondents can be called "young professional". The study shows that such respondents often begin to

consciously strive for a secluded lifestyle already in College [1]. Interest in the phenomenon of loneliness exists in Russian science. Initially, it originated in the Soviet period. However, it could not be called intense. Currently, the most interesting are the works of the Russian sociologist Zhanna Vasilievna Puzanova. In them, she traced the history of the study of this problem by Russian and Western scientists, described the history of the definition of the term at different stages of its study, characterized the existing approaches and methods of empirical study of the phenomenon, developed and proposed her method of studying loneliness.

Drawing on the work of this scientist, we can say that today there are the following methods – test UCLA, a questionnaire of Elbing, questionnaire, Rokach [2]. In this article, we will not dwell on the description of each of them, mention only the main weaknesses common to all three methods, namely, questionnaires tend to expand (increase the number of questions), which adversely affects the quality of their filling, leads to difficulties in processing and, as a consequence, to the risk of reducing the validity of data. The second negative point is related to the psychological difficulties experienced by the Respondent in answering sensitive questions about their internal state associated with loneliness. Zh. V. Puzanova proposes to solve the above problems using the method of "unfinished sentences", which allows to simultaneously remove the psychological barriers of respondents and at the same time significantly enrich the scientific understanding of the phenomenon of loneliness due to the ideas obtained from the "life experience" and "common sense of respondents".

The problems described above determine the relevance of the study. The focus of the research attention is shifted from the definition of loneliness to the strategies of its overcoming existing in modern society. Namely, we pay attention to the strategy of religious conversion. The relevance of this statement of the problem is associated with an increase in the number of people in modern Russia, certifying themselves as single [3], while increasing the number of those who have passed through religious conversion in adulthood.

In addition, the methods of data collection and analysis presented in the article enrich the repertoire of sociological methods relevant to the study of loneliness, as they bypass the above difficulties. The method of biographical interview removes the problem of psychological barrier in respondents when communicating on sensitive topics, as the guide does not affect them directly. The Respondent answers the "passport" questions about the date and place of birth, place of residence, study, work, and so on. At the same time, the construction of a biographical narrative, that is, the need to make a sequence of life events and coherently tell the interviewer about them, pushes the Respondent to reflect on himself and his experience. As a result, the researcher receives a description of the internal experience, judgments, assessments and feelings of the Respondent in the narrative text. The absence of any direct sensitive questions it allows us to understand how the Respondent will sum up the story to we are interested in the topic, and to understand where the event or experience is in his biography.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study of the phenomenon of religious conversion began in the framework of the psychological approach with the works of the American scientist W. James. It was he who introduced the term "conversion" into scientific circulation, which was interpreted as a religious experience associated with overcoming the life crisis and marking a strong change in personality [4]. This definition for a long time determined the theoretical direction in which the study of the phenomenon took place.

The sociological direction of the study of religious conversion has three directions: objective, constructivist and functionalist. Objectifiers, which include the work of George. Lofland and R. stark, and D. snow, and R. Metelica believed that this process is carried out by inserting in the activities of religious movements that are non-traditional for a particular society [5]. John. Lofland and R. stark focus on identifying the motives of conversion, situational factors and characteristics of individuals predisposed to a strong religious experience [6]. D. snow and R. Macalik conceptualizarea the phenomenon of conversatii in the context of the constructivist paradigm (ethnomethodology, and symbolic interactionism). Religious conversion is defined by them as a change in the fundamental interpretative models that an individual uses to organize his or her daily experience [7]. Constructivists identify, thus, the transformation of consciousness and its verbal articulation, but leave without attention to the practical level of conversion, i.e., what consequences the appeal has for the life of the individual. German sociologist M. Heinrich takes a new approach to the definition of the crisis situation in religious conversion. He believes that a crisis occurs when a person is confronted with facts or events that cannot be explained by existing interpretative models, but cannot be ignored by them. The adoption of a new worldview becomes a solution to the problem of the crisis, the search for meaning. In this context, the relationship between crisis and conversion is fundamental.

K. Jones notes that the conversion is considered as a way (strategy) out of the crisis, which is aimed at both new interpretative models and new forms of solving specific biographical problems [8]. Religious worldview provides values and normative guidelines for the daily activities of the individual, and its symbols become a means of expression and rethinking of the crisis experience. And the solution to the biographical problem associated with the adoption of a new religion is "not to eliminate ambivalent aspirations, but to revive them again, to Express them in a religious language and thus, to a certain extent, lead to reconciliation [9].

It is obvious that the term "conversion" is interpreted differently in the works of researchers. A key characteristic of the phenomenon of religious conversion is a radical change of worldview, which entails the transformation of identity, which is expressed both at the verbal level and at the level of social action [10].

In the vector the above, I understand religious conversion as a process of internalizing the individual's system of religious attitudes, and patterns of behavior, with subsequent embedding of the basis for the creation of the biography, making vital

decisions and ensure the integrity of the life experience of the individual.

The following components must be present in the description of the believer's experience:

- Awareness of the turning point in life associated with faith. The turning point in the life of believers (gaining faith) is the Central element of the new convert's self-presentation;

- the high importance of this moment in the context of the whole life of the believer. If the first sign of conversion can be called cognitive, the second is related to the evaluation, emotional component of the experience;

- awareness and reflection of the consequences of gaining faith. Thus, believers talk about significant changes in their lives, the achievement of "true" or "real" life.

The study of the phenomenon of religious conversion focuses on the definition of the specificity of the biographical experience, on the definition of the life crisis and the identification of the moment of religious conversion. At the same time, in the field of view of the researcher the social form of this phenomenon, namely, how a person represents the very cause of treatment and his biography in the context of the group.

At the same time, according to experts, the phenomenon of loneliness is becoming common among the adult working-age population [11]. 2 studies of American sociologists are devoted to this question. Eric Kleinenberg and Shirley Tarkle. Their work studies the spread of the phenomenon of loneliness in modern American society. In this light, the question of what strategies exist to overcome loneliness arises in full growth.

In their study, we assumed that one of these strategies can be religious conversatia. The basis of our assumption is the definition of loneliness, developed at the first stage of the study. Loneliness is considered in the context of the biography of the individual. The study showed that loneliness is experienced by people at different stages of life, and most often, it is associated with biographical gaps experienced by the individual, and occurs at the stage of dissociation of the real and ideal self. To such biographical gaps we include – divorce, chronic disease, change of residence, return from the army (men). In such periods, for the reconstruction of the life project, the individual turns to religion and thus restores the integrity of his biography, overcoming dissociation.

The theoretical framework of the study was the concept of multiple modernities of sh. Eisenstadt, "the focus of which is the idea of reflexive subjectivity as a key to the study of modernity" and the method of biographical narrative. A key characteristic of any modernity Eisenstadt considers reflexivity as a tool for creating identities. The boundaries of new identities arise without the participation of such outdated realities as ethno-territorial, linguistic and related characteristics [12]."

Another Russian researcher E. A. Zdravomyslova, describing the "biographical turn" in the history of sociology referring to the work of Beck and Z. Bauman says the following words: "in modern society, decisions are individualized, they are not subject to social, political, economic restrictions.

Everyone is free to choose their own destiny and the trajectory of their life [13]."

In the described circumstances, the individual is faced with the space of a huge variety of choices and the question arises- what will serve as the basis for building his own biography?

The transition to the empirical study of religious conversion involves identifying its causes and signs. To identify the causes of religious conversion, a qualitative study of narratives about the conversion of believers of different faiths was conducted. To do this, we have compiled a detailed guide to the biographical interview, which includes 32 questions. The questions were arranged in chronological order. Since birth (When were you born?) to date (What are you doing now?). It should be noted that the procedure, according to which the interview was conducted, includes a block of reflection of the Respondent about himself. Therefore, the guide also included 2 final questions: "would you like to change something in your life? and do you have a dream?". For the purpose of our study, this block of information is extremely important, as it helps to see how deeply religious attitudes are rooted in the consciousness of the Respondent, to what extent it corresponds to behavioral patterns.

The object of the study we have chosen residents of the metropolis. This choice is dictated by the fact that it is a resident of the metropolis to the greatest extent has the biographical freedom in building their own lives, which we talked about earlier. Therefore, we conducted our research in two large Metropolitan areas of Yekaterinburg and St. Petersburg. When planning the sample, we included major denominations represented in Russia – Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Buddhism, Judaism.

We chose a reference sample as a method of sampling. The method of filling the sample was "snowball". Initially, our goal was to fill the sample with respondents aged 25 to 45 years. However, during the study, the lower limit of the sample was extended to 60 years. The reason for this was our understanding that respondents aged 45-60 years have experience of biographical gaps and biographical work aimed at restoring the integrity of the biography.

In total, the sample included 30 respondents at the rate of three representatives of each denomination (Orthodox, Catholics, old believers, Buddhists, Jews) in each of the two cities. They were interviewed (in person and via Skype), then the transcripts were analyzed, according to the methodology of analysis of the biographical narrative described By T. Wengraf.

This procedure allows identifying and describing strategies of behavior, as it is based on the comparison of biographical data of respondents with the "told life story", that is, the consideration of subjective experience in comparison with the real socio-cultural context [14].

The procedure consists of five stages. The first is the compilation of the chronological sequence of the biography. The events of the Respondent's life are arranged in the order in which they occurred. At this step, only "dry facts" are subject to fixation, what relates directly to the biography and can be verified by data from diaries, documents or other sources. In addition to the obvious effect of structuring, this process allows

you to enter the life of the Respondent in the socio-cultural and historical contexts, thereby obtaining rich material for further interpretation.

The second stage is the construction of the compositional structure of the narrative. Its essence consists in fixing a sequence according to which the Respondent sets out the events of his life (with which it begins what then becomes; what does the accent; that lowers). At the same time, three types of changes are recorded in the literal text of the narrative: 1. change of narrator, 2. change of topic, 3. change the text type. This fixation is designed to help the researcher to see the mechanisms that the Respondent chooses to describe their experience.

The third step of the analysis is carried out using the procedures of "Reasonable theory". At this stage, the researcher addresses the questions that he put at the beginning of his research, and for each stage of the biography, develops hypotheses for its further development. Then, these assumptions are confirmed or refuted on the basis of further narrative material. They can answer the following questions: how could the Respondent survive this event, given his age, education, environment; how and to what extent this sequence of events could affect the future life of the Respondent; what will happen next. This step is used to find the connection between the objective events of the Respondent's life and their subjective perception.

At this step of the study, the Wengraf offers several possible options for performing the analysis procedure. We opted for the microanalysis of the elements of the narrative. This decision is due, first of all, to the questions we raised in the study, namely: is religious conversion a way to overcome anthropological pessimism? Do religious beliefs become the basis for making vital decisions?

The fourth stage is the analysis of thematic areas of the narrative. According to Wengraf, thematic area – a combination of those elements identified by theme (region, i.e. the fragment of the narrative), those that form the context for it [15]. The selected thematic areas are briefly summarized, "problem" areas are selected-those within which key life events take place, and a brief retelling is made on the basis of this material. This procedure makes it possible to obtain a "life story" from the compositional structure of the narrative. Next, we search for and describe the strongest links between the biographical data obtained by compiling a chronological sequence of the biography and the "case history" that appeared as a result of the analysis of the thematic areas of the narrative.

The final stage of the analysis is the search for non-narrative fragments of the "case history" and the formation of the "case understanding". At this stage, the researcher answers the question of what is the responsibility of the Respondent, what is his perception of the situation.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the study showed, respondents went through the main stage of conversion - awareness of the turning point in life associated with faith, is associated more with understanding their loneliness, the search for "kindred souls", communication, than with changes in emotions towards God. All narratives are characterized by a temporal structure, where the Central part is the story of the treatment, associated experiences and events. Religious conversion in almost all narratives appears as the culmination point of life, which made a strong change in their own biography.

Here is the first example. Respondent a, 40 years old Buddhist priest. "In 98 I came, I saw that all life has changed people, all my friends, acquaintances have completely changed the attitude to life. I had to knock about, didn't know where to get a job, where to go.....then through some throwing in 25 years became interested in Buddhism, began to go to lectures.....Because all these situations, even somewhere there are psychological fractures, the same 90's....It led me to think about how we live, what principles and how to live better in this world. Exactly what to adhere to. This led me to Buddhism precisely." As a rule, the period of spiritual search is preceded by a crisis, which is associated with the awareness of one's own loneliness, spiritual search. The period of spiritual quest was preceded by economic crisis, loss of work and lack of family.

Respondent G, 33 years old Buddhist, also raises the question of "spiritual search": "in 2007, I entered the aviation College. It is the father, his own path, I did not choose. I was still undefined.....Well, it was not just a difficult decision, and in fact the chief, said that I was going to look for God. Well, everyone saw that I was struggling as if, that is, nothing good would have remained if I had stayed there.....Now then. When I was in Buddhism, I can answer all that karma..... Well, it's constantly actually happened (the spiritual search). Expressed, first, that I was constantly uncomfortable, that is, I was not satisfied with the way of life. According to him, conversion to Buddhism radically changed his life. Features of the Buddhist worldview became prerequisites for integration into the community as a follower.

Interview with Respondent a found not only an internal awareness of loneliness, but also a kind of existential crisis, which was expressed "the search for the meaning of life", "the search for lost peace of mind." About such a crisis tells, and Respondent B, parishioner. Unlike Respondent A, when Buddhism was not the religion of his parents, with which he was familiar from childhood, Respondent B already belonged to the community of old believers, but probably did not have a strong connection with them.

"My wife and I divorced.....I got sick. I'm going to the hospital. But I was struck by the attitude of the people, that is, I was lying there in the Botkin barracks, well, first of me from the community, too, no one visited, so to speak. At least they called. And with work at all. No calls, nothing. I understand that they called the hospital, were interested in some moments. And there to me no one came not visited, not telephoned me, nothing. And I too so thought, well I'll wait at some of the reaction, in General, what this organization was, what kind of people work there."From this passage we can conclude that

living in St. Petersburg, B felt a crisis of loneliness not only in connection with the departure of his wife and illness, but also characteristic of the metropolis loneliness. It is due to the specifics of living in the socio-cultural environment of the big city. This is the superficiality, formality and anonymous nature of relations between citizens, the desire for interaction in a highly specialized functional framework, the presence of such norms as the approval of non-interference and alienation. Thus, loneliness and, perhaps, inability to integrate into the new socio-cultural environment of the big city became the cause of the crisis, which led the Respondent to the religious community.

As a result, several of our parishioners, whom I have met, have supported me. Yes, in General I went there. I am told that we will stop our relations with you.....So I'm really lost here. I mean, I really understood. Already I have such a few moments in my life was that life is a cruel thing, and in the world can, there, throw, spit on you and everything, and no one needs you, although you, there, and gave all the strength and health, to perform some tasks of work, but no one will examine. Behold. Well. In General I finalized. Then there was a conversation one summer. And no, I am something all in the community, by the community as he worked. Well, help than can, as they say. Then again in the summer went to youth camp. Here, the whole season spent in the camp. And then left here, so I need to be here."

Respondent B clearly indicates the reasons that led him to this community. He puts special emphasis on the awareness of his own loneliness after the loss of family, work and illness. In the interview, he never mentions the power of his faith, but often says that the community saved him from loneliness and despondency, that he feels significant only within it. His religious choice can be correlated with the influence of tradition through social environment, or socialization.

Respondent, 55 years old, Catholic, priest.

"Now I'm all alone. That is somewhere in the nature they exist, cousin, but..... There are no contacts with them."

The second fragment, the Respondent talks about the fact that he had existed the necessity of communication on religious topic that remained elusive: "There is absolutely. We talked about anything but religion. About school, about school, about some other things. Well, of course about girls, of course, of course, here, not about religion, no. Friends were utterly not religious. And I always felt this discomfort. Kind of alone, not with anyone. And then, that's when I joined the Church. He's in. I met these people who invited me to visit. Now, they are older than me here, well, I was invited to visit, and since then we are friends". It should be noted that today the choice of religious system is determined by personal preferences, views and previous life experience. A sense of connection with the worldview system should arise at the individual level. In the process of conversion, symbols of religious worldview are transformed into aspects of experience, and Vice versa — aspects of experience into significant cultural and religious symbols. The individual continuously reveals the meaning of his life through the language of the new religious system. "And accordingly Yes, the Bible, the gospel, the first time I read in the army. I didn't have that one. It's served man - also

Orthodox, so he had that kind of Baptist publishing, a small, handheld, of the gospel here, and we, so to speak, secretly read".

"Here I and three more even, in my opinion, the person, we these Komsomol tickets solemnly burned. Here, solemnly burned at the pigsty, which was a part of it. There we read the Holy Scripture. Well, since for me it was still a mere formality, because I was forced to statistics. There, already in the third year at vocational school." In an interview, the Respondent says that he was always religious: he attended Church since childhood, adopted Orthodoxy from his grandmother, in the 80's in the army realized that he seriously believes and even wants to be a monk. However, he found himself in Catholicism, went to study in Poland in the 90s and now he is a Catholic priest.

"That's it, then say so, and the trap slammed shut. I realized that I do not need anything else, that's my Dominicans. And before that, in addition to the Franciscans, there were other contacts, sporadic, with other monastic, primarily in the Baltic States. But they also were not durable, such well, these were sporadic, and it didn't work, and here and here that turned out so myself....Then the very matter. I say that I found the Holy Dominic, I found, in his Order involved". Respondent b says that he felt lonely because of the fact that the believer, but also a way out of his loneliness he found through faith.

A similar situation can be traced in an interview with a Respondent D 33 years, Orthodox, parishioner, "I really did not like to go to kindergarten, I basically, that is, well, I protested. My grandmother often took me before the quiet hour, I really did not like to sleep during the day, so in principle, I did not really like that there are other children, but still somehow built a relationship with them."

Respondent D in his interview talks about conscious loneliness, this is the kind of loneliness when a person voluntarily chooses solitude. Privacy initially has a time frame, always voluntarily and freely chosen by man. Seclusion seems to be the most "beneficial" for the subject behavior at a given time, for example, in terms of personal growth, the action of protective mechanisms, reducing the level of mental tension, etc. In this case, the experience of religious conversion leads to a desire to conform to religious ideals and emphasizes the peculiarities of their own character.

After analyzing the interview, I chose the fragments that are relevant to us and divided all respondents into two groups. The first group includes those respondents who internalized religiosity from a family in early childhood or adolescence and carried it through their entire lives. Around it defended the identity. These include either religious professionals or active members of the parish (visit the Church at least once a week, confess, take communion, observe fasts and holidays).

The second group included respondents who came to faith at a conscious age (in the period from 20 to 40 years). These are those who experienced some "confusion" and after a certain period of searching chose religiosity as the trajectory of building their personal biography. At the same time, the choice could be made between different denominations, or religiosity and an attempt to make another life choice (for example, to continue a career, or to have another child). I can assume that

this is because religion reverts to traditional values, ascribes clear behavioral patterns to adepts.

If we divide the respondents into "clergy" and "parishioners", it becomes obvious that both of them go the same way. The stages of implementation of the strategy of overcoming loneliness through religiosity differ only at the point where the decision is made to become a professional, that is, to devote life to it. Such a decision is characterized by two components: the first - the Respondent understands that this particular religion, its worldview and behavioral patterns are completely suitable for him, 2 – he decides that he wants to do only this in life, and devote all his time only to religion.

IV. CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that in General, all respondents have signs of religious conversion. All respondents came to faith after realizing their loneliness. Most of the believers have in their experience radical changes associated with faith. However, the identified causes and signs have no religious differences.

In our opinion, this is due to the fact that the threshold of entry into the religious community is the lowest of all other possible options. As we said earlier, many respondents realized that they had the opportunity to make another biographical choice – to keep the family (divorce), to have another child, to change their profession. But, this was not done. Only 4 out of 24 respondents were able to clearly explain the reasons for the choice " with my wife, we did not succeed." But as we can see, this trajectory of events is set by "objective circumstances" - the mutual desire of the second party not to save the marriage. In General, respondents were almost never able to clearly answer the question concerning their acquisition of religiosity. They explain this by external circumstances, or by the fact that "that happened." Only in one case, the question of what motivates the Respondent to go to the service every Sunday, to observe the fasts and the Church calendar, we received the answer: "I'm breathing there."

All respondents showed signs of religious conversion, which include:

- awareness of your loneliness;
- the search for communication, similar to the interests of a group of people;
- choosing religious conversion as a strategy to overcome loneliness;
- awareness of the turning point in life that divides your life into "before" and "after" gaining faith.

Religious conversion is one of the most significant and significant factors in the dynamics of religiosity. In the context of social, economic and cultural changes taking place in society, the methodology of the study of religious conversion becomes particularly relevant. In my opinion, the stage of religious conversion, which becomes a turning point in the biography, is

the most important for understanding how religious views of modern man are formed. Sociological interpretation of biographical narratives of envelopes allows to reveal how in the process of awareness of own loneliness the strategy of overcoming of loneliness is created or chosen.

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