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APPROACHING ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Abstract. The development of modern societies is largely associated with ethno-religious and religious processes. The study of ethnicities, societies or other groups through the prism of religious processes, first of all, aims to identify the impact of religious consciousness and behavior on the processes of reproduction of ethnic or group identity. It is the religion that is most often associated with ethnic or group culture. Due to the characteristics of the country of residence, religious, ethnic, cultural or political segments, the same ethnic or other group may exhibit differing religious behaviors. Religious processes have become a prominent topic of social inquiry, with scholars across various disciplines examining concepts like religiosity, religious identity, worldview, consciousness, and behavior. This area of study presents a crucial, intriguing, and inherently complex facet of modern social sciences. Yet, the question of theoretical and methodological approaches in studying this subject remains open in scientific discourse. For example, the issues of religiosity often go beyond the scope of theoretical research, and their social significance requires the use of applied analytical capabilities, as the latter is dictated by the need to identify the place of religious consciousness and behavior in social processes in the context of transformation of modern societies and during periods of reforms and crisis. Religious belonging, practices and traditions are the key factors in defining cultural identity of an ethnic/religious minority groups. The emphasis becomes stronger in multi-religious societies, where religion and religious affiliation determine the self-identity of a group, thus becoming one of the pillars of preserving its cultural heritage. This paper examines the unique challenges and considerations involved in studying the phenomenon of ethno-religious identity. It analyzes the complex interplay between ethnic and religious identities that forms the core structure of ethno-religious identity. Drawing on the author's research experience, the paper provides an overview of the theoretical, ideological, and empirical approaches utilized in studying this complex phenomenon.

Keywords: ethno-religious identity; religiosity; ethnic group; religious group; historical analysis; methodology

Исследовательская статья

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ОСОБЕННОСТИ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ЭТНОРЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ

Аннотация. Развитие современных обществ во многом связано с этнорелигиозными и религиозными процессами. Изучение этносов или иных групп сквозь призму религиозных процессов, прежде всего, направлено на выявление влияния религиозного сознания и поведения на процессы воспроизводства этнической или групповой идентичности. Порою, именно религия ассоциируется с этнической культурой. В зависимости от особенностей страны проживания, ее религиозных, этнических, культурных или политических сегментов, представители одной и той же этничности или группы могут демонстрировать разное религиозное поведение. Сегодня религиозные процессы обсуждаются в широком социальном аспекте. Понятия религиозности, религиозной идентичности, мировоззрения, сознания и поведения являются объектом различных исследований. Это одно из важных, интересных и в то же время сложных направлений современной гуманитарной науки. Однако вопрос о теоретико-методологических подходах изучения данного феномена остается открытым в научном дискурсе. К примеру, вопросы религиозности часто выходят за рамки теоретических исследований, а их социальная значимость требует использования прикладных аналитических возможностей. Последнее продиктовано необходимостью выявления места религиозного сознания и поведения в социальных процессах в условиях трансформации современных обществ, а также в периоды реформ и чрезвычайных ситуаций. Религиозная принадлежность, обычаи и традиции являются ключевыми факторами в определении культурной идентичности этнических и/или религиозных меньшинств. Акцент усиливается в поликонфессиональном обществе, где религия и религиозная принадлежность определяют самоидентичность группы, становясь тем самым одним из столпов сохранения ее культурного наследия. Целью статьи является представление особенностей изучения феномена этнорелигиозной идентичности. Предпринята попытка анализа специфического взаимодействия этнической и религиозной идентичности, образующего общую структуру этнорелигиозной идентичности. Анализ основан на исследовательском опыте автора и представляет собой обзор теоретических, идеологических и эмпирических подходов в изучении феномена.

Ключевые слова. Этнорелигиозная идентичность, религиозность, этнос, религиозная группа, исторический анализ, методология

Introduction

The concept of "identity" is widely used today in ethnology, psychology, cultural and social anthropology, oriental studies, religious studies, sociology and in many interdisciplinary researches. In the most generalised sense, it means a person's awareness of his belonging to any human community, enabling one to determine one's place in the real socio-cultural space. The need for identity is caused by a person's need for orderliness of his life activity in a specific community of people [1].

In the context of globalisation processes and intense interethnic contacts, where it is assumed that features and unique social and cultural phenomena can be integrated and lost, it turns out that it is the ethnic and religious groups that are the most stable and invariable. Despite the trend of standardisation, the unique ethnic and religious identity has not gone anywhere [2: 337; 1; 3: 116]. Moreover, recently the thesis about the unavoidability of secularisation and the decline of religion has been changing its course. The term "post-secular" is increasingly used in relation to the world, society and era. "Post-secular" means the return of religion to the domain of modern society [4: 9].

As modern societies become more urbanized, individuals become increasingly estranged [5: 408, 414, 423], leading to a general sense of instability in the modern world. This, in turn, increases the desire to seek out a comfortable social and cultural microenvironment. The latter is commonly marked with social, demographic, cultural, etc. signs that link the personality to "people alike". In that concept the most stable can be the consolidations on the basis of sensation of common blood, origin, memory, history, representations, values and functions [6: 390–392]. It is obvious that these requirements are met by associations based on ethnic and religious sensitivities, both in individual and interconnected systems.

Therefore, modernization and unification trends, while not eliminating ethnic ties and identity [3: 116], can even stimulate the emergence of strong ethnocentric forces alongside rapidly evolving transnational and trans-communal experiences [2: 352]. This phenomenon is further amplified by the close connection between ethnic and religious components, where this interdependence manifests within the religious domain as well.

Basic concepts and approaches

Our approach is based on the specific interactions of ethnic and religious identities. These relations play a key role in understanding the worldview of a specific ethnic, ethno-religious or religious group.

In accordance with currently adopted formulations, ethnic identity can be characterised as part of the overall social identity of the individual, which refers to understanding, acceptance and attribution of belonging to a particular ethnic group [7]. In the same vein, religious identity can be considered as a form of group and individual identity, based on the awareness of belonging to a particular religion, forming perceptions through the relevant religious beliefs.

By virtue of the function of social regulation inherent in religion, the religious identity in one case enables to replace, and in the other case to superimpose on the feeling of ethnic

identity contributing to its consolidation through generations [8: 263–266]. Hence, the ethno-religious identity can be considered as one of the forms of ethnic identity [9: 137] imbued with a certain religious worldview and spirituality.

Each ethnic community develops a unique value system, hierarchy, and spiritual life in a specific period of time. The form in which these elements are ultimately expressed depends on many factors of influence, such as political (geopolitical), cultural, demographic, geographical (climatic), and ethno-religious factors.

Thus, the study of ethno-religious identity should aim to identify the mechanisms of self-preservation of ethnic or other groups based on the religious component both in certain historical periods or throughout the whole historical timeline.

Analysis of the theory

Nowadays within the framework of theoretical approaches (ethnological, sociological, philosophical, religious, cultural, anthropological etc.) to the phenomenon of ethno-religious identity, we can observe the following. The philosophical approach advocates examining the phenomenon not only as it currently exists (how it presents and manifests within society) but also in its ideal or potential form – what should be its dynamics, based on certain relationships, and interdependencies [10: 18].

Cultural theories indicate that each cultural system (and the ethno-religious component, as its part) is formed by a number of distinctive and unique features for the particular system, and it is obvious that the content of these kind of systems and the variates of the relationships in it can be quite diverse [11].

Both in ethnocultural life of society and ethnos [12: 174–176] as well as in strengthening social and ethnic solidarity [13: 63] the religious factor has always been given a special role. It has been noted, however, that the religious component is directly related to the ethnocultural homogeneity [14: 173]. In this regard, since the mid-20s the term "ethnic religion" is introduced into circulation [14: 278], and studies on ethno-religious identity are commonly based on it.

Analyzing the religious processes in ethnic society, it is important to understand that they are an integral part of the spiritual and cultural layers of it, determining the scope of meanings and values related to the fundamental aspects of the human being and the existence of ethnos. These layers are traditionally formed in society as an independent social institution, which is in close connection with other infrastructures.

Thus, in studying religious processes, the concepts of religiosity and spirituality become fundamental in this aspect. They are considered to be the spiritual, cultural and social characteristics of a representative of a particular group, which is expressed in the adoption of certain religious beliefs, self-identification and the choice of a behavior model at the individual and group levels [15: 49].

However, when regarding this phenomenon, we observe that the religious component can have some variations, depending on the factors affecting it, the situation where it manifests, the environment, historical realities, and how it is viewed by the community and the individual, what system it belongs to, spiritual or cultural, ecclesiastical or social, whether it is an innate or acquired quality.

According to Eliade, before trying to define the phenomenon of the religious component in any group, it is necessary to discuss the "facts" of a given religious system, mainly those facts that appear "in their purest form" and, perhaps, are closer to their main "source" [16: 10–11].

Since the end of the 20th century, researchers have favored an integrated approach to the concept of the religious component of ethnicity. This approach emphasizes the simultaneous consideration of multiple variables to explain patterns of behavior and cognition. Key elements include religious activities (participation in worship, visiting holy places, adherence to behavioral norms), religious consciousness (self-identification, acceptance of dogma, integration of religious norms into life, desire for spiritual knowledge), depth of faith, and degree of spirituality. Together, these elements offer a comprehensive understanding of the religious component within a particular group [17: 136–143].

Durkheim, in turn, argues that the religious component is inseparable from the concept of a church, emphasizing the inherently collective nature of religion [12: 44].

The migration research indicates that the religious organizations help immigrants to adapt faster to a new social and ethnic environment and the success of adaptation is ensured mainly by the religious factors of adaptation as well [18].

During periods of social and political change, religion frequently serves as a defining marker of ethnic identity. In some instances, it even takes on the role of a political factor or a crucial element in nation-building. This underscores the significant role religion plays in human history and the life of ethnic communities.

Furthermore, to fully understand the religious component within a particular ethnicity, it should be perceived in its true essence and the approach to it should be "with the same religious yardstick". Without this approach, the researcher risks overlooking the core element that defines the religious component – its sacred nature [16: 7].

When investigating the concept of ethno-religious identity, it's necessary to begin with the understanding that culture and the lives of ethnic groups are interconnected. Culture, while multi-faceted, is largely shaped by the practice of religion. A society or ethnic group that loses its religious foundations risks a subsequent erosion of its cultural identity [4: 3–7].

Thus, studies of ethno-religious identity are important in terms of understanding ethno-cultural (and/or ethno-religious) mechanisms of self-preservation of an ethnic or religious group, its current state, prospects for development in the context of its own and foreign (ethnic, religious or confessional) environment.

Analysis of methodology

The article also aims to develop a methodological basis for the study of ethno-religious identity. Exploring the dynamics of the development of the ethno-religious identity, it is supposed to work not only within the study of its current situation, influencing factors and phenomena, development prospects, but also in the framework of a comparative historical analysis. The combination of modern and historical layers of the phenomenon makes it possible to identify certain patterns, the analysis of which can be used in the development of the concepts in the formulation of theoretical and methodological basis.

A long-term strategy for this kind of research should be identifying the mechanisms for the reproduction of spiritual values, so called "ethno-spiritual" life typical for the study

group. In future, research may provide an opportunity to form a concept of the current ethno-cultural processes in the frame of an ethnic group.

Based on the materials of comparative field surveys, it is possible to fix the features of religious consciousness and behaviour inherent in this particular ethnicity. Among the tasks, the priority may be:

Determining the level of influence of the religious component on the state of ethnicity, ethnic consolidation and development;

Identifying factors that influence or provoke changes in ethno-religious identity of an ethnic group;

Exploring mechanisms by which individuals understand their own ethno-religious identity;

Investigating the role of the national church in the formation and development of ethnicity;

Identifying resurfacing, revitalizing, and fading spiritual and cultural values underlying ethno-religious identity;

Examining the degree of perception of social reality through the prism of ethnic and religious categories specific to a particular ethnic group;

Defining multi-identity issues, etc.

In order to obtain more information, it is important to measure the segmentation of ethno-religious communities according to the following criteria: nature of settlement (compactness-dispersion), level of self-organisation (political, social, cultural, economic, etc.), ethnic and social environment, demographic status (gender, age and family structure, migration dynamics), origin, confession, etc. [19: 12–20].

All of the above are intended to uncover problems in empirical research into the correlation of religious and ethnic identities in order to identify the religiously-based self-preservation mechanisms of ethnic communities.

Conclusions

Therefore, examining the phenomenon of ethno-religious identity through comparative historical analysis reveals its inherent complexity. This complexity stems from the intertwined nature of its ethnic and religious content of the phenomenon, which is not only shaped by contemporary influences but also necessitates a long-term historical perspective. Thus, the study of ethno-religious identity should involve tracing its historical development, taking into account both external and internal influences, and potentially anticipating its future transformations.

It is crucial to acknowledge that under specific historical circumstances, the ethnic and religious aspects of identity can become deeply intertwined, even seemingly inseparable. In such cases, religion becomes inextricably linked to the ethnic group's culture, national heritage, and other defining elements. Consequently, the national church and religion serve as the custodians of the group's historical and cultural legacy. Furthermore, in situations of statelessness or risk of assimilation, ethnicity can create a cultural barrier within the group's collective consciousness, encompassing religious traditions, language, history, and the memory of a specific territory. And once this barrier collapses, assimilation occurs [20: 15].

When creating such a cultural and ideological barrier, opposing a certain "opponent" (meaning different types of assimilation), there is a further formation of a special kind of ethno-religious identity of this ethnos both in its own and in a foreign environment. And in the transition to other religions, confessions or ethnic groups, however, there may be a gradual decline in the basic indicators of the ethno-religious identity of the group [18: 151]. As a result, one of the main goals of studying ethno-religious identity is to identify the basic markers and indicators of this phenomenon, which can be considered in the future solving issues of ethno-religious or religious reconversion.

In the context of certain historical, cultural and religious characteristics ethnic groups are able to form a specific type of ethno-religious identity, an important niche of which occupies a high cultural background. However, if, due to the historical circumstances, that kind of background is absent or poorly manifested, a different kind of identity is formed on the basis of the concepts of resettlement territory and/or relatively newly formed state. In this type of group identity, ethnic and religious components develop later, emerging alongside the development of state or territorial identity or nationalism. Initially, a unique intra-territorial solidarity forms. This is followed by a distinct intra-territorial religiosity, often with regional characteristics. As these factors gain prominence in the socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic spheres of the society, they ultimately contribute to the overall social consolidation of the group.

Comparative empirical research on ethno-religious identity offers valuable insights into the dynamics of ethno-religious processes. By examining religious consciousness, behaviour, opinions, and assessments within specific ethnic groups, researchers can identify patterns and regularities. The findings of the case studies and their analyses may be considered as experience in the systematic follow-up of ethno-religious processes, that are complex and require a close in-depth approach, since the dynamics of those processes are in contact with religion, which is essential for the group's vitality and reproduction.

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