

The Network Analysis of Virtual Religious Communities in the Russian–Mongolian Borderlands

Svetlana Maximova^{1, 2, *}, Daria Omelchenko^{1, 2}, Sophia Chistyakova^{1, 2}

¹Laboratory of Fundamental and Applied Research, Russian Biotechnological University, Moscow, Russia

²Department of Social and Youth Policy, Altai State University, Barnaul, Russia

Email address:

Svet-maximova@yandex.ru (Svetlana Maximova), daria.omelchenko@mail.ru (Daria Omelchenko), malyavko@mail.asu.ru (Sophia Chistyakova)

*Corresponding author

Abstract

In the digital age, religious communities colonize the internet, engendering identity with a fundamentally networked nature. Digitalization intensifies the fragmentation of the religious scene and transforms religious practices in the “offline world.” The internet and digital environment, along with new social media, are becoming full-fledged conduits of religious worldviews, culture, and values; they become not only primary sources of information but also carriers of meaning and regulators of the “rules of the game,” while geographical characteristics become less significant. To describe the virtual religious landscape in the regions of the Russian–Mongolian borderlands, characterized by multi-layered and mosaic ethno-confessional structures and a “frontier” nature, the research combining classical tools of social network analysis with a netnographic approach was conducted. In total, 280 virtual religious communities in five Russian regions (Altai Krai, the Altai Republic, the Tyva Republic, the Republic of Buryatia, and Zabaykalsky Krai) and 67 in four Mongolian aimags (Bayan-Ölgii, Khovd, Khövsgöl, and Selenge) were selected on the most widely used social networking platforms (VKontakte in Russia and Facebook in Mongolia) according to two main criteria: (1) an explicit religious orientation and (2) a connection to elements of the “offline” religious landscape—churches, cathedrals, monasteries, and parishes. The results confirmed that social media platforms maintain religious networks, complementing and, in some cases, replacing offline interactions. The most influential groups within each confession are those devoted to the activities of the largest or most authoritative central churches (cathedrals, historical datsans), reflecting administrative resources and integrative potential. However, informal communities uniting believers from several regions can sometimes be even more significant, since they are usually larger and publish more neutral, non-region-specific content, which has greater potential to attract attention and spread more widely thanks to its universality. The analysis of Mongolian communities revealed differences driven both by legal restrictions and by the dominance of Buddhism in the religious self-identification of the population: they tend to have a predominantly informational or cultural-educational profile, while their network structures are less dense. A comparative analysis of regions identified common patterns: women constitute the majority of participants, the audience is predominantly composed of middle-aged and older individuals (with the exception of Protestant youth groups), and the geographical composition of subscribers often extends beyond the region itself, indicating the emergence of translocal networks of religious support and identification.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Virtual Religious Communities, Russian–Mongolian Borderlands, Social Network Analysis, Ethno-confessional Landscape