

O. S. PETRIAIEV

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6561-2647>

National Institute for Strategic Studies, Kyiv

DIGITAL CHURCH: RELIGION ON THE INTERNET, AS A NEW STAGE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE OF POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Наукові праці МАУП. Серія Політичні науки, 2019, вип. 58(2), с. 59–67

<https://doi.org/10.32689/2523-4625-2019-02/58-59-67>

The article discusses the activities of the religious organization Fellow in the Internet space in Ukraine in the context of globalization and digitalization of society.

The globalization of society based on digital technologies dictates new conditions for the existence of society, which gradually affect all areas of human activity, including the spiritual. The Internet, as part of the global world, has become a field of confrontation between different religions and their movements for a spiritual human resource. In the article, the author investigated the activities of the first religious organization called “Fallow”, which is a Christian movement fully functioning in the Internet, which transmits religious information through social platforms of mobile communicators, bypassing traditional church parishes, clergy, religious rites and sacraments.

The Article aim is to study the impact on the information security of Ukraine in the context of further globalization of the information based on the emergence of new digital technologies as an example of the expansion of the new religious movement of Protestant church the “Christian Vision.”

Historical changes, in the social, economic and political spheres, have always led to a change in the relationship between religion and society, a reformation of the religious teaching itself and its structural organization. Every time the world was on the verge of a change in the economic system, this led to a change in religion. For example, paganism was the religion of the slave system, in which there was a Hellenic, Roman and eastern direction. By the fourth century of the new era, the bureaucratic system of the Roman Empire demanded a new centralized monotheistic religion, in connection with which, paganism remained the religion of the conservative part of the empire, and the plebeians adopted the Christian mono religion. Economic changes, and the transition from a slaveholding model of the economy to a feudal one based on agriculture, led to the accelerated spread of Christianity in Europe. The carrier of ideology, a new economic formation, was Christianity, which since the reign of Emperor Constantine I gained the status of state religion.

Despite the fact that the Christian church at the beginning of its existence served the purposes of the slave system, with a change in the economy and the transition from a slave system to a feudal system, many bishops of the western part of the Roman Empire entered into an alliance with large landowners and barbarian kings, instilling in them Christian holiness and protection their requirements for unlimited power. The church tried to adapt to political, economic and social changes, and adapt to the needs of the new ruling class of feudal kingdoms of barbarians [1].

In further history, religion again adapted to the scrapping of the economic formation. In the 16th century, the teaching of Protestantism began to develop as an ideology that counteracts the monopoly of Catholicism. The most influential Protestant theologians were Martin Luther and Jean Calvin. The struggle of the Protestant church against the Catholic Church in history was called the “era of the Reformation”. One of the most important reasons that influenced the emergence of Protestant teachings was the economy. In the 16th century, a new economic class of the bourgeoisie was actively forming, which needed a new ideology. The Catholic Church supported the feudal system, which was based on large landowners. And the Catholic Church itself owned up to 1/3 of all cultivated land in various European countries. Protestantism, which opposed the monopoly of the Catholic Church, advocated not only the reformation of the church, but also contributed to the revival of culture and science, called the “era of enlightenment”. The transition to the era of the Reformation has become one of the main reasons for the emergence of Protestant creeds and a new stage in the development of the Christian religion in Europe [2].

Historically new methods of production and labor, pushed people to search for a new religion, or a new interpretation of religion, ideology and philosophy. The new digital era, which is now replacing the industrial one, also could not but affect the changes in religion, in particular in Christianity.

The development of digital technologies, as well as technologies, the increasingly predominant transmission of information through the Internet, has led to a significant change in the social and cultural life of people. Many areas of life, such as work, entertainment, education, dating and religion, have partially gone to the Internet.

The first researcher to raise and study the interaction of religion and the Internet was the American researcher Joshua Kupper Ramo. In 1996, in Time magazine, he published the article “Finding god on the web-across the internet, believers are re-examining their ideas of faith, religion and spirituality”. Ramo noted that by the mid-nineties of the twentieth century, some religious groups, such as American evangelists, Orthodox Jews or Muslims, began to actively use the Internet to connect with believers, disseminate religious literature and coordinate religious rites. The author describes the penetration of creeds into the Internet as a new stage in the development of religion. With new technologies, religion and religious information has become much more accessible to a wide range of people than in ancient times, when religious texts were not accessible to everyone. With the spread of technology digital information transfer, the essence of religion has also begun to

change, since any religion that does not adapt to new cultural and technological changes runs the risk of being forgotten. The Internet began to change not only the behavior of believers, but also their attitude towards God [3].

The American science fiction writer Williams Gibbs, believes that the World Wide Web the Internet itself has realized its existence, and can perceive itself as “God” and be “God”, according to its own rules [4].

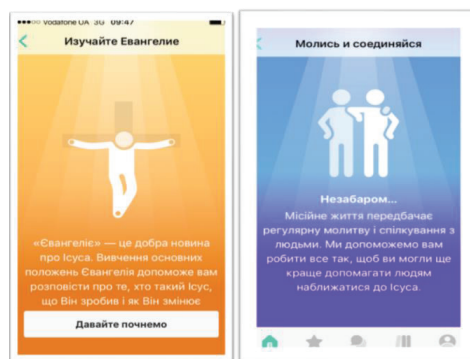
Recently, a phenomenon called the “digital church” has appeared in cyber space. For simplicity of description of the study of the system for building a digital church, we chose a church that appeared in the summer of 2018 in the Russian-language part of the Internet of the religious project Fellow. Unlike the classical church system, which first existed in the physical world, and then collided with the digital world, the Fellow Church first began to spread and preach in the virtual world of the Internet, and only then began to gather groups of believers and conduct sermons in the real world.

In order to know better and learn the essence of the Fellow Church, we visited its website: *“Fellow is a community of young Christians from different countries who are united by faith in Jesus Christ and the desire to make this world a better place. A community that seeks answers in the Bible and God. A community that runs away from meaninglessness, from taking your life, takes energy and pulls you down. We are a charity project of Christian Vision”* [5].

Christian Vision or the abbreviation “CVΦ refers to the Christian evangelical organization, founded in 1988 by the British entrepreneur, public and social activist Lord Edmiston, with headquarters in the UK. This religious organization, at the moment, conducts various Christian projects in many parts of the world, such as: Africa, Asia Pacific, CIS, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America [6].

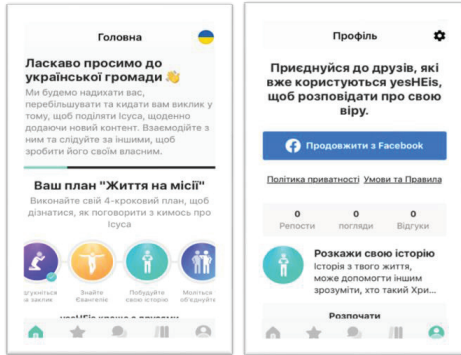
Christian Vision’s missionary strategy involves two approaches. The first strategy is a classic missionary activity in various regions of the world and financing of various Christian projects. The second strategy is digital missionary work, which actively uses gadgets, primarily smartphones and social networks of the Internet, for Christian enlightenment of people.

Thus, the CV organization today actively uses digital technologies, the Internet and, in particular, mobile add-ons to attract more believers (parishioners). To promote its church, Christian Vision uses social platforms such as: Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and **YesHEis** mobile app. For example, you can download this application through the Appstore system. After the download process, the user is given the right to choose a convenient language, age group, group for social and ethnicity, which provides a wide geography of parishioners. The “**YesHEis**” application also allows you to be integrated into the church CV from your Facebook account.



The YesHeis application also allows you to read Bible passages, communicate with other believers, share your religious experiences, stories, overcome difficulties and “sins” [7].

An important element of the promotion of the Fellow project is its popularization, which is achieved through various videos on Youtube, as advertising inserts in front of the selected client of a video.



Lets see a few examples of such advertising on Youtube.

The first thing that attracts attention is the names of the videos, which fit into one, two, three words. For an example, we took a few, the first ones that came across, such names: “Void”, “Vaccine from fear”, “**I have a dream**”, “Explosion of the brain”, “**How to find yourself**” and many other similar names [8–12].

Firstly, the connecting link is the words that carry a negative semantic load: **emptiness, fear, explosion, scary, strange, broken, I do not see**. Secondly, they are knocked out of this series: **I have a dream how to find myself, you are not alone, I will tell you a secret: they are encouraging**. Thirdly, some of these names are nominal, that is, they state a fact (“Void”), and some are effective: they contain verbs in the first person or infinitive, which involves some kind of instruction, parting word. This artistic technique helps to convey the meaning through sounds, in our case, psychological stress, hopelessness.

It is no less interesting to parse the content of the Fellow project videos. For analysis, we take one video with a negative load and one encouraging.

Video 1 — The Void [8].

1. Hello! My name is Christina.
2. I want to tell a story about how my life has changed. I remember very well the time until this moment. I constantly felt some kind of emptiness inside myself, which I tried to fill with various entertainments.

3. I had a girlfriend with whom we often spent time together, were constantly obsessed with something and in search of some joy and happiness. My friend and I found a company where I received a lot of attention from the guys, and, apparently, it seemed outwardly that everything was fine, and I should be happy, **but still I always lacked something inside**. I ended up as if in some kind of race for what could fill me.

4. And one day, my friend invited me to a Christian camp. It was there that I first heard about God. And this was a turning point in my life. The void that was always in me, Christ began to fill.

5. **The presence of God** in my life is my happiness that I have always lacked.

Video 2 — “I have a dream” [10].

1. Hello! Watch this video.

2. I have a dream, Martin Luther King said and became the hero of the Civil Rights Movement. Do you have a dream? Not on a scale, of course, when quarantine ends or this year's rest is not in Turkey, but in Greece, but a big dream that is scary to tell even to your closest friend; a dream that does not rest at bedtime. Many people live with such a dream, cherish it carefully, go to school, university, work, grow old and die, without finding support, not daring to take a step in its direction.

3. But you know, there is someone who wants to be with you along the way, someone who taught us to dream, who puts these very bold thoughts and ideas into our hearts.

4. This is Jesus Christ. He loves you and wants you to be truly happy. And you can entrust him with the most secret dreams.

5. Want to know more, write to us.

The analysis of the content of the given examples of advertising video clips allows us to reveal their compositional content, orientation and psychological techniques of influence.

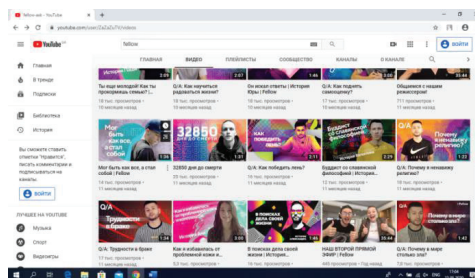
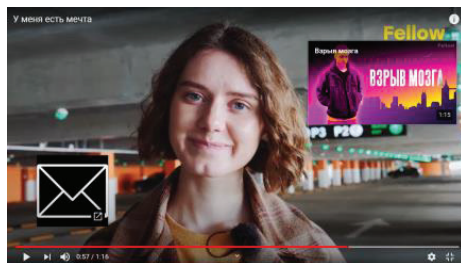
1. All commercials have a duration of not more than one or two minutes, which allows the viewer to remain patient to watch them until the end, without losing interest in them;

2. Plots are built according to the same semantic scheme, regardless of the content:

3. The content of all videos includes concepts such as: loneliness, longing, inner emptiness, loss, hopelessness, lack of understanding of their inner world, need for help, life disorder, etc., which are transmitted by such game effects as a lonely character, gloomy surroundings, empty city, dim light, destroyed premises, etc. In addition, the effect of increasing psychological tension (through muted light tones) is used, passing, to light tones to the end of the plot, through the “knowledge” of Jesus Christ.

4. Production scenes are presented in the form of a played scene or story. The characters are not represented as suffering (as they say their suffering is already behind), but appear to be such that they found a way out of their problems transmitting the easiness, without tension, of their perception. Their movements are smooth and restrained, which testifies not only to the sublime nature of their conversation with the viewer, but also to the certainty of the correct decision. This effect is also achieved by using the soft timbre of the character's voice or tack (voiceover).

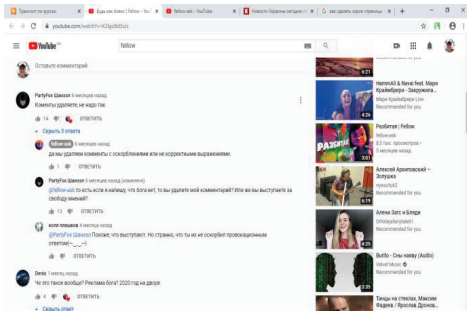
5. It is noteworthy that the advertising is aimed exclusively at a youth audience, which is in a state of various psychological problems: loss, job search or ex-



pression of self, etc., which, in general, is characteristic of the young generation, during adapting them to the new conditions of socialization. In addition, there is also the fact that it is adolescents, in contrast to adults, who are the most active Internet users. Cultural behavior, a neat and modern style of character clothes, act as a selective effect of determining the category of the viewer; attracts the appropriate age and social group of young people to view videos.

6. Actors present their characters in a very professional way, liberated in front of the camera, realistically depict fear, loss and hopelessness, joy or calm in communication; clearly deliver their speech, have full contact with the viewer and, depending on the emotional coloring of the information, change their intonation from hopelessness to hope. An in-depth analysis of the characters' belonging to professional actors showed that some of them are employees of the Misanthrope Theater, created in 2015, whose repertoire of performances has elements of outrageousness [13].

The reaction of viewers to church CV advertisements deserves attention and study.



So, 105 videos have been posted on the Fellow channel. The first video was published on June 25, 2018. Almost all comments are positive reviews, or open admiration for Christianity, Jesus, or the Fellow organization. View of almost all comments on the video showed the absence of at least some comments with negative coloring. This indicates that the creators of the project purposefully remove the negative points of viewers on

advertising projects of the church CV. Consequently, Fellow artificially forms a positive opinion about their organization, through approving comments under his videos. Undesired comments that carry negative meaning are likely to be deleted.

In addition to the Youtube channel described, Fellow also uses Instagram, on which YouTube videos are duplicated. Also posted are colorful pictures with different motivating phrases and “smart” sayings, and an offer to go to the official Fellow website [14]. Appeal to the official Fellow website showed that this religious organization uses cross-platform messengers Telegram and WhatsApp [5].

Thus, for the modern methodology of digital missionary work, most of the social systems and instant messengers that are currently available on various gadgets are used.

The Fellow site itself is very limited information about the religious organization itself. To obtain more detailed information about the activities of this church, we decided to go through the procedure registration on the Fellow website, via e-mail, as its creators suggest.

The results of communication with a representative of the religious organization Fellow showed that the written answers of thier representative are very mean and vague, carry common phrases, for example: “*We created an application*

to inspire you and equip your friends to talk about God". To the question of how your church differs from other churches, our interlocutor answered the following: *"We are not a church, we are an organization, but in our organization, there are people from different churches"* [15].

From this answer, it is possible to conclude that the Fellow organization, is a kind of Internet media, it speaks on behalf of all the diversity around Protestant churches following the teachings of the "Methodists", "Baptists" and "Adventists", with one purpose – to expand and form their flocks on the territory of Ukraine.

Considering the fact that the Constitution of Ukraine secured the right to freedom of worldview and religion, which includes the freedom to profess any religion or not to profess any, unhindered to single-handedly or collectively religious cults and ritual ceremonies, to conduct religious activities, the activity of the Fellow organization is completely legal [16].

At the same time, a question inevitably arises that affects the processes of ensuring information security of Ukraine, in at least three areas:

a) in the context of the further development of a digital society, Western churches, which previously did not have wide access to the population of Ukraine, can now get an unlimited opportunity for missionary work;

b) this, in turn, will inevitably lead to the weakening and fading of Orthodoxy, which, for many centuries, served as the foundation of unity of the country's population;

c) the formation of a future flock based on digital technologies, designed exclusively for the younger generation, can be considered as the next stage in publicly changing public morality in the field of religion (Overton's Window), the final stage of which may be the accusation of the archaism of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In these conditions, the "church in the smartphone" will dominate the traditional church. The COVID-19 epidemic quite clearly outlined the roadmap for the further development of religion.

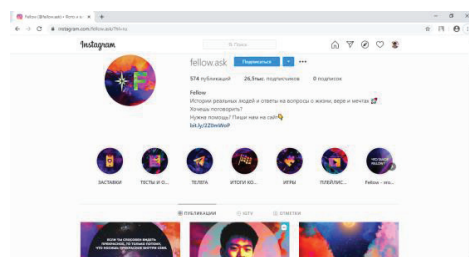
Conclusions. To summarize the above, we denote that:

- The British religious organization (sect) Christian Vision is the first serious attempt to create a global church in the Internet, which must meet the modern requirements of globalizing world;

- This Internet project is aimed at the missionary activity of Protestant churches in Ukraine to influence the teenage audience;

- to form its flock, the organization uses modern Internet applications such as e-mail, Youtube, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, as well as a special application of YesHeis on the mobile gadgets that are actively used by the modern young generation;

- the spread of Protestant organizations like Christian Vision and Fellow will inevitably strike a blow at Orthodoxy in Ukraine, which has been in a split state for three decades;



- the appearance of a Protestant Internet project in Ukraine, in our opinion, should be considered as an element of the country's information security, which is aimed at weakening the dominance of Orthodoxy in this territory;
- in the confrontation between Western Protestant churches and Eastern Orthodox churches, in the context of digitalization and globalization of society, the one who is the first to adapt religion to the new digital age will win by the principle: between smartphone and a person, bypassing traditional church parishes, clergy, religious rites and sacraments. The global pandemic COVID-19 quite clearly outlined the roadmap for the further development of religion.

References

1. Всемирная история. Энциклопедия: Т. 3. (1957 год) (Сборник) Ч. II: Гибель рабовладельческого строя и переход к феодализму в странах Европы и Средней Азии. Возникновение раннефеодальных государств. Глава V. Зарождение феодальных отношений в поздней Римской империи. Передвижения германских и славянских племен [Электронный ресурс] / Сост. Алексей Злыгостев // 'Historic. Ru: Всемирная история'. URL: <http://historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000032/st005.shtml> / (Last accessed: May 29 2020)
2. Бевзюк Н. П. Реформация и европейский мир: Методические рекомендации. [Electronic resource] Одесса: ОНУ им.И.И.Мечникова, 2012. 31 с. URL: <http://fs.onu.edu.ua/clients/client11/web11/metod/filos/bevzjuk.pdf/> (Last accessed: 15.07.2020)
3. Ramo J. C. Finding God On The Web. Across The Internet, Believers Are Re-Examining Their Ideas Of Faith, Religion And Spirituality [Electronic resource] // TIME. 16.12.1996. URL : <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,985700-1,00.html> // (Last accessed: May 29 2020)
4. Valovic T. Digital Mythologies: The Hidden Complexities of the Internet. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2000. С. 77. 219 с.
5. Fellow (сообщество молодых христиан) [Electronic resource]. URL : <https://fellow.site/ru-l/ru/> // (Last accessed: May 29 2020)
6. CV (Christian Vision) [Electronic resource] / URL : <https://www.cvglobal.co/ru/%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81/%D0%B3%D0%B4%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D1%8B-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%BC/> // (Last accessed: May 29 2020)
7. yesHEis (Ініціатива CV) [Electronic resource] / URL : <https://uk.yesheis.com/ua/> // (Last accessed: May 22 2020)
8. Пустота | История Кристины | Fellow [Electronic resource] // YouTube. Google LLC. URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtvZhOKHajU/> (Last accessed: June 06 2020)
9. Вакцина от страха| Fellow [Electronic resource] // YouTube. Google LLC. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE2DwfVktw4/> (Last accessed: July 16 2020)
10. У меня есть мечта| Fellow [Electronic resource] // YouTube. Google LLC. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDFBsLkTj9s> (Last accessed: July 16 2020)
11. Взрыв мозга| Fellow [Electronic resource] // YouTube. Google LLC. URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB5c-B3wPVI/> (Last accessed: July 16 2020)
12. Как найти себя?| Fellow [Electronic resource] // YouTube. Google LLC. URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIkvEfTVX2A> (Last accessed: July 16 2020)
13. Театр Мізантроп [Електронний ресурс]. URL: <http://misanthrope.com.ua/#rec50320776/> / (Last accessed: June 06 2020)

14. Fellow.ask. URL: <https://www.instagram.com/fellow.ask/?hl=ru> / (Last accessed: June 04 2020)
15. Переписка с одним из членов религиозной организации. URL: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1234015783626635&id=100010546740299
16. Конституція України: Закон України від 28 червня 1996 р. Редакція від 01.01.2020 р. [Електронний ресурс] // Верховна Рада України Законодавство України. URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/254%D0%BA/96-%D0%B2%D1%80> / (Last accessed: April 16 2020).

Петряев О. С. Цифрова церква: релігія в інтернет-просторі як новий етап духовного життя постіндустріального суспільства.

Розглядається поява в Українському сегменті інтернету нового протестантського руху Christian Vision і його цифрового крила Fellow. Простежуються зміни релігії в історичному контексті, від епохи рабовласництва, де головною релігією було язичництво, перехід до феодального ладу, де панувало християнство і сучасні зміни в християнстві, викликані реальністю постіндустріального суспільства. Сучасні релігійні організації оцінили можливість інформаційних технологій і використовують їх для своєї місіонерської діяльності. Релігійний рух Fellow з'явився в Українському інтернет-просторі у 2018 р. Його релігійна діяльність націлена на молоде покоління українців, приблизно віком від 15 до 30 років. Для поширення своїх релігійних ідей, рух Fellow використовує соціальні мережі і цифрові програми, такі як Youtube, YesHeis, Facebook, Telegram, Whatsapp.

Поява релігійних рухів Christian Vision і Fellow несуть загрозу для православ'я в Україні. По-перше, такі організації перетягують молодих українських віруючих в протестантизм, по-друге, дії цих організацій несуть загрозу для духовної безпеки держави.

<https://doi.org/10.32689/2523-4625-2019-02/58-59-67>

Надійшла 8 грудня 2019 р.