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## Political Cults as a New Phenomenon of Religious Studies

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### Abstract

The article investigates the study of political cults, the emergence of which is the result of ongoing processes in the religious sphere in the post-secular period. These processes include the active formation and development of new religious movements and politicization of the religion. The growth of their influence is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the post-Soviet period was characterized by a crisis of religious and national identity, which facilitated the growth of people's interest in the non-traditional religiosity. Secondly, there was an increase in the desire of religious groups to participate in the political process by any means in the 90s. As a result, such processes generate a controversial phenomenon of "political cult". This article includes an attempt to consider and analyze the approaches to the definition of the "political cult" concept available in the current literature. To this end, we have chosen a systematic approach that enables, considering the constructivist and instrumental features of this phenomenon, to consider it from the point of view of a structural, functional and strategic model. This approach made it possible to identify specific features of the political cult, distinguishing it from political parties and individual religious-political entities.

**Keywords:** Political cult, Religious and political associations, Religion politicization, New religious movements, Party.

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## **Introduction**

Political cults are a new "controversial" phenomenon, formed on the basis of intensively developing interdisciplinary researches at the intersection of political science and religious studies, which is used to designate a special kind of social organizations and movements in the political life of human society. Despite the special interest in this phenomenon, it still remains insufficiently studied theoretically and methodologically. This confirms the absence of a unified definition of the "political cult" concept and the specialized researches in the emergence and evolution of political cults.

This phenomenon is new both for political science and for religious studies. It has not been institutionalized in the scientific community yet. Perhaps the problem belongs to the interdisciplinarity. Different scientific directions focus their attention on certain aspects of this phenomenon. The scientific literature more often describes the individual religious organizations that seek to penetrate power and implement their ideas through the political institutions on a global scale. The factual material is necessary, but it requires additional comprehension, analysis and systematization. And a comprehensive study of the "political cult" phenomenon is absent in the domestic science. For the political scientists, the issues on the relationship of political cults with political parties, the methods they use and tools to achieve their goals remain relevant. From the point of view of both political science and religious studies, the issue whether all political cults are destructive remains relevant. The lack of a common understanding of this phenomenon leads to a difficulty in identifying the criteria for their typologization and determining their impact on society.

The few existing studies analyze either cults in general, emphasizing their active participation in politics, or consider the political role and tactics of the sects, or study the examples of political cults in the individual countries. We can single out the following scientists among the most famous ones who have devoted their works to the study of various aspects of the phenomenon we are considering: D. Tourish & T. Wohlforth (2002), G. Evans (1998), M. Dorraj (2006), O'Toole (1976), V. Martinovich (2015), F. Putintsev (1935), Ya. Zdorovets & Mukhin (2005).

The absence of a single categorical conceptual apparatus often leads to a substitution of concepts and difficulties in conducting interdisciplinary analysis and typology of organizations. Currently, there are many religious and pseudo-religious associations that offer a wide range of relation options to political life, ways to transform it and the expected results of such action.

There are organizations that differ in their characteristics among the religious-political associations, for example, the party "Volya" ("Will") by S. Peunova, the Lyndon LaRouche Movement, the "Russian Liberation Movement", the "National-Sovereign Party of Russia", the political bloc of the neo-Pagan groups, including the "Black Order of SS" by E. Golovnin, VASAMF (the World Anti-Zionist and Anti-Masonic Front), "Pamyat" ("Memory") by V. Emelyanov, the "Union of Veneds" by V. Bezverkhiiy and some others. But can all of them be attributed to the political cults?

For a better understanding of the specific nature of the "political cult" concept it is important to identify the criteria distinguishing the political cults from other socio-political organizations, in particular, to determine their relationship with the broader concept of "political party".

## **Methods**

The main methodological approach of this study is a systematic approach to the study of political cults. This is due to the fact that there has not formed a holistic view of this phenomenon at the present time in the scientific community. Most of the works are based on the descriptive methods. It is made some separate attempts to systematize the disparate facts about the participation of new religious movements in politics. In this regard, in our opinion, the application of the system approach will allow studying the new phenomenon of "political cults" in terms of structural, strategic and functional models. This will help to determine how this phenomenon will take root in the scientific community, what features it has, and whether it will be able to unite such different religious and political associations.

## **Results and discussion**

The presence of political cults is characteristic of the vast majority of countries and almost all political systems. Their formation and development has been due to the nature of religious doctrines of a new type, the essence of modern culture, which allows the existence of mythological, religious and secular types of outlook on a parity basis, as well as almost all possible versions of their synthesis. The political methods and practices offered within these systems are often the result of the widespread dissemination of an industrial culture with all its inalienable attributes.

From the point of view of political science, the emergence of political cults is not a natural process of political development of the society, but a flaw in the process of democratization, political transformation and radical politicization of religion. With a favorable combination of

a number of circumstances and the appropriate social and political prerequisites, the national-religious ideology of initially few, even marginal groups, can capture the minds of political leaders and the broad people masses and turn into the dominant one. For example, when U. Andropov was at power, the radical and extremist organizations, which differed in that they used religious ideas to cover up chauvinist, racist, fascist and other dangerous views and ideas emerged in Russia in the late 1980s.

Formation and development of political cults can also be considered a symbol and a sign of political modernization as their activity is galvanized in the critical historical periods, often due to the socio-economic and political crises. Thus, political cults can also arise as a response to politics. For example, the repeal of Article 6 of the Constitution of the USSR and the adopted law "On Public Associations" in the 1990s contributed to the emergence of new political organizations and associations based on left, right, centrist ideology or having no ideology on the political proscenium. The intensification of political processes in the country was accompanied by the formation of many new nationalist and religious movements that sought to enter the power structures of the state. It was formed the first religious political parties, absorbing the fragmented groups, in the activities of which the ideological extremes subsequently led to the adoption of a law on their prohibition.

The political cults started to emerge simultaneously with political parties as an integral part of mass politics. Initially, they were no more than the groups of like-minded people who united around some notable figure or principle in respect of which they had some consent.

However, both political parties and political cults were unstable entities that differed little from each other at that time. As noted by D. Tourish and T. Wohlforth, an insane activity and a strong sense of group identity made it difficult to distinguish between the political parties and the groups achieving such obsession that they could be considered as cults (2002: 4).

Are political parties and political cults so alike? From a religious point of view, the political cults, unlike political parties, have a pronounced negative coloring. From the point of view of domestic political science, the term "political cult" is synonymous with a "political sect" and does not exist as an independent phenomenon. As a rule, the political analysts describe extremist or terrorist organizations that use a religious factor to achieve personal and political goals of the leaders of extremist and terrorist groups, without uniting them under one concept.

The creation and activities of political parties whose goals and actions are aimed at carrying out the extremist activities, as well as the creation of political parties on the grounds of professional, racial, national or religious affiliations are prohibited at the legislative level in

the Russian Federation. This situation becomes fair, if we turn to the history of our country and analyze the consequences of religious and party building in the 90s.

Unlike political parties, the term "political cult" is not normatively defined, is not fixed and does not have an unambiguous interpretation in science. Within the framework of religious studies, there are two main complementary conceptual approaches to understanding the essence of political cults, differing in the choice of criteria for identifying their specific cases: motivational-ideological and functional.

The first approach is aimed at revealing the interpenetration of ideological constructions of religion and their practical political variations in the implementation of goals aimed at transforming the social and political life. The most general definition in the first approach is formulated by V.A. Martinovich. "Political cults are extremist, nationalist, terrorist and other groups that justify their program of political actions with the help of some religious or pseudo-religious doctrine" (2015: 108-109). The advantage of this definition is that it does not predetermine in advance the nature and real compatibility of the goals and methods of struggle, but leaves these issues open for a specific study.

However, this approach involves an explanation of meaning of the religious extremism. It seems that religious extremism should be understood as activity in the sphere of interreligious relations, which is expressed in violent attempts to impose a certain system of religious beliefs on society, as well as justification of such activity. It is not accidental that V.A. Martinovich points out that the "religious doctrine is assumed by them [*representatives of the political cult*] as the main guarantee of the success of all their future political undertakings and activities. Accordingly, the coming to power is invariably associated with the subsequent widespread dissemination of this doctrine among the population of the country. Belonging to the cult presupposes both agreement with its political program and acceptance of its dogma" (2015: 108-109). Indeed, the religious factor is often used to implement the very specific interests of various forces and actors of political action.

The second approach is focused on the study of the functions of political cults performed by them in the society, the ways of their action in the society and the definition of their role in the political system. However, it is important to understand that the political cults can manifest themselves in different ways and their functions may not coincide in different countries.

For example, D. Tourish and T. Wohlforth define the political cult as a destructive organization that changes individuality, subordinates it to the laws and needs of the cult, creating taboos that eliminate doubts and criticism and create certain mental attitudes,

whereby the cult members see themselves as a lonely missionary struggling with all his strength with the surrounding enemy forces to bring prosperity to the world (2002: 3).

As a rule, people live in fantasy about what kind of society and state will be when they seize the state power or will be able to exert significant influence on it both in the political party and in the political culture. There are political cults that are sure that the political positions and preferences will be irrelevant in an improved society of the future, since any social differences and political boundaries will be completely erased.

However, despite certain external similarities, both approaches to the definition of "political cult" show the structural-functional and organizational differences between the political parties and cults. Moreover, it is important to note that, despite possible similarities in political ideology, the political parties and political cults differ in means of achieving their goals and their implementation, as well as attitudes toward dissenters.

So, for example, the main value of political cults is the notion of justice, which is understood as an inalienable right to avenge the offender. Thus, if opponents are regarded as competitors in a political party, then all dissidents are either enemies needed to be liquidated or potential members needed to be recruited in the cult.

However, are all political cults destructive? This is a complex and yet little studied issue in the modern domestic socio-political thought. The Western religious studies are more characterized by the negativist interpretation of the cult, manifested in the theological disagreements and threats of the cult's activity to the society. It is especially manifested in the supporters of the anti-cult and the counterculture movements.

If we analyze it from the point of view of political science, then it is difficult to give an unambiguous answer to this issue. This is due to the fact that the political cults use different means to declare themselves and their position: from political indifference to active radical methods (participation in uprisings, revolutions, committing terrorist acts and taking responsibility for the most prominent of them in order to attract attention and spread of fear among the population; calls for a radical change in political life and the overthrow of government bodies).

There are some cults that believe that the cause of catastrophic situation in the modern world is the very nature of political power, which is devilish in nature. However, even in this case, it is necessary to be critical of the statements of certain organization about power, and not automatically add it to the extremist organizations as they may manifest the asocial orientation and the absence of aggressive attitude towards the dominant political system.

## Conclusions

Thus, on the one hand, there are political cults that try to integrate themselves into the political process of their country and find their niche in it (it is similar with the opposition political parties in this). In this context, the political cults can be viewed as an intermediate stage in the development of a political organization by transforming it from a client to a political party, provided that the legal framework is recognized and enforced.

On the other hand, there are also the most radical political cults that criticize the activities of public authorities and political parties representing the interests of the people. By blaming them for failing to respond to the emerging trends in modern societies and unwillingness to address or pay attention to many serious problems, the political cults tend to take their place to replace the existing state system and build a new world order.

At the same time, the religious-nationalist ideology and the sectarian organizational nature of political cults have a negative impact on their ability to become full-fledged subjects of the modern political process. Therefore, they use semi-legal and illegal methods to implement their goals and intentions. They include the following ones: the creation of autonomous communities, groups, departments, which can participate in the separatist movement under certain circumstances; the unification of several groups or their entry into larger right-wing radical organizations; the creation of illegal combat groups, detachments with the possible conduct of partisan (terrorist) activities.

But in most cases, the political cults are an amorphous, structureless, uncondensed type of political structure whose goal for adherents is personal ecstatic experience, salvation, and for the leader - attainment of a personal higher good by moving to a new level. In this case, the politics is only an instrument for implementing one's own ambitions and the requests of the cult leader. That is why the successes of a cult are the wisdom of the leader, and the failures are the slowness, sluggishness of its members. As a rule, such organizations eventually become outlawed. For example, the "Navi Church".

The political cults build different models of interaction with the outside world. They include: religious escapism (moving away from the outside world), theocratic interaction model, authoritarian, democratic, totalitarian and anarchic models. A distinctive feature of many political doctrines of these organizations is that, in their essence, they are based on certain socio-political myths, or on the doctrines of some traditional religion of the world, the mobilization potential of which is perceived as the key to success for the development of their organization.

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