N. S. Dushakova

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4486-5367

■ dushakova@list.ru
Российский государственный гуманитарный университет (Россия, Москва)

CREATING OTHERNESS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE: WHY AND HOW OLD BELIEVERS SPEND TIME ON DIFFERENT MEDIA PLATFORMS

Аннотация. Статья посвящена тому, каким образом и с какой целью российские старообрядцы разных согласий используют социальные медиа. На основе наблюдений в цифровой среде (онлайн-этнография) и интервью со старообрядческими религиозными лидерами, администраторами телеграм-каналов и страниц старообрядческих общин в социальной сети «ВКонтакте», а также с активными пользователями соцсетей рассматриваются различия в использовании наиболее популярных медиаплощадок. В статье уделяется внимание тому, как сами сообщества меняются под влиянием использования социальных медиа, а также тому, как технические аффордансы разных площадок формируют оптимальную среду для взаимодействия старообрядцев и достижения поставленных целей в рамках онлайн коммуникации. Исследование показало, что в настоящее время старообрядцы используют «ВКонтакте» и Телеграм как основные площадки для цифровой проповеди, обмена новостями, трансляции важных для общин сообщений и очерчивания своего культурного пространства в Сети. На предпочтения площадки оказывает влияние возможность ограничивать доступ к данным, защищать их от копирования, использовать разные форматы данных, а также удобство переписки. При выборе способа взаимодействия с той или иной платформой старообрядцы поступают в соответствии со своими религиозными представлениями, а не следуя логике медиа. Доступ к социальным медиа не только объединяет, но и создает разрывы внутри сообществ в зависимости от взглядов на цели использования медиаплошадок (в то время как одни создают хронику своей общины в социальной сети, другие считают возможным обсуждать онлайн вопросы веры). Онлайн-коммуникация размывает границы сообществ, разделяя верующих при помощи тех же инструментов, которые призваны создавать безграничное пространство для общения.

Ключевые слова: старообрядцы, социальные медиа, «ВКонтакте», Телеграм, технические аффордансы, онлайн-сообщества, интернет-старообрядчество

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N. S. Dushakova

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4486-5367

■ dushakova@list.ru

Russian State University for the Humanities
(Russia, Moscow)

CREATING OTHERNESS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE: WHY AND HOW OLD BELIEVERS SPEND TIME ON DIFFERENT MEDIA PLATFORMS

Abstract. The article is devoted to the ways and purposes for which Russian Old Believers of different denominations use social media. Based on observations in the digital environment (online ethnography) and interviews with Old Believer religious leaders, administrators of Telegram channels and VK pages of Old Believer communities, as well as active users of social networks, the article examines the differences in the use of the most popular media platforms. The article focuses on how the communities themselves change under the influence of the use of social media, as well as how the technical affordances of different platforms form an optimal environment for interaction between Old Believers and achieving their goals in online communication. The study showed that Old Believers currently use VKontakte and Telegram as the main platforms for digital preaching, exchanging news, broadcasting messages important to the communities, and delineating their cultural space online. Platform preferences are influenced by the ability to restrict access to data, protect it from copying, use different data formats, as well as the convenience of correspondence. When choosing a way to interact with a particular platform. Old Believers act in accordance with their religious beliefs and not following the logic of the media. Access to social media not only unites but also divides communities, depending on views regarding the purposes of using media platforms (while some create a chronicle of their community on a social network, others consider it possible to discuss issues of faith online). Online communication blurs the boundaries of the communities, while dividing believers through the use of tools that are designed to create a limitless space for communication.

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Keywords: Old Believers, social media, VK, Telegram, technical affordances, online communities, Internet Old Believers

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Introduction

uring the coronavirus pandemic even those religious communities which had been resisting the usage of digital environment in their religious practices for quite a long time had to adapt to it in one way or another. So, it has become a challenge for anthropologists and sociologists of religion to make sense of this evolving interaction of religious communities with the digital sphere. Old Believers oriented to preserving traditions and ecclesiastical rites are among those communities whose way to adopting the digital environment was full of negotiations and doubts (for more details on the history of the development of Old Believer space on the Internet, see: [Dushakova, Litvina 2025]). Even today there are voices in favor of refusing to engage with social media or to use digital space in religious practices.

While for some communities interaction with social media has a long rich history and, accordingly, numerous papers have been written on the topic, there are not so many papers devoted to the issue in the context of Old Believer culture. Some aspects of social media usage were reflected in the papers by D. Ermolin [2020] and A. Boytsova [2025]. D. Ermolin analyzed which Old Believer communities are most active on social media, paid attention to the most popular Old Believer resources on the Internet, and also focused on the reaction to the coronavirus pandemic. A. Boytsova studied the concepts of ritual purity and desecration as reflected in discussions on social media, touching upon the issues of self-representation on the Internet and the interaction of Old Believers with media. Looking broader at the research field, it's important to mention the papers by I. Simonov considering Old Believer Internet mass media [Simonov 2023], O. Shimanskaya [2021] on present day challenges for Old Believer communities and their self-determination, K. Tovbin [2014] on post-religion and modernity, where the author also touches upon the phenomenon of virtual Old Believers, D. Rygovskiy [2019] on the perception of technical and technological innovations by Old Believers. Also, such topical issues as the influence of the Internet on religiosity as well as the ideas on the usage of Internet in everyday life and missionary activities are discussed at different conferences and public events by active members of Old Believer communities (see, for example: [Dontsov, Nikolaev 2018; Loskutov 2013]).

In this context of insufficient studies of the interaction of Old Believers with new media technologies and at the same time of increasing interest towards present day challenges and dealing with the online media environment, this paper focuses on the role of social media, in particular the goals Old Believers intend to achieve when using different media platforms, as well as the means they offer and consequences for the communities on this way.

After the recent ban on a number of social network sites in Russia it is VKontakte (VK) and Telegram that have become more or less convenient spaces for virtual communication, self-expression, sharing news, missionary work, etc. Henceforth I'm going to focus on the usage of VK and Telegram as the most popular platforms among Old Believers nowadays. Addressing the issues outlined above, the paper discusses why Old Believers of different denominations prefer to use these platforms for certain purposes, how they see the functions and limits of these platforms, and how the active use of social media advances self-expression and dialogue or, on the contrary, mostly divides people due to a number of reasons.

Theoretical approaches and methodology

To understand why and how people around the world use social media the British anthropologist D. Miller with his team carried out a famous project called "Why we post" (2012–2017), which resulted in the publication of eleven monographs on the practices of people from different regions of the world: Brazil, Chile, rural and industrial China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey. Having become a case of exemplary research for anthropologists of social media, this project formulated foundations for studying media practices in different communities (although they can be applied to any anthropological research): commitment to long-term field research, participant observation, using formal recorded interviews together with informal conversations in the field, holistic contextualization, collaborative and comparative work, refusing generalizations and protecting the anonymity of the interviewees in case they didn't want to be recognized, etc. [Miller et al. 2016: 25–41].

The research on Old Believer practices concerning social media usage is based on the same principles of qualitative anthropological research and includes both offline and online ethnography. In other words, I am using a mixed methods approach, which means collecting data offline (long-term participant observation, formal interviews, informal conversations) and online (online observation in open access Old Believer groups and pages). Field research among Old Believers in Russia has been conducted since 2018, interviews on the topic were recorded in 2019–2024 with Old Believer bloggers, authors of the main Telegram channels, moderators of the pages of Old Believer communities on social network sites as well as with their followers and active users of social media. It's impossible to count the exact number of interlocutors and interviewees, as some conversations lasted for ten minutes, while some others longer than six hours and continued during the following visits, but this is a normal anthropological experience, also emphasized by Miller and his colleagues [Miller et al. 2016: 35]. Interviews were

conducted mostly in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Veliky Novgorod, Yekaterinburg and online. Since 2019 there have been more than 50 recorded interviews. It is well known that Old Believers are not homogeneous, so this paper is based on interviews with representatives of different denominations and communities from Russia, both those with priests, 'priested ones' (*popovtsy*) and 'priestless' (*bespopovtsy*). Below there will be remarks concerning differences depending on the denomination, in case there are any.

As for the data obtained by online observation, I only took into account open and publicly accessible pages on social network platforms whose purpose is to inform a wide audience about their culture, which includes pages of communities and religious leaders. These online resources were found using ordinary online search, and they also were discussed in the interviews and conversations with Old Believers during the field research.

Besides the elaborations of Miller and his team, and as a next theoretical step aimed at applying the usage of social media to the religious sphere, I took into account the works by H. Campbell carried out at the intersection of religious and media studies. In particular, she showed what happened when different religious communities started using the new media and how mastering new technologies also affected the communities themselves [Campbell 2010]. The important issue of technological affordances, usually understood as properties of devices that allow them to be used in a certain way [Falahatpisheh, Khajeheian 2020], was further elaborated by H. Campbell together with G. Evolvi: they spoke of affordances that can create religious meanings and/or identities [Campbell, Evolvi 2019].

These theoretical resources provided the optics for the analysis of field data and for answering the questions my paper is focused on: (1) why and for what are Old Believers using social media nowadays, (2) how do the affordances of the preferred media platforms help them or interfere with achieving their goals, (3) what are the most visible consequences of social media usage for Old Believer communities?

Old Believers on VK: reflecting on technical affordances and purposes of presence on the platform

Most of the Old Believer groups on VK were created in 2009–2010. Nowadays more personal pages of religious leaders as well as pages of communities appear on this platform. As shown by Ermolin, there are groups on VK that unite all Old Believer communities (such as the groups "Russian Faith", "Old Believers", "Decent Old Believer", etc.), they are the most numerous ones (from about 5 to 7 thousand subscribers). These resources are of interest not only to Old Believers themselves, but also to specialists who study the history and culture of the Old Believers, as well as everyone interested either in this topic or in joining the con-

¹ URL: https://vk.ru/ruvera_ru?from=search.

² URL: https://vk.ru/bogunashemuslava?from=search.

³ URL: https://vk.ru/p starover?from=search.

fessional search; quite often the same person participates in all the main groups on the platform. There are also groups consisting of a single denomination or even a single community; they are obviously less numerous, the most active being the followers of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (*belokrinitskie*) and the Russian Old Orthodox Church (*pomortsy*) [Ermolin 2020: 135–136].

According to online observation, the groups of Old Believer communities on VK appear very similar: they mostly describe the religious life of the parish, publish essential news of the community, tell about religious holidays, post something about the history of the parish and/or the city or the village where it is situated, etc. As for open and publicly accessible pages of religious leaders, they are more diverse if we look at the content: some priests or mentors post videos of sermons and photos of the church, others share more personal information or combine both.

It is the interviews that give us more insights into the purposes and the process of communication on the social network sites. First of all, it turned out that a number of my interlocutors didn't post a lot on VK or even had no page on this platform because they were not satisfied with technical characteristics of VK:

...for some reason, the VK style is a bit... I liked it less from the very beginning, I'm not really into it... There's a page, and there are a few of my posts there. Well, I posted one of my interviews, there's something else, well, so for those who suddenly want to find me there, at least they'll see something there. This is probably a very passive participation [Resp. 1].

I don't have VK at all. Never had one. I've always had a very negative attitude towards VK, because I tried to get there. But VK's policy is that so much, to put it mildly, obscene stuff comes out of there [Resp. 2].

In these two cases both priests would be happier with a platform that would not allow mixing education and entertainment on the same platform and/or provide better possibilities of navigation through diverse data without having to deal with unwanted information.

It's worth mentioning that while some of the moderators of groups or active users of social media are well aware of the technical affordances provided by the platform and do use them either to choose content or to include / exclude potential subscribers, others are just unaware of them. For example, followers of the Russian Old Orthodox Church (priestless Old Believers, *pomortsy*) prefer groups with restricted access: to become a member one has to answer questions about one's baptism. Representatives of other Old Believer denominations as well as other religions are not included in the group by the moderator. At the same time, several priests of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (*belokrinitskie*) told me during interviews that they never thought it was technically possible to create a group with restricted access. So, it's not always their beliefs when we are dealing with virtual space, it can just be about digital literacy.

Attitudes towards the platform can change with an increase in technological awareness, and this is not denied in the interviews. For instance:

It's even some kind of feeling, maybe, in the end it's just necessary to gain more experience in order to feel it more as some kind of instrument [Resp. 1].

Old Believers who use VK on a regular basis reflect on their personal goals of maintaining their presence on social media:

VK? It is convenient for me personally. I am used to it. It is the most popular social network in Russia, despite the fact that there are many competitors. <...> My personal page serves as a parish page, because I report parish news. All sorts of christenings, weddings, and so on, so forth. That's it. And all of this is posted. And besides that, many of my parishioners are my friends on VK. And in fact, my page is also the parish page, especially since I write who I am, the prior of which community [Resp. 3].

I am not very technically savvy, I am not easy with the Internet, it takes a lot of time, and I don't have it. I just don't have time to post everything that needs to be posted. We often hold events, exhibitions, etc. Now I'm posting more as a chronicle — been there, done that, visited that. A kind of cultural sermon [Resp. 4].

I use it to communicate and tell about our parish. I don't talk a lot on the Internet [Resp. 5].

What draws one's attention is that it's not the logic of the media that dominates in these fragments of interviews: the quality of a media product is not so important, Old Believers speak of what they communicate rather than how they do it or of using what possibilities of a platform, the format of data, etc. From what we see in the interviews, the main purposes of presence on social media declared by representatives of different denominations are (1) communication with parishioners, (2) delivering news of the parish, (3) education — telling people about Old Believer culture and providing a glimpse of everyday religiosity. There were no interviews where I was told that Old Believers used social media to explain subtle spiritual aspects of the religion, this only being done face-to-face. The picture wouldn't be complete if I didn't mention that not all priests and mentors see their personal pages as those of the parish (like Resp. 3 and 4).

It's not a rare case when the perception of the pages on social media does not coincide with the goals of moderators. For instance, one of the priests of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (*belokrinitskie*) shared his vision of the page where he would post something personal, such as a photo with his mother or a birthday celebration with the family [Resp. 1]. He sees such a page as a personal one, but due to his status in the community it is perceived as a kind of sermon (promoting traditional values), and he can't change that. According to the interviews, parishioners following the pages of religious leaders usually perceive them as digital sermons even if the authors do not position these pages in this way. During an expedition to Veliky Novgorod in 2020, parishioners of the

Church of the Apostle John the Theologian talked about reading personal VK pages not only of the priest⁴, but also of his wife⁵, treating them both as sermons.

While religious leaders refuse to talk about subtle spiritual aspects of religion on their personal pages on social media, discussions concerning such issues do take place in numerous Old Believer groups, mostly those with open access to everyone interested. An Old Believer who played an active role in the development of Old Believer Internet resources, remembered that

...the recommended search results in the VK news feed made it possible to get into groups absolutely [easily]. And, in fact, at some point, Old Believers came face to face virtually with people who had absolutely no idea what Old Believers were, where they came from, what they were for, why. This was especially true for large groups. And to this day, if you look at the discussions in one of the most popular VK groups, "Decent Old Believer", you can see that two-thirds of the commentators are not Old Believers, and few understand what Old Believers are [Resp. 6].

Thus, the problems with discussing essential issues of religion on social media are different levels of knowledge about the Old Belief, different motivations and purposes of discussion itself among the participants, as well as their various religious belonging.

Informing about the Old Belief and communicating on Telegram

Old Believers who were not satisfied with the VK social network mostly moved to Telegram. Today it is the platform with growing popularity among the representatives of different denominations. Looking for reasons for choosing this platform over VK, I found out that technical affordances of Telegram turned out to be closer to the style of virtual communication Old Believers find convenient and appropriate for themselves:

We now have the main ones, these groups for priests, they are functioning on Telegram now. There it is possible to better control, let's say, participation, and if someone suddenly participates in a not entirely ethical way, then somehow it is possible to regulate these issues better. <...> I, for example, don't want to isolate myself from all this life, although it takes away time and attention <...> I think that this is a very useful factor, it is an opportunity to learn, exchange experiences, share sources [Resp. 1].

Here we have a channel within the family, and I am absolutely not ready to make it open. Here. The same is true within my community. This concerns our community. I do not want anyone to discuss this. <...> Our channel is for our church. Of course, there are the announce-

⁴ URL: https://vk.ru/iereyalexandrpankratov?from=search.

⁵ URL: https://vk.ru/id49357523?from=search.

⁶ URL: https://vk.ru/p starover?from=search.

ments of the services. Here are all these detailed reports about some of our holidays, which even those who are here cannot copy, they can only read and watch. My sermons are posted here. And only those who are parishioners can subscribe. All the news, photos, etc. [Resp. 2].

Interviews show that possibilities to restrict access and protect data from copying are among the main technical characteristics of the platform for administrators of Old Believer Telegram chats and channels. Besides that, possibilities to store and share data in different formats (texts, photos, videos, audio recordings) and to communicate easily make this platform useful and important for them.

On Telegram Old Believers mostly refrained from creating platforms for discussing important issues and focused on informing about the Old Belief and on sharing news connected to it. The administrators of the channels consider providing news of the church as well as "cultural news" (about exhibitions, new books, relevant events, etc.) — all in one place — to be the main goals of the channels together with attracting new people to the Old Belief by sharing interesting things about the history and culture of the Old Believers.

There are always exceptions though: a chat⁷ has been created recently to discuss topical issues with the possibility to ask questions of religious leaders and find answers in the same chat. Priests either devote their sermons to topical issues raised on the chat or write short replies straight away. Videos of the sermons are posted on YouTube with a link on the chat for the participants and for everyone interested. Admission to the chat is not restricted, everyone can join it and write comments.

An overview of Old Believer channels on Telegram allows us to distinguish several types of them:

- (1) educational channels: representatives of various denominations as well as non-Old Believers are among the subscribers; these channels are most popular among Old Believers, researchers and broader audience ("Notes on the Old Believers", "Old Believers", "Old Believer Thought", "Museum, library and archive department" and others);
- (2) channels devoted to certain denominations ("Old Believers of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church" ¹², "Old Believers-Pomors" ¹³);
- (3) regional channels representing Old Believers from different regions of Russia ("Old Believer of the Urals¹⁴", "Altai Old Believer"¹⁵);

⁷ See, for example, the chat of the Old Believers of N (URL: https://t.me/staroobryad1).

⁸ URL: https://t.me/russianoldbelievers.

⁹ URL: https://t.me/staroobryadci.

¹⁰ URL: https://t.me/staroveru.

¹¹ URL: https://t.me/mbao_mmrpsc.

¹² URL: https://t.me/Pravdarpsc.

¹³ URL: https://t.me/StaroverPomorec.

¹⁴ URL: https://t.me/staroobryadchestvo ural.

¹⁵ URL: https://t.me/altaistarover ru.

(4) channels of communities ("Rogozhskoye" 16, "Old Believer Preobrazhensky Monastery" 17, "Old Believers Shuvoye" 18 and others).

Some of the channels are also represented on other Internet platforms: they have their own websites, YouTube channels, pages on social networks. In these cases, links in the posts lead to other platforms. In addition to these types of channels there are also chats for horizontal communication among Old Believers, exchanges of opinions, business proposals, provision of assistance, etc.

According to interviews, Telegram is the platform most Old Believers follow: they regularly read a number of channels they consider useful either for the soul or for intellectual background, in order to know more about the denomination they belong to as well as other communities (active or just interesting because of a bright priest or a mentor or activities of the community).

The overview of the activities of Old Believers on social media shows that representatives of Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (belokrinitskie) and Russian Old Orthodox Church (pomortsy) have created most of the pages and channels both on VK and Telegram. There is a tendency towards increasing the involvement in maintaining activity on social media. It was only several years ago that researchers paid attention to the fact that the Old Believers chasovennye were the most conservative in comparison with other denominations with regard to using the Internet and other media technologies, they definitely held off from social media [Rygovskiy 2019; Ermolin 2020]. The situation has changed: nowadays during interviews one can hear that even some of chasovennye, mostly from a younger generation, started using the Internet and social media, although confessing this fact can still cause a conflict in the community.

Reflecting on the consequences of social media usage and concluding remarks

Posting on social media is seen by religious leaders and active users/administrators of VK groups or Telegram channels as creating a chronicle of the parish or storing useful data in one place, constructing a space for communication or sometimes discussions: we saw all these goals of social media usage when analyzing how Old Believers see the involvement of media platforms in everyday lives of their communities. Different technical affordances of VK and Telegram shape digital narratives in different ways and for different numbers of participants. The audience might only include the representatives of one denomination or even one community of one denomination — or unite all the Old Believers and even adherents to other faiths in their interest towards Old Believer history, culture and present-day reality.

Making their voices heard and narrating about themselves are the goals common to all those involved in creating and expanding the space of visibility of the Old Belief on modern media platforms. However, there are also differences in the

¹⁶ URL: https://t.me/rogozhskoe.

¹⁷ URL: https://t.me/staroverM.

¹⁸ URL: https://t.me/rpsc shuvoe.

perception of usefulness, appropriate behavior and goals of arranging Old Believer space on social media. As we saw, sometimes problems can be solved by regulation: if the moderator of a group makes his/her first priority being heard and understood in the community, he / she creates a group / a chat with restricted access for parishioners only. In case an administrator of a channel / a group strives to attract more people to the Old Belief, he or she creates an open space and contributes to making a positive image of the Old Belief for everyone interested. At the same time, online observation together with interviews has demonstrated that Old Believers mostly follow their logic based on religious beliefs rather than media literacy, the latter being less important or sometimes even not important at all when choosing how to deal with social media, be it a page or a group on VK, or a channel on Telegram. It is close to elaborating the religious affordances discussed by H. Campbell and G. Evolvi [Campbell, Evolvi 2019]. Administrators of Old Believer resources often confessed in the interviews that they did nothing to attract more subscribers, to increase the visibility of the group or the channel, other than to post interesting things on topics they considered important.

Conducting polemics against the *Nikonites* (followers of the Russian Orthodox Church) or other Old Believer groups is usually not the focus of interaction on social media. Such discussions do take place only in the most numerous groups on VK, but it's not always possible to say whether it is an Old Believer or a non-Old Believer who participates in the discussion. Such groups could hypothetically expand inter-Old Believer dialogue; however, the success of such a dialogue on social media is assessed very differently.

The issue of a fruitful dialogue on media platforms is closely connected to one of the main questions raised at the beginning of this paper: what are the consequences of social media usage for communities of Old Believers? Now we've reached the point where we can say that they can be comprehended through several types of otherness created by using media technologies and making communication on social media a part of everyday life.

First, there is otherness within the community, which means the division of parishioners depending on their views on using media platforms on an everyday basis. The visibility of this type of otherness is rather essential as more and more of my interlocutors speak of the appearance of so-called "Internet Old Believers" who prefer communicating online to going to church and seeing a priest or a mentor (in priestless communities) and parishioners face-to-face. Moreover, people who don't mind discussing peculiarities of religion on VK or in a group chat also are called "Internet Old Believers". It is a common understanding among Old Believer leaders of all the denominations that not everything can and should be discussed via the Internet, so this type of behavior divides communities: after negotiating about religious beliefs on social media, "Internet Old Believers" acquire new ideas which can be far from the legitimate knowledge transferred face-to-face in the parish. By the way, here lies one of the reasons for

opening the above mentioned chat¹⁹ for discussions and providing possibilities to ask questions directly to the priests.

Second, there is technical otherness that can be understood as division due to technical preferences, be it a preferable platform, type of access to the chat or the group, format of sharing news, etc. This division does not lie along the boundaries of the communities or denominations but can differ from one Old Believer to another.

Online communication blurs the boundaries of the communities, but it's not just about Old Believers and social media, it's a part of the process of mediatization that affects everyone. The borders of the space for communication have extended tremendously, which even has made researchers speak of "sacrality without borders" [Frauhammer 2016]; however, at the same time believers are divided by the same means that provide this seemingly limitless space for religious interaction.

Respondents

- Resp. 1 E. C., m., Rzhev, Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, recorded by N. Dushakova and N. Litvina, 2023.
- Resp. 2 A. L., m., Moscow, Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, recorded by N. Dushakova and N. Litvina, 2023.
- Resp. 3 A. P., m., Veliky Novgorod, Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, recorded by N. Dushakova and N. Litvina, 2023.
- Resp. 4 A. B., m., Velikiy Novgorod, Russian Old Orthodox Church, recorded by N. Du-shakova, 2020.
- Resp. 5 A. K., m., Moscow, Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, recorded by N. Dushakova, 2021.
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Информация об авторе

Наталья Сергеевна Душакова *PhD*

старший научный сотрудник, Департамент научной деятельности, Российский государственный гуманитарный университет Россия, 125047, Москва, Миусская пл., д. 6

™ dushakova@list.ru

Information about the author

Natalia Sergheevna Dushakova *PhD*

Senior Researcher, Department of Academic Activities, Russian State University for the Humanities Russia, 125047, Moscow, Miusskaya Sq., 6 ■ dushakova@list.ru