

“FASTING – UNRESTRICTED” IN THE TRADITIONAL NUTRITION OF RUSSIANS

Fasting was practiced from ancient times by many people, it took place also during the spreading of Christianity. But the Eastern Church took an independent line in the development of appointed fast-days, and its present practice differs considerably from that of the Church in the West.

The practice of fasting in Russia has a long history: it began since the adoption of Christianity (988). Fast days were timed by the regulations of the Russian Orthodox Church and were linked with the major Christian feasts¹. Such practice remains unchanged till today, but not so many people can easily understand the meaning of fasting. That's why the main aim of the article is to throw light on the semantic meaning of the practice of fasting, on the origin and meaning of binary opposition fasting – unrestricted and some other special definitions. The article also deals with a terminology that is typical for the practice of fasting and abstinence.

Fasts lasting for many days and one-day fasts accounted for more than 200 days. Fasting in accordance to the Church Statute includes four fasts lasting for many days, their duration and the level of strictness are different.

The first fast (“*Rozhshdestvensky*” or “*Philipovsky*”) is devoted to St. Philip or to the Nativity of Jesus Christ (from November 15/November 28 till December 24/January 6)². It lasts 40 days and ends by Christmas.

The second fast is Lent (“Great Fast” or “*Velikij post*” – in Russian), it is the most strict and longest fast, it includes seven weeks before the Holy Week and Easter – on the whole 49 days. Food allowance during Lent is differed not only from another fasts but also by several prohibitions. It means that it is allowed to eat only boiled vegetarian dishes and to exclude meat, fish, milk, eggs, cheese, sour cream, animal and oil butter, fancy cakes, buns. But on Saturdays and Sundays it is allowed to eat dishes with oil butter (except on Holy Saturday) and to drink wine.

The first week of Lent is particularly strict, especially during the first five days. It is allowed to eat unboiled and cold food without any oil and cold drinks. During Lent it is allowed to eat fish only twice: on the Day of Annunciation of Our Virgin (March 25/April 7) and on Palm Sunday (in Russian – “*Verbnoye*” Sunday because people bless the branch of verba instead of palm leaves). On Saturday before Palm Sunday – “*Lazarus*” Sunday it is allowed to eat caviar.

The last week before Easter - the Holy week is close to the first week of Lent in its strictness. Pious people try to abstain from hot meals and eat cold dishes. On Thursday they have a communion, on Friday they eat nothing and prepare for the

¹ For more details see Voronina 2007.

² Russian Orthodox Church still follows the Julian calendar that's why all the dates in Church calendar are indicated according to the old – Julian calendar and contemporary – Gregorian calendar.

festival service and only after the service it is allowed to eat Easter cake and eggs that were blessed before.

Easter (*Paskha* – in Russian) is a culmination of Lent, it is celebrated from the 5th century. Easter or the day of the Resurrection had a name “the Tsar of the days” or “the main holiday among other festive days”. The first food after the Divine service is consecrated food that includes painted eggs, *kulitch* (artos) and “*paskha*” – rich mixture of sweetened curds, butter and raisins, which are the main symbols of Easter. It is still common to kiss each other with the words “Jesus Christ arisen!” and to present red painted egg. This custom goes from ancient times when St. Maria Magdalena presented red egg to Emperor Tivery with these words. Red egg is a symbol of a tomb and resurrection of life. Festive food means food that is prepared during the feasts of church calendar that are always celebrated even during fasts. In that case food allowance widened at the expense of bakery, pies, fish dishes etc, but not meat, cow butter, fat, eggs, milk products.

The third fast is devoted to the Holy Apostles or St. Peter’ fast, it’s beginning depends on the date of Easter but it always ends on the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul the Apostles (June 29/July 12) so the duration is always different - from eight days to six weeks. It is not as strict as the Lent. In accordance to Church Statute vegetarian oil can be used every day but fish is allowed to eat only on Saturdays and Sundays and more on special feasts.

The fourth fast lasts 14 days, it is devoted to the Dormition of Our Virgin and ends on this day (from August 1/August 14 till August 14/August 27). It is a strict fast but shorter than Lent. It is necessary to abstain from fish but it is allowed to eat only on the day of Transfiguration (August 6/August 19). Vegetarian oil and wine is allowed to use on Saturdays and Sundays.

All these 4 fasts have a special day before the beginning – “*Zagovenje*”, when people abstain from meat but they can eat fish and dairy products.

One-day fasts are also connected with the feasts but their strictness is different. The following are one-day fasts:

1. Christmas Eve (December 24/January 6);
2. the Eve of the Epiphany or the Twelfth-Day (January 5/January 18);
3. the Feast of Beheading of St. John the Prophet (August 29/September 11);
4. the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14/September 27).

It is necessary to keep fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays every week except

1. Christmas-tide - a period from December 25/7 January till 5/18 January;
2. period from 4/17 February till 9/22 February,
3. Shrovetide or “*Maslenitsa*”, “Cheese Week” – a week before the Lent,
4. a week after Easter (“Light Week”),
5. a week after the Day of St. Trinity. In accordance with the Church Statutes there is no fast on Christmas and Epiphany if they are on Wednesday and Friday.

The nutrition of Russians during fasts in the 19th century was defined by the level of the development of agriculture, which stipulated the maintenance in the food allowance of a multitude of cereals and vegetable products. At the same time the natural and climatic conditions considerably influenced the character of nutrition in the dif-

ferent regions of Russia. The regional peculiarities left significant traces on nutrition wherefore the menu of the peasants differed. Since the peasants grew their own crops and vegetables, the keeping of fasts was significantly easier for the rural population. "Black" or rye bread and pies made from the mixture of rye and wheat flour were a part of everyday meal. A variety of cereals allowed to prepare different kind of porridge. Potatoes, cabbage and carrots were cultivated in many provinces and were the main ingredients of traditional soup or "*shchtee*". A famous proverb "*Shchtee* and porridge is our meal" well enough characterized the national peculiarities of Russian cuisine.

During fasts the peasants did not eat milk and other dairy products, that gave a possibility to collect them in greater amount and to sell at the markets. These products also became an equivalent of money, they could be changed for flour, bread and other things of the first need.³ Fasting, besides its symbolism and other semantic features, had an important economic meaning, because it helped to use meat and milk products sparingly.

It is quite natural that the food allowance during fasts depended on the seasons. The menu was the most abundant and diverse in autumn and at the beginning of winter when there were enough stocks of foodstuffs after gathering the last harvest. A lack of them began in spring. Then the ration of a poor family came to minimum: rye bread, water, kvass, salted products (cucumbers, cabbage, wild mushrooms), potatoes, cereals. It became the most meager in summer when the stocks ran out. The menu of the fasting table depended of course on the degree of prosperity of the peasants. Festive food that was prepared during fasts differed from everyday food and was more diverse, however there was no exclusion during these days for guests who kept fasting.

Thus fasting was a part of folk calendar of Russian peasants that combined both holidays and week-days, work and rest, fasts and days of unrestricted food.⁴

Fasting introduced significant changes into the peasants's life; it also concerned the type of meals they ate. Thus the fasts regulated the eating habits of the peasants on workdays and holidays. Without exaggeration we can say that the whole Russian traditional nutrition system was based on the alternation of fasting days and "meat days".

Field materials that were collected by the author showed that till nowadays the tradition of fasting slackened but was not interrupted and was kept by the adherents of the Orthodox faith. Contemporary nutrition during fasts still includes a lot of bread and bakeries, porridges made not only with oat and buckwheat but also with rice, boiled and fried potatoes, fruits and vegetables, compote, kvass. The menu during different seasons varied: for example, in summer it includes soup with fish, *shchtee* with fresh cabbage, fresh or "young" boiled and fried potatoes, vegetable marrow, fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, salads, fresh mushrooms, berries; in winter it includes *shchtee* with salted cabbage, potatoes with salted cabbage, mushrooms, cucumbers. Now everybody drink tea and coffee during fasts. An ordinary menu during the fast of the Dormition in August can include the first dishes – soup with fresh

³ AREM. Fond 7. List 1. File 100. 22. File 286. 14–17.

⁴ Bernshtam 1985. 120–153.

mushrooms, potatoes and green onion, the second dish – fresh boiled potatoes and salad with tomatoes and cucumbers, the third dish – compote or tea with jam.

THE SEMANTICS OF BINARY OPPOSITION “FASTING – UNRESTRICTED”

A common differentiation “fasting – unrestricted” in Christian (Orthodox) ceremonial rites has numerous subdivisions, which themselves go into ramified system of binary oppositions. From one side, this difference is based on the source or origin of food. From the other side, besides leading opposition “vegetable – animal”, the oppositions “meat – fish”, “fish – caviar”, etc., can be also be distinguished.

As to the strictness of fasting, we can differentiate *ordinary* days of fasting and *special*, very strict, days of fasting, *ordinary* days of fasting and *peculiarly* strict days of fasting, and among them – Lent (*Velikij post*). Among peculiarly strict days of fasting there are notable some restrictions before Easter, that can be set off against other limitations. It is Holy Week when the believers remember the Passion. All these can be attributed to category of emic differences.

At the same time, there are etic approaches, that can not go into the explicit binary oppositions on the force of their lability, but they depend on personal attention and perception of fasting. This distinction between pleasant and refined food, that gives pleasure, and food or ordinary, rude fare, that has to support vital functions, but not to supply delights and enjoyments. To some degree it is also a binary opposition, but if in emic categories the brink of oppositions is quite discrete and universally recognized, in this case it is diffusional and individual.

WORD “FAST” (“FASTING”) AND ITS MEANING

The origin of the words “fast”, “fasting” is very old. “Fast” had several meanings. First of all it meant to avoid from all food or some foodstuffs in accordance to religious prescriptions or as a sign of mourning. For the second, it meant to manage without food.⁵ A word “fast” is tied together with a word “*fasti fae*” that in Ancient Rome meant juridical annual book or calendar (“*fasti diurni*”), or annals, literally “legitimate days” for the sitting of the Court.⁶

Till 304 B.C. a monopoly to compile a calendar (*calendaria*) belonged to the priesthood, but during the rule of Gnaeus Flavius that right went to a temporal power, that can be considered as an origin of the Roman civil calendar.⁷ But at the same time it is necessary to differ a word “fasting” from the keeping the rules of dietary that forbid to eat definite food as a “dirty food” or “sacral food”.⁸

The word “fast”, “fasting” became an integral part of spoken language of English-speaking people. It can be used in various word-combinations, for instance, “a day for a general fast”; “to observe the fasts and feasts of the church”; to break one’s fast. Englishmen use such a proverb like”. A clean fast is better than a dirty

⁵ Coulson 1986. 301.

⁶ Onions 1974. 346.

⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica 1961. 106.

⁸ Hinnells 1997. 166.

breakfast". An expression "I have been fasting since breakfast" can be translated "I ate nothing from the very breakfast".

A word "fasten" in different combinations also can be translated as "fast", but in combination "Fasten Tuesday" it means Tuesday during Shrovetide. A word "fastens" is a reduction of ancient and now very rare dialect combination "fastens – een" (f. Een) – an eve of Lent. Now it is more common to write "fastens-eve", "fastens-even" (fasnziv) (Galperin I.R. 1979: 495).

A word *post* is the Russian equivalent of English word fasting.

In Russian language such categories as fasting and unrestricted that have contrary meaning are still very popular, and first of all they have more common with food ration. Max Vasmer who investigated the origin of the Russian word *post*, tried to find the parallels in different languages. Indeed, it has the similar words in other languages: *pist* (Ukrainian), *post* (Bulgarian), *post*, *post* (Serb.-Croatian.) etc. The word *fast*, as he thought, was taken from old German word *fasto* and it was made by Moravian-Pannonic Slavs, but not by Southern Slavs from Balkan-German group of languages. Max Vasmer thought that the verb *postiti* also came from old German *fasten* that meant *fasting*, Gothic (sic) *fastan*: but it also could be a denomination from Slavonic word *post*.⁹

A noun "govenie" (говение – in Russian) that also means "post" and is translated into English as "fasting", has a wider sense. To translate it more exact and to show its religious meaning a verb "goveti" is translated as "to fast and to attend divine service before confession and Communion". From the theological point of view a noun "govenie" is a pious custom of Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches to avoid not only from sweet dishes, but also from moderate eating of ordinary food – during one of the weeks of many days fast (mainly during Lent) or often during 2-3 days – and to attend the church service everyday. It is very interesting and useful to retrace the Indo-European roots of the word "govenie" (гове́ние) in Sanscrit: *go* (го) – means speech, especially in spiritual sense; *hava* – means offering, *gu* (гу) – means donors (who make a sacrifice). Therefore, one can suppose that in ancient times "govenie" or fasting included praying, connected with sacrifice.¹⁰

Russian word "unrestricted", *skoromnoye* (скоромное – in Russian) has completely contrary significance to fasting. It means – "dishes containing meat and milk products", accordingly to it, periods without fasting, could be translated into English as "meat days". Russian word *скоромное* also seems to be very archaic. The philologists think that the first letter *c* or pra-slavonic **sъ* goes back to Indo-European **su*, that means "good, kind; big; very, already", that after reducing became an asemantic element *c* or *z*. The traces of the mentioned basis were reconstructed in a few historical composites that reflected in dialects. For example, in Olonets, Jaroslavl, Poshehon dialects the noun *скором* means "fat food" that comes from pra-slavonic **skormъ* – fat. M. Vasmer connects it with pra-slavonic word **kъrmъ* – feed. But in old Russian documents a word *кормъ* (sometimes *крьмъ*) meant food as a kind of taxation (tax), that could easy develop into *кором*. But just that phonetic variant gave reasons for mainly religious *skorom* (*скором*) and later on *skoromny* (*скоромный*).

⁹ Vasmer 1953-1958. Tom II. 415–416.

¹⁰ Complete Orthodox Theological Encyclopedical Vocabulary 1992. 653–654.

As to the first letter c-, the explanation of its origin is very problematic. It could be a reflection of pra-Slavonic *sъ- that means “good, kind”, that with a word *кѣрмѣ (later on *kormъ – food) – formed a composite *sъкѣрмѣ / *sъkormъ – good food.¹¹

It is no secret that good and desired food was always fat, and in connection with that a meaning of a “good food” gradually got narrow to a word “fat”. And only after baptizing Russia it was forbidden to eat food rich in calories (that includes meat, animal fat, dairy products etc). And semantics of a word *skorom* (скором) developed into meaning “meat or milk products, that are forbidden by Church canons during fasts”. One more model with archaic *sъ – “good, big” is presented in a dialect word *smolost*, *smoloch* (смолость, смолочь – “cow’s udder”), based on word *molost* (молост – зовение).¹² Thus, the difference between conceptions fasting and unrestricted is based on rather sharp differentiation of food allowance with the limitation of definite products in the first case and with the permissions of their use in the second one. Meat and dairy products as the products, containing too much animal fat (and albumen, protein) are not allowed during fasting. Fish is not admitted to eat, although it is considered as semi-fasted food, and it is under the ban, excepting some days when, in accordance to the Church Statutes, it is allowed to eat.

The concepts fasting – unrestricted is closely tied with another binary opposition scanty – plentiful, that, in its turn, implies the concepts “few – many”. Really, fasting presupposes quantitative and qualitative changes. To fast means to eat less and without animal fat (but vegetable oil is allowed), not too much, rare, not to overeat, to diminish the number of dishes. It is known, that the most pious believers try not to eat until 12 o’clock, and they have their meal after the end of church service. As a matter of fact, it usually happens on Sundays and other festive days, when the first meal is eaten after coming home from the church. They do not even drink water. After the liturgy (on Sundays and festive days) following the public prayer, water is given only after it is consecrated by priest. It reminds the history of Ancient Greece when to fast meant not to eat until sunset. The concept unrestricted implies quite another meaning which is almost synonymous with the word festive. It was told, that fasting always ends by a religious feast. At the same time, in the case of many-days fasting holiday means a happy day after long and sad period of abstinence.

An opposition sad – joyful is underlined by a rather sharp transition from *vegetable* diet to the *plentiful, unrestricted* dishes, that seem to be especially tasty on holiday. This was reflected in the English expression “to break one’s fast”. On the whole fasting introduced to diffuse existential flow of the elements of structural alternation.

CONCLUSION

Traditional dietary of Russians in the 19th century was a wholesome and stable complex of nourishment, which included fast days set apart for partial or complete abstinence from definite food during a calendar year. After 1988, the year of Millennium of Christianity in Russia, the believers began to follow the religious prescriptions and

¹¹ Vasmer 1953-1958. Vol 3. 540., 652–653., 685–686., 690–691., 816.

¹² Luchik 2001. 165–166.

fasted openly as in the past. Thanks to a considerable mass of archive, field materials and published works it became possible to demonstrate the significant role of fast days in the life of Russians till nowadays. The study of the semantic meaning of fasting in historical perspective can help us to a fuller understanding of the origin of the fasting – unrestricted binary oppositions and some other meanings and special definitions.

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