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Yakutia (Sakha) Faces a Religious Choice: Shamanism or Christianity

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The religious situation in postsoviet Yakutia (Sakha) is most similar to that in the Finno-Ugric republics of the Volga region, Mari El and Udmurtia, and in the Turkic republic of Chuvashia. In all these regions two religions are battling for souls: national paganism and Orthodoxy.¹ However, the situation in Yakutia has many unique features.

The peoples of the Volga have preserved far less of their pagan heritage, having been subjected to intensive russification, europeanisation and christianisation from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their current world-view, even among those who consider themselves pagans, has been formed over several generations of Russian schooling and many centuries of Christian influence. Paganism is preserved in the form of folklore and various elements of ancient beliefs. Individual pagan priests in Udmurtia and their slightly more numerous colleagues in Mari El have become more like organisers of festivals and rites that they themselves have difficulty understanding rather than custodians of a priceless prechristian worldview. The leaders of the neopagan movements in these republics are mostly involved in reconstructing an ideology that has disappeared, and they are doing so on the basis of European (essentially Christian) concepts that they are familiar with, as a response to the popular desire for national revival; they are not preserving and reviving something that already exists.

The situation is different in Yakutia. The Russians arrived here much later. The first Cossack vanguards, who were not very numerous, began to build their fortified settlements at the end of the seventeenth century; but the real conquest of Yakutia began a century later. Only from the end of the eighteenth century did mass baptisms of the native population begin. However, the genuine christianisation of the Yakut (Sakha) nation took place much later still, with the work of St Innokenti (Veni-aminov) in the second half of the nineteenth century. As bishop, Innokenti initiated and oversaw the translation of the Bible and a number of other theological texts into the Yakut language. Nor was he afraid to incorporate elements of pagan rites into the liturgy and to use the names of their Yakuts' own pagan gods in the translation of the scriptures.

The missionary and educational activity of Innokenti and his colleagues had some success. Before 1917 there were Yakut-language parishes with Yakut priests, and some of the population had adopted Orthodoxy, giving them a pro-Russian cultural and political orientation. Nevertheless, the majority of Yakuts remained pagans or dual-believers with a very shallow Christian overlay. Shamanism was the basic form

of religiosity among Yakuts before 1917. The belief in good and evil spirits, the possibility of reincarnation and magical healing had not only survived, but had even gained a certain following among the local Russian population.

The everyday religiosity of the Yakuts concentrated mainly on belief in the existence of a multitude of spirits dwelling in the surrounding material world. A Yakut sensed the existence of spirits in animals, trees, rivers and streams, hills and valleys. No less powerful, the Yakuts believed, were the spirits of the dead. In addition they believed that there were also general abstract spirits – of fire or water, for example – which absorbed local spirits, such as those of a particular hearth or river.

The Yakut nation placed great weight on belief in its special divine origin. According to ancient beliefs, the first Yakuts – Sakha Saaryn Toion and Saby Vaai Khotun – were gods who had come down to Earth from the Highest Heaven with the great mission to create the Sakha nation.

The Yakuts also had several beliefs which contemporary neopagans have interpreted as monotheism, including the belief in a supreme god, the Sun (fire), Aiyy (Tengri), which has its roots in pan-Turkic religious myth. However, in everyday religious practice little attention was paid to this supreme god. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century the image of Aiyy had blended with the concept of the Christian God among the majority of the population. Contemporary pagan ideologies claim that Aiyy had a special priestly caste (similar to the Christian clergy), the ‘white shamans’, who were supplanted by Orthodox priests, but ethnographers who studied the Yakuts’ religious life at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century do not even mention their existence.

The paganism that survived up to 1917 was popular, patriarchal and unorganised. It had no ideologues and gradually retreated in the face of Christian and European enlightenment.

Among the European population at the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of deeply-rooted Orthodox adherents were Cossacks, most of them political exiles, prisoners or people who had come to earn money, social groups not inclined towards a religious life. Among the exiles were many Polish nationalists; thus Catholicism in Yakutia has prerevolutionary roots.

The 1917 Revolution brought a sharp halt to the process of christianisation in Yakutia. The last Orthodox bishop, Sofroni, was shot in 1922 and towards the end of the 1920s legally-organised religious activity, by the Orthodox as well as by any other Christian group, was brought to a stop. After the Second World War only one Orthodox parish, based in a rebuilt wooden hut in the city of Yakutsk, was allowed for the entire massive republic. This remained the only organised legal Christian activity in Yakutia until the era of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost*’ in the late 1980s.

The communist authorities took an uncompromising attitude not only to Christianity, but to any form of religion, including paganism. Shamans and cultural activists propagating ‘national spiritual values’ suffered persecution. However, paganism was in practice very difficult to root out – it had no organised structure, no leaders who transcended ethnic groups and no publishing house or publications. The oral transmission of knowledge in families and rites that had no need of churches, priests or special holy objects made it difficult for the KGB to act. The Yakuts’ way of life also enabled the pagan world-view to survive – few Yakuts have been urbanised, with the vast majority still living in small settlements in the wild, bleak and very sparsely-inhabited taiga (or, in the north of Yakutia, in the tundra).

Of course, Soviet education and communist propaganda in general did have some

impact in undermining the Yakuts' pagan world-view: the meaning of mythology was largely lost, the number of shamans dwindled and a small class of urban Yakuts arose who knew nothing of the traditional values of their nation. All the same, Orthodox Christianity was rooted out more decisively than paganism. By the time of the fall of the Soviet regime the religious identity of the majority of Yakuts was a reduced pagan world-view.

By the middle of the 1980s the majority of the population of Yakutia (some 60 per cent) were not Yakuts, but Russians and russified members of other Soviet nationalities. Most of them had come to work on the numerous building sites or in the mines. They had been cut off from their religious roots and the majority were (and remained) unreligious. Another key element in their consciousness is that even the second generation consider themselves as only temporary residents of Yakutia. 'We'll earn some more money, then head down to the south', is a common sentiment. This is the origin of their remarkable passivity in social, political and religious life. The Russians make up the majority of the population, yet they are almost invisible in public life.

From the very beginning the religious revival in Yakutia depended heavily on the local authorities. The president of Yakutia, Mikhail Nikolayev, who has been in office since the late 1980s, has paid unusually close attention to questions of ideology, 'spirituality' and religion compared to other leaders of Russian republics.

The official ideology of the current Yakut authorities is '*kul'tivistsiya*' ('promoting culture') – a rapid rise in the level of education, science and culture of the Yakut nation designed to turn the Yakuts into one of the most civilised nations of the world. There are few places in Russia that give such attention to the system of education and culture. Everything is being done in Yakutia to enable each child to receive a full secondary education and great efforts are being put into finding grants for Yakut students to study abroad. New museums and cultural centres are being established.

'Spirituality' and religion are given a key role in this project. President Nikolayev's strategic thinking (completely in line with the traditions of Yakut dual belief) concentrates on striving to revive the national tradition, culture, folklore and consciousness of the Yakuts and at the same time to complete the process – interrupted by the 1917 Revolution – of converting them to Orthodoxy. In this context, national 'spirituality' is viewed as the secular component of the national ideology and Orthodoxy as its religious expression.

Pursuing this project, the Yakut government has established public events to mark national festivals, primarily the pagan new year *Yyssakh*. The national mythology and calendar and 'national traditions' are studied in schools and colleges. At the same time the authorities stress the secular, exclusively 'cultural' nature of these subjects.

On the other hand, President Nikolayev has done a lot to revive Orthodoxy in Yakutia. The diocese of Yakutsk and Vilyuisk (later renamed the diocese of Yakutsk and Lensk) was restored in 1993, with German (Moralin) as the first bishop, after Nikolayev appealed personally to Patriarch Aleksii. Nikolayev has displayed his favouritism towards the Orthodox Church both by practical assistance (republican funds covered the cost of rebuilding St Nicholas cathedral from ruins) and in his public speeches. He has regularly met the patriarch in Moscow and has attended the nighttime liturgy at the cathedral at Easter and Christmas, where he has greeted the congregation from in front of the altar. Bishop German's own words of greeting on religious festivals have been published in government newspapers and broadcast on

Yakut television.

President Nikolayev's ideological position is articulated by the Academy of Spirituality (*Akademiya dukhovnosti*), founded by his decree in 1996 as a 'state/public organisation, created with the aim of the reviving and refining the spirituality of the multiethnic people of Sakha, preserving and enriching their original culture and augmenting their intellectual potential'. Leading members of the Yakut intelligentsia – writers, artists, performers and scholars of the humanities, as well as Bishop German – have become members of the Academy.

In his speech at the opening ceremony President Nikolayev restated the 'strategic aims of the Academy' he had set out in his decree. 'Our aspiration toward the future must have as one of its essential components a respectful attitude to our history, traditions and customs accumulated by the peoples over the many centuries of their history', he declared.

The peoples of Sakha have unique values. Take the popular heroic epic Olonkho. Unfortunately this has been neglected for various well-known reasons. But the sources of our national education – the *vargan* [a traditional musical instrument – Ed.], shamanism and traditional medicine – likewise arouse interest among foreign scholars, with good reason.

Of special value is the spread of faith and the Christian religion in the north. The mission of Bishop Innokenti (Veniaminov) and the appearance of churches in the Far North as far as Russian America were phenomena which had no parallels in the world. Prayers were said in the Yakut language and the first books in Yakut were church publications. In general, the spread of Christianity in the north-east of Russia had a huge influence on the subsequent fate of the native peoples. The key to bringing them into world culture and human civilisation is to be found in these roots in Christianity.²

However, subsequent events, both in the Academy of Spirituality and in wider Yakut society, have shown that achieving a synthesis of 'national culture and traditions' with Orthodoxy are unlikely to be successful.

In the Academy, two factions soon emerged. One faction included Bishop German and a 90-year-old Orthodox writer, Suorun Omollon, who wants to bring the Yakuts back to Christianity. In his numerous articles and speeches Omollon has been even harsher than the Russian Bishop German in condemning his fellow Yakuts' attraction to paganism, considering it primitive barbarity and regarding Christianity as the only possible route to achieving national revival.

One hundred and thirty years ago Yakutia first gained its sovereignty, and this was a spiritual sovereignty. It was then that an independent Yakut diocese was formed, thanks to many years' work by the Russian priest Innokenti Veniaminov, who had been able to persuade the tsar and the Orthodox leadership that 'Yakutia is a special world'. It was then that we joined the ranks of all the politically significant nations of the world. To lose this achievement now would be at the very least thoughtless.³

Bishop German is under the patronage of the nationally-minded authorities of Yakutia, and strives to take account of the Yakuts' national interests in his internal church policy. He declares his opposition to any hint of russifying Orthodox Yakuts and fights for the preservation of the language and culture of the native peoples of the republic. One of his principal aims is the introduction of the liturgy in the Yakut

language. He has already taken the first steps towards this, having reprinted the Bible, prayerbooks and catechetical texts in Yakut. Moreover, he shows great caution in criticising shamanism and paganism.

On the other hand, all the other 19 members of the Academy are at best indifferent to the Orthodox Church. These scholars of the humanities are strongly attracted to their national traditions and customs and even if they are not themselves pagans their sympathies lie in that direction. It is not surprising that they are in practice sabotaging the Orthodox component of the president's strategic ideological plan. 'The spreading of Christianity is an obligation for Bishop German', declares Academy president Afanasi Osipov. 'We have nothing against that. But preaching is not our job. We artists, writers and performers are involved with our national culture.'⁴ The only subject on which the members of the Academy of Spirituality have found real agreement is missionary activity by religious minorities, most of which involves Protestants. They constantly call for such activity to be restricted or banned.

Since the end of communism, however, it has been clear that the main opposition to Orthodoxy and the religious policy of the authorities is not coming from Academy members inclined towards national traditions. The rapid modernisation and urbanisation of Yakut society and the collapse of social links and traditional morals have given rise to an inevitable reaction on the ground. The popular mood has been strengthened by the current social, political and economic crisis across Russia which has alienated the people from the institutions of power and the ruling ideology. Those who are trying to promote *kul'tivizatsiya* have concentrated on those Yakuts who are oriented towards European values. Although numerous, these are not the majority of the population, however, and there has been opposition from patriarchal village populations and from the radical nationalist neopagans.

Back in the mid-1980s the current leaders of the Yakut pagans, Lazar' Afanas'yev, Ivan Ukhkhan (Nikolayev) and Anatoli Pavlov, began to formulate their ideology and create their public movement, which is in total opposition not only to the current republican and Russian authorities, but also to the modernisation under way in Yakut society as a whole. At the dawn of *perestroika* Afanas'yev, a philologist by education and the leading pagan ideologue, concluded that the pitiful state of the Yakut nation was the result of the breaking of the deep links between the person and nature, which had meant that the Yakuts had lost their spiritual identity. He believed that there was only one way to halt the degradation of the nation: by reviving the traditional Yakut way of life, world-view and religious (pagan) system of values. Afanas'yev was engaged in 'researching' (though in practice creatively reconstructing) the religious beliefs of his nation and the results of his work were published in his book *Aiyy uorete (Divine Teaching)*. For the first few years this work – which has not yet been translated from Yakut into any other language – circulated among the Yakut nationalist intelligentsia in typed editions, becoming in practice the religious textbook of Yakut neopaganism. Afanas'yev strives to draw out of the numerous pagan myths and popular beliefs an orderly monotheistic system and declares that the most respected and powerful gods in the Yakut pagan pantheon are persons of the one Creator-God (Aiyy, or Tengri). The doctrine of Aiyy is a modernised Yakut version of the pan-Turkic pagan religion of Tengrianism.

According to this doctrine the world is a system of ten heavenly circles. Each heaven has its own pantheon of gods and spirits, and in the highest heaven, the ninth, the pantheon is headed by the supreme Creator-God Aiyy (Tengri). Mankind is placed at the very bottom of this system, on Earth, with the first heaven stretched above. Between mankind and Aiyy, usually represented by the Sun (fire), there are

therefore nine circles of heaven. The living strength, named *syur*, flows down from Aiyy through these heavenly circles. *Syur* is the energy that animates an individual and makes him a person. The person himself is made up of three parts and after death divides up into three souls. The earth-soul (the body) disappears, the breath-soul (the psychic level) rests in one of the nine heavens, depending on the goodness of the deceased, and the mother-soul returns to Aiyy. Sometimes the mother-soul is known as *kut*, the core of a person lit by the divine *syur*. It is simultaneously the 'life force' in a person and his 'divine image'. A person may lose his *kut*, and can be kidnapped by spirits or evil shamans. Throughout their lives the Yakuts are afraid of losing their *kut*, which is necessary both in this world and in the world beyond the grave. Their main spiritual task is to preserve their *kut*. Afanas'yev believes that the psychic state and well-being of a living person depends directly on the moral state in which an individual preserves his *kut*. Afanas'yev alerts his nation to endangered traditional values and suggests ways in which they can be reasserted, formulating nine commandments of Aiyy:

do not commit adultery; respect nature; work hard; do not destroy or kill;
seek out your talents; tell the truth; attain the truth through study; protect
your *kut*; respect the commandments of Aiyy.

Afanas'yev and his fellow-believers are striving not only to assert monotheism but to break free of shamanist ideas, which are all that remains of the entire pagan belief system in the consciousness of the Yakut nation. They promote a reconstructed or new religion which will 'raise the Yakuts spiritually and morally' and have banned the practice of shamanism among themselves. They consider that they are carrying out the duties of 'white shamans' (that is, priests of Aiyy). At their meetings the neopagans conduct general prayer and carry out a bloodless sacrifice.

Shamanistic ideas are nevertheless a real form of religiosity for Yakuts today. This makes it impossible for the neopagans simply to reject shamanism and their attitude to it remains ambivalent. In propagating their teaching they draw on shamanist concepts and cannot rid themselves of feelings of pride about their shamanist fellow-Yakuts who have 'control over unbelievable psychic possibilities and have achieved phenomenal mystical illumination'.

A shaman (strictly speaking, a 'black shaman') is linked to the forces of death and destruction (in contrast to the 'white shaman', who is linked to creation and creativity). A black shaman is capable of controlling the forces of evil, using them in his own interests or suppressing them. The physical body of a person, which is destructible, is above all susceptible to the influence of a black shaman. Beliefs about how a shaman influences a person's body are based on the concept of the *belit*, a spiritual field that surrounds each person and has some similarities to the 'biofield' of the followers of extrasensory perception. The Yakut neopagans boast that 'all the achievements of contemporary science about extrasensory perception are known to any one of us from childhood'. It is believed that shamans are capable of influencing, transferring or stealing a *belit*, whether for good or evil purposes. The world of black shamanism, in contrast to that of white shamanism, has no moral origin; it is a world of dark, primitive, ancient spiritual elements.

In 1993 the neopagans established and officially registered the neopagan religious organisation *Kut-Syur*. Formally only a small number of ideologues and intellectuals has joined the organisation, but they have had some perceptible success in spreading their views. The authorities are backing the movement as a vehicle for preserving national culture and traditions. Their aim is to keep it purely secular, but many of the

movement's leaders want to redirect it along a religious path.

As a result of the activity of *Kut-Syur*, the syllabus for national cultural studies in secondary schools has begun to take on a pagan orientation. In some places school principals have set up 'Aiyy structures' (in essence, pagan chapels). The College of Culture (*Kolledzh kul'tury*), which trains the directors of Houses of Culture, has deliberately turned itself into a training centre for specialists in conducting pagan rites, prayers and festivals. The college director, Vil'yam Yakovlev, believes that it is not folklore that is being revived (though this is what the Ministry of Culture has instructed him to do), but religion.

From the beginning of the 1990s the neopagans campaigned for the right to build an Aiyy Centre in Yakutsk as the main national temple of their sun god, but they were obstructed by the authorities. In 1999 the authorities allocated the Tri Berezy region on the outskirts of Yakutsk for the Yyssakh Yakut national cultural centre. 'We will wait and see whether this will be a cultural or cult centre', says Ukhkhan.⁵

The neopagan movement does not confine itself to religious issues and is also involved in politics. The political party *Sakha Kasketele* was founded at the same time as *Kut-Syur*; its leader is Afanas'yev's closest colleague, Ivan Ukhkhan. The party programme aims to turn Yakutia into the national republic of the Yakut nation, maintain confederal links with Russia, confirm the Yakut pagan identity in all spheres of life, reorient the education system towards national traditions and revive the traditional economic system.

The neopagans are full of missionary enthusiasm, believing that they have access to the original unsullied truth that has been lost by other nations but preserved in the Yakut consciousness. 'The twentieth century', declares Anatoli Pavlov, one of the Yakut neopagans leaders,

was the century of revolutionary, destructive religions – Christianity and Marxism – which confirm the social conditioning and consciousness of a person. Now these ideological religions are failing. In their place an existential faith is coming, a faith that will help a person in his self-identity and self-perfection. Someone with Marx or Christ in his head would get lost in the taiga, but with faith in Aiyy he would survive. In essence, on the spiritual level, a person is always in the taiga. Life and death, the preservation of moral foundations and humanity – these are problems about which Marx and Christ have nothing to say. Christianity and Marxism have destroyed mankind over centuries. It is time to return to the unsullied truth, to traditions and to the good old days. A person must cease to feel like a marionette driven by social and economic forces. He must feel that he is, as in ancient times, one of the first principles of the universe, like water, fire or air. Such is his true nature. This is the truth that we are now bringing to our nation and which perhaps we will bring to humanity.⁶

The neopagans are, on principle, opposed to western civilisation. 'Western people do not believe in God, or in Christ', says Ukhkhan

but in Civilisation, in comfort, in progress and in social order. Faith in Christ quickly turns into faith in the dollar. Russians believe in exactly the same, but for them this turns out badly. ... Go down the western path – that means the unavoidable loss of the soul, and one becomes a helpless toy in the hands of external forces. The less Christianity and western

influence there is the better for the Yakuts (and perhaps for the Russians as well).⁷

In its mere six years of organised existence the neopagan movement has achieved some remarkable results. According to Bishop German, in the past two or three years there have been instances of Yakuts refusing to listen to Christian missionaries or to let them into their villages.⁸ As part of the revival of national rites and festivals, houses and yurts dedicated to Aiyy have been quietly appearing in the villages. *Kut-Syur* itself has remained fairly small, but new organisations, clubs and seminars dedicated to neopaganism have mushroomed.

The neopagan political movement has also developed dramatically. The republican authorities have always regarded the movement as radical-nationalist and therefore dangerous. They have adopted a dual policy: trying to tame it and integrate it into the ruling structures while at the same time subjecting it to direct repression.

There have been several attempts to persuade Afanas'yev and Ukhkhan to cooperate with the Academy of Spirituality on the development of national culture. From 1993 to 1997 Ukhkhan was a member of the president's Consultative Council, where he gained a reputation for outspokenness. But other attempts failed and the neopagan leaders have remained deaf to calls to join the Yakut establishment. Indeed, the authorities have unleashed several campaigns in the media against the spread of teachings about Aiyy and have threatened Ukhkhan and Afanas'yev with all kinds of harassment if they refused to moderate their views, banning several of their initiatives.

Before the presidential elections in Yakutia in December 1996 President Nikolayev met activists of *Sakha Kasketele* as part of his campaign strategy of trying to secure support from all important social sectors. At this meeting, according to Ukhkhan,⁹ Nikolayev promised to support several of *Sakha Kasketele*'s demands for a reorientation of educational and cultural policy towards 'national values', ecology and the revival of traditional economic patterns. *Sakha Kasketele* duly supported Nikolayev in the election. By mid-1997, however, Ukhkhan and his colleagues had reached the conclusion that the reelected president was not fulfilling his promises. They then began to criticise the president everywhere, in public and without restraint. An article by Ukhkhan, 'Pestryye dumy o bol'shom nachal'nike', caused a sensation, with its accusations that the president had betrayed his nation.

In the December 1997 elections to the Yakut parliament the neopagans campaigned as implacable opponents of the ruling authorities. Several of their supporters were elected and the neopagans became the second-strongest opposition group in parliament after the communists.

The authorities moved to an attitude of hostility towards *Sakha Kasketele* and *Kut-Syur*. Ukhkhan was removed from the president's Consultative Council and all contacts between the groups' leaders and the authorities were broken. The authorities forced the newspaper *Sakhada* (the organ of *Sakha Kasketele*) into bankruptcy, according to Ukhkhan by directly intimidating its sponsors. Afanas'yev was demoted at his workplace, the Institute of Humanities, from the post of head of the laboratories to that of a humble technician. The neopagan leaders were several times summoned to the Federal Security Service, the FSB, where they were advised to 'cool it'.

Meanwhile 'national' (that is, pagan) values are spreading more and more widely in society. In response, the authorities – while repressing the most principled and radical wing in the form of *Sakha Kasketele* and *Kut-Syur* – have made more and more concessions to the unorganised and spontaneous national movement. Attempts to halt

the spread of teachings about Aiiy have practically stopped and the authorities have begun to meet the new neopagan organisations that emerged in 1997–99. Construction work began in 1999 on Yyssakh, a centre for national ‘spirituality’ on the outskirts of Yakutsk.

The official attitude towards the Orthodox Church is also changing, mainly because of its obvious weakness and its inability to gain widespread popular support. As of mid-1999 there were only 42 Orthodox parishes in the whole of the huge republic, supporting 17 priests, only one of whom was a Yakut. The Church’s almost exclusive sources of funding were the republican and local budgets or sponsorship from big enterprises (almost always as the result of pressure from the authorities). In comparison with the rest of the Russian Orthodox Church the Yakut diocese is quite active. The diocesan clergy and the bishop himself spend a lot of time on missionary journeys, make real efforts to attract Yakuts to the Church and undertake charitable and catechetical work. However, given the difficult national and political conditions in Yakutia all this work has not been effective enough. The Orthodox Church has failed to become a serious ideological and social force. At the same time, Bishop German constantly ‘rocks the boat’ (as the authorities see it) by denouncing the shamanists and calling on the authorities to restrict (or even better to ban) the activity of Protestant and Catholic missionaries.

His calls come at a time when not only the neopagans but the Protestants too are having much more success than the Russian Orthodox Church. The number of active Protestant congregations exceeds the number of Orthodox parishes. The Pentecostals have organised several congregations made up of Yakuts and services are conducted entirely in the Yakut language. Protestant prayer houses are being built across Yakutia without any material support from the state. The growth in the number of Catholics in Yakutia has not been so striking – only two Catholic parishes were functioning in 1999 – but there are several highly significant qualitative indicators: several respected Yakut intellectuals have converted to Catholicism and the social work carried out by the Catholic parishes is recognised, even by the republic’s authorities, as the most effective. The proportion of Yakuts in the parishes is rising constantly.

The Yakuts themselves give two main reasons why they accept Protestantism or Catholicism more often than Orthodoxy: ‘Orthodoxy has more to do with the authorities than with God’ and ‘Orthodoxy is too national, it is the faith of the Russians, while Protestantism and Catholicism are faiths for everyone.’

Conditions have changed and so has the religious policy of the authorities. During 1997 the president began to distance himself from the Orthodox Church and references to Orthodoxy all but disappeared from his public pronouncements, just as his meetings with Bishop German began to get rarer. Material support for the Church also dropped.

There has been little serious discrimination against religious minorities in Yakutia in the 1990s, although the authorities certainly had plans for this. Deep inside government offices analyses were prepared about the ‘danger’ posed to the republic by Protestants and Catholics. The authorities had no principled position on the question of freedom of conscience. In late 1996 the government prepared a republican religious law which would have significantly restricted the rights of religious minorities, but it was never adopted.

By 1999 it was clear that the authorities had adopted the policy of recognising the rights of religious minorities. The secretary of the Commission for Religious Policy of the Government of Yakutia, Aleksandr Nikolayev, who is responsible for devising

religious policy, explains:

We cannot consider Protestants a minority as they have no fewer communities than the Orthodox. In the whole of the republic there are no more than 500 pagans at present – for the majority of Yakuts paganism is at the end of the day only culture and the government will treat it just like secular culture. There are many Yakuts who are favourable towards Orthodoxy – up to 20 per cent of new-born babies are baptised – but Orthodoxy has not become the religion of the Yakuts and the policy of support for the Orthodox Church exclusively was a mistake. The nation itself decides what it will believe in. And in all circumstances the leadership of the republic will strive to mobilise the real moral and spiritual potential of the religious communities to promote progress in the republic.¹⁰

Developments in religious life in Yakutia over the past ten years may be a reflection in miniature of the direction religious life in Russia as a whole might follow: from the restoration of the prerevolutionary situation to a wide pluralism; from attempts by the authorities to control and manipulate the religious situation to the recognition that the religious sphere is autonomous and not accountable to the authorities.

Notes and References

- ¹ See: Sergei Filatov and Aleksandr Shchipkov, 'Religious developments among the Volga nations as a model for the Russian Federation', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, September 1995, pp. 233–48; Sergei Filatov and Aleksandr Shchipkov, 'Udmurtia: Orthodoxy, paganism, authority', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, June 1997, pp. 177–83.
- ² M. Nikolayev, 'Dukhovnost' – krayeugol'ny kamen' v fundamente novoi Yakutii', *Vestnik Akademii dukhovnosti respubliki Sakha (Yakutii)*, no. 1, 1996, p. 9.
- ³ S. Omollon, 'Korneyava kul'tura i shamanizm', *NG – Religiya*, 7 April 1999.
- ⁴ Interview with the author, Yakutsk, 16 June 1999.
- ⁵ Interview with the author.
- ⁶ S. Filatov and A. Shchipkov, 'Yakutiya: obreteniye kuta', *Druzhba narodov*, no. 2, 1998, pp. 127–28.
- ⁷ Interview with the author, 14 July 1999.
- ⁸ Interview with the author.
- ⁹ Interview with the author, July 1999.
- ¹⁰ Interview with the author.

(Translated from the Russian by Felix Corley)