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Religion Revives in all its Variety: Russia's Regions Today*

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Introduction

The catastrophic experiment forcibly to impose 'state atheism' (*gosateizm*) in the Soviet Union lasted just 70 years. Until Lenin's first decree on the Separation of Church and State of January 1918,[1] no government in history had sought to impose a system which rejected all forms of religion. The Roman Empire debased the gods of mythology by decreeing that the ruler should be worshipped, but they never abolished the pantheon. The French Revolution was strongly anticlerical, but Christian worship continued. 'State atheism' had its ups and downs throughout the Soviet period, but continued as the dominant policy in one form or other until 1988. The advent of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party put an end to it three years into his rule. It is possible to put a precise date on this: 29 April 1988, the day on which Gorbachev received a group of leading bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin, the first such meeting since Stalin received Metropolitan Sergi in September 1943 and only the second in history. Gorbachev's words truly marked the beginning of a new era:

> Not everything has been easy and simple in the sphere of church–state relations. Religious organizations have been affected by the tragic developments that occurred in the period of the cult of personality. Mistakes made in relation to the church and believers in the 1930s and subsequently are being rectified. ... Believers are Soviet people, workers, patriots, and they have the full right to express their convictions with dignity. *Perestroika*, democratization and *glasnost* concern them as well – in full measure and without any restrictions. This is especially true of ethics and morals, a domain where universal norms and customs are so helpful for our common cause.[2]

'Our common cause' – never before anywhere had a communist leader in power pronounced such a phrase. Gorbachev proved to be as good as his word, though of course his own experiment in democracy collapsed three years later. Not only shortage of time prevented the emergence of such a dialogue, but the Churches all of a sudden became too strong to be tempted in this direction. Gorbachev made two

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promises: the right to celebrate the Millennium of the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Kiev in 988 and the introduction of a new and just law on religion to replace Stalin's of 1929.

The first was soon implemented, as plans were already in existence. The date on which the celebration of the conversion of the Eastern Slavs (in the ancient land of Rus') was due to begin, 4 June, was just five weeks away. But in that short time what might have been a local celebration expanded to become one of international significance. Guests from all over the world were expected, but they were surprised to find that Russian television, radio and newspapers would lead every broadcast, every issue, with extensive news of the day's events. Moscow and Russia received the acclaim that should rightly have belonged to Kiev and Ukraine, but nevertheless it felt as though the USSR had become a Christian country overnight. The apogee was a celebration in the Bolshoi Theatre where the massive forces of the theatre itself joined with cathedral and seminary choirs in a symphony of church and state, culminating in a massive peal of church bells – real bells – which a panel rolled back to reveal above the proscenium arch. In retrospect, some aspects of this week seem over the top, but Russia would never be the same again.[3]

Gorbachev's promise of a new law took longer to implement, but when it was promulgated in September 1990 it went beyond everyone's expectations in proclaiming total freedom of religion (even permitting the teaching of religion in state schools in the version for the Russian Republic: the text for the whole Soviet Union did not go quite this far).[4]

Had this law remained in force for a sensible period of time, this would have been a major step in the painful evolution of Russia towards democracy. This is not the place to discuss the convoluted and secret processes which led to the abolition of this law in September 1997 and its replacement by a new one which is a blueprint for the return of state control of religion, albeit of a different kind from that formerly exercised by the Communist Party.

Under the old system, every region of the Soviet Union had its local officials responsible for controlling religious activities and reporting back to the Council for Religious Affairs in Moscow. This system was abolished in 1990, but not, as it proved, swept away. Many – perhaps most – of these people remained at their desks or perhaps moved to the local polytechnic to deliver lectures in favour of religion, or at least of the Orthodox Church. They were awaiting a better day, when their services would once again be needed. That time came with the 1997 law, in agitating for which they had joined with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church.

What had happened during the seven-year interim was basically a revival of all forms of native religion, coupled with an invasion of cults from all over the world. Time might well have dictated that the resulting dangers were more perceived than actual.[5] The reaction was out of all proportion, but the old atheist guard believed that their day had come again. The resulting text was achieved by a secretive process and skulduggery does not seem too strong a word in the context.

There is not space here to discuss the new law in detail and this has already been done more than exhaustively elsewhere.[6] However, it is worth pausing over the preamble – not, we are told by its Russian defenders, part of the law itself, but merely the context in which the law is set. This text, consisting of one convoluted sentence, would fail a test in logic written by a high-school pupil:

> Confirming the right of each to freedom of conscience and freedom of creed, and also to equality before the law regardless of his attitudes to

> religion and his convictions; basing itself on the fact that the Russian Federation is a secular state; recognising the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia's spirituality and culture. ...

So far so not very good, but just supportable: the juxtaposition of 'secular state' and 'the special contribution of Orthodoxy' is bound to lead to misunderstandings somewhere along the line. But then comes a truly astonishing continuation:

> ... respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions and creeds which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples; considering it important to promote the achievement of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect in questions of freedom of conscience and freedom of creed; hereby adopts this federal law.

So what is this 'Christianity' which is separate from the Russian Orthodox Church? We are not told. And this, we must remind ourselves, is part of the law of the land, not some casual commentary by a careless journalist. We can only assume that it means in fact Catholicism and Protestantism, the first of which had a toehold on Russian soil, the second rather more. Representatives of Islam, Buddhism and Judaism were naturally delighted to find themselves named and protected under the new law. But what are the 'other religions and creeds which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples'? Such a vague, indeed meaningless, phrase may not be susceptible of an obvious interpretation, but one surprising answer will suggest itself later in this paper, when we come to discuss the rise of traditional paganism.

Confusion is already rife, but the main text will go on to show that there are three tiers of privilege. The Russian Orthodox Church, *de facto* if not *de jure* and encouraged by this special mention, will arrogate to itself, in the form of the local clergy, the right of deciding, where appealed to by the local state official, which other religions or denominations are to be granted the right of registration. It apparently has first claim on the loyalty of some 160 million people. Then any other religion may be considered 'traditional' if it was in existence 15 years before the decree – 1982 – which takes one right back to the end of the Brezhnev years. So the extreme discrimination of those years is perpetuated today. Any group not in existence then must reregister conditionally every year for the next 15 years to prove its credentials and in the meanwhile has virtually no rights: no printing and distribution of literature, owning property, hiring halls, inviting foreign guests, and much else. Those familiar with the period of 'stagnation' (*zastoi*), as Gorbachev called it, will know that this was a time of widespread discrimination, with a ban on such groups as Methodists (except in Estonia), Lutherans (except in Latvia and Estonia), some groups of Baptists who had separated from the Moscow-dominated All-Union Council, Eastern-rite Catholics (the 'Uniates' or Greek Catholics of Ukraine), Jehovah's Witnesses and many others. Some of these had been notably present before the Revolution: Lutherans were in Siberia in the seventeenth century and in St Petersburg from its founding (see the magnificent church, now being restored, on Nevsky Prospekt). The Anglican (Episcopal) Church had owned property in St Petersburg and Moscow, with flourishing congregations before the Revolution. Subsequent abolition of their chaplaincies would logically have meant that they fell foul of the 'fifteen-year rule', but of course for diplomatic reasons it would have been inconceivable to take back in 1997 the church in Moscow where worship had

trip up the slopes, ascend the high hills, come down to the broad rivers, like princesses in white and red, they lift their bell-towers – graceful, shapely, all different, high over mundane timber and thatch, they nod to each other from afar, from villages that are cut off and invisible to each other they soar to the same heaven. ...

But when you get into the village you find that not the living but the dead greeted you from afar. The crosses were knocked off the roof or twisted out of place long ago. The dome has been stripped and there are gaping holes between its rusty ribs. ... Our forefathers put all their understanding of life into these stones, into these bell-towers.[8]

Religious Revival

The revival of religion, especially among the intelligentsia of Moscow and Leningrad, even as early as the 1960s is amply documented.[9] Those writers who have attributed it in some way to the *perestroika* of Gorbachev are seriously in error. What Gorbachev did was to take the lid off a seething cauldron, facilitating the rebirth of religious institutions nationwide and giving voice to the pent-up spiritual aspirations of the Russian people (one meaning of *glasnost'*). This is the context in which we must view the events of 1988, when all this suddenly broke the surface.

One major effect of all this, as well as the releasing of a wound-up spring, was an influx of foreign missionaries of many denominations and religions. They were encouraged by 1988, by the 1990 legislation and especially by the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991. At this time, too, Russia, Ukraine and other former constituent republics began urgently to turn to the West for advice and economic support, which soon led to a much more ready access and a partial relaxation of visa restrictions.

This was not to last. The new law on religion of 1997 was only one aspect of the gathering spirit of resentment against the West in Russia, underlined by the adoption of the new law by the Duma with a majority of over 300 votes in favour.

However, if the main intention of the new law was to protect and encourage Orthodoxy over against all other religions (an interpretation based on the first part of the Preamble), then it has signally failed. The revival of all religions, those mentioned in the second part of the Preamble and many others, is one of the most interesting, significant, but least-known factors in the recent development of Russian society. It deserves to be studied and documented, to be set alongside the endless accounts of economic deprivation in the countryside.

There is an opportunity for a study of this kind to be undertaken and it is on the interim results of this as seen from the perspective of approximately halfway through a three-year study that this article is based.

In 1998 Keston Institute (Oxford, UK) secured a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia to carry out a nationwide and comprehensive survey of religious institutions in every region of Russia, leading to the establishment of a permanent database which can be constantly revised. Never before in history could there have been such an undertaking. In tsarist Russia the means did not exist. In the Soviet period there was no access for political and ideological reasons. There is now a window of opportunity, which is not guaranteed to remain open indefinitely. However, this is not an American (or British) project, despite the origin of the financial support and the nationality of its director (the present author). It is primarily a Russian project for Russians, with the fieldwork being carried out by experienced

Moscow-based sociologists of religions. For the moment, most of the material remains in Russian, much unpublished. However, there are plans to make it systematically available in the original language. We are also seeking ways of making as much as possible available in English.

The picture which is rapidly emerging is of a vast canvas stretched out over the length and breadth of the world's largest country and filled with the most diversified and active elements of religion. It is a microcosm – no, almost a macrocosm – of world religion on the threshold of the new millennium. Millions of Russians themselves will find this study a treasure-trove of new information. Western scholars of the Russian present as well as would-be missionaries and those who wish to offer fraternal aid to their fellow-believers will find this an essential source.

The new law has not even begun to control the explosion of all religions, from Russian Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Catholicism, through Islam and Buddhism to paganism, with more than a sprinkling of new-age religions and a revival of ancient Russian sects. Nor could it exercise such control, even if the will were there – which it is certainly not in many of the regions. A list of some of the more important recent violations of religious liberty resulting from the passing of the new law appeared in an earlier issue of *RSS*,[10] but overall one would have to classify these as relatively minor irritations rather than as harbingers of the intention to initiate a nationwide purge.

The remainder of this article takes a brief look around the regions and picks out some dominant trends, but only briefly touches on the revival of Orthodoxy in the Russian heartland, which is a subject on its own and which has already been adequately studied by the late Jane Ellis.[11]

Buddhism

Buddhism was a recognised religion under the tsars.[12] Buryatia, the Siberian region bordering on Mongolia, had 46 monasteries and 150 temples before the Revolution. It is not widely known that Buddhism was also indigenous in one corner of Europe, Kalmykia, part of the melting-pot of diverse ethnic peoples in the Lower Volga region, where they had settled in the seventeenth century following migration from north-west China. From ancient times they had close links with Tibet and respected the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama. The Russians did not interfere in their religious affairs until the eighteenth century, when they made half-hearted attempts to convert them to Orthodoxy. Those Kalmyks who did convert had the right to leave their villages and settle in Russian towns. In the second half of the eighteenth century the tsarist administration abolished the Kalmyk Khanate and many Buddhists found their way back to their Chinese homeland. Buddhism continued to exist, but was never as strong again.

There was a revival at the turn of the twentieth century, following a renewal of ties with Tibet after a visit of the Kalmyk lama Baaza Maknudzhuyev to the Dalai Lama and the holy sites of Lhasa. Links were established, too, with Buryatia. The loosening of imperial controls in 1905 led to a short period of revival and stability, with 96 centres of worship of various kinds in the Astrakhan'–Kalmykia region, and 1600 recognised Buddhist lamas. Major decisions for further development were taken after the February Revolution of 1917, but the subsequent Civil War and advent of an atheist regime soon rendered these null and void, despite the establishment of a Kalmyk Autonomous Republic in 1920. The final flourish was an All-Soviet Buddhist Assembly in Moscow in 1927, at which the Kalmyks played an important

role, but this led directly into the period of total repression. The final purge of Kalmyk lamas began in 1931, with the leading figure, Sharal Tepkin, being sentenced to the camps. Reports from his exile in Kazakhstan indicated that he had carried out his priestly duties in prison, but he died some 20 years later without having regained his freedom.

In 1943 Stalin, fearing that the national minorities in Europe might side with Hitler if the Nazis reached their area, abolished the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic, and deported the whole nationality to Siberia, along with many other allegedly recalcitrant minorities. Those who survived could return in 1957, the period of the 'thaw', and it was reported that some lamas had been able to continue secret ministry in exile. However, there was no permitted registration of any single religious centre or movement right up to the Gorbachev era.

In the interim, however, evidence began to emerge of survival. In Buryatia this was to a very limited extent permitted, for two monasteries were registered at the end of the Second World War. A leading Soviet newspaper wrote of this in 1972, describing the Buddhist temple at Ivolga, just outside Ulan-Ude, the regional capital:

> The busy Ulan-Ude to Kyakhta highroad. Crowds of hurrying pedestrians in the village streets. Hillocks along the roadside. Everything normal. Suddenly, beyond the snow-covered road, some curious looking buildings, glittering in all the colours of the rainbow. Can it be some sort of mirage? No, it is a Buddhist temple – a Datsan. You push open the gate and find yourself in another century, in another world. Carved pagodas with marvellously curved steep-sided roofs, strange sculptured animals, the white structures of chapels, resembling miniature Indian temples. Silence. The only sound is the tinkling of the bells under the roofs of the pagodas, caused by the wind, and a strange scraping sound.
>
> We move closer. An elderly woman is turning the handle of a 'holy' prayer wheel decorated with Tibetan hieroglyphics. A full circle has been made, and a bell rings. That means the prayer has been registered and the sin forgiven. Then her companion, a young girl aged about ten, moves up to the prayer wheel. She has a lively, smiling face, and she turns it as though it were some sort of game. She looks admiringly at the chapels, decorated with the Buddhist and national Buryat ornamentation. She is obviously attracted by their artistry. ... Then mother and daughter move on to one of the buildings, where the daily service is taking place. One can hear the monotonous mumbling of the priest – the Lama.[...]
>
> In essence, the teachers have closed their eyes to the problem, and refuse to appreciate all its complexities.[...] In Upper Ivolga, the children are exposed to particularly strong religious influence.[...]
>
> Time passes, and the number of believers in the Buryat Republic decreases very slowly. Its ranks are constantly being reinforced with older people, who received their education in Soviet schools.[...]
>
> Buddhism is not as harmless as it looks.[13]

This article, too, was not as harmless as it looked at the time. In fact, it was a preparation for the arrest of perhaps the greatest figure of Buddhism in Soviet times, Bidiya Dandaron. He had studied oriental languages in Leningrad in the 1930s and was twice imprisoned (1937–42 and 1947–54). He survived to enjoy 18 years of freedom (1954–72), during which time he became active again as a teacher, translator, writer of articles which circulated in *samizdat*, and founder of a secret Tantric

sect. This was suppressed in 1972; Dandaron was arrested, tried from 18 to 25 December 1972 (less than a week after publication of the above article) and transferred to Vydrino prison in Irkutsk. Keston College (as it then was) first exposed these events just after the trial, publishing the full *samizdat* testimony from Dandaron's friends and supporters.[14] This did not, however, prevent his death in prison in unknown circumstances a year later.

Dandaron's influence was perhaps more felt in Europe than in Siberia. It is clear from the evidence that Buddhism maintained an existence, part overt, part secret, during these long years of suppression.[15] It is not such a surprise that there were strong influences ready to lead to an open revival as soon as this became possible in the Gorbachev period. Already in 1985[16] a sociological survey reported that 30 per cent of rural Kalmyks and 23 per cent in towns called themselves Buddhists, 48 per cent of families had preserved religious objects and 98 per cent celebrated the holidays of the Buddhist calendar – and these results may be skewed against religion, because at this time atheist policy was still in full swing.

Initially, after the collapse of communism, the Buddhist revival focused on re-establishing spiritual ties with Tibet. The present Dalai Lama visited Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, in 1991 and was greeted with an enormous popular outpouring of enthusiasm. As there were no local people with a proper Buddhist education, a Kalmyk who had been educated in America, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, was appointed as the leader. In 1993 15 young Kalmyks went to study at the Tibetan exile centre in northern India and in 1997 five went to China. Several Tibetan monks came to Elista to teach Buddhism to the Kalmyks. A Buddhist theological institute opened its doors in 1995. Of the first intake of 30 only 12 were Kalmyks, the remaining 18, interestingly enough, being Russians.

However, the Tibetan link fell short of satisfying all the aspirations of the Kalmyks. Rinpoche left in 1993 for a study period in India, but he renounced his monastic vows and returned as a married man, subsequently going back to the USA. The Tibetan monks in Kalmykia do not know the language and are unfamiliar with local problems, as well as having certain theological differences of opinion.

Two tendencies are replacing this allegiance. Some believers are beginning to look more and more to Japan and Korea for their education and inspiration. Just as important, however, are the increasing links with the Buddhist communities of Western Europe. Those who speak for the Kalmyks are beginning increasingly to emphasise their own European identity and to underline their role as 'the only European Buddhist country'.

Bator Elistayev, seen as a leader of the younger intelligentsia, considers himself to be a pupil of the Parisian lama Deni Eiserinka-François. These young people pursue lively personal contacts, as well as setting up daily contact on the Internet.

The President of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, has now begun to play an active role as well. He secured financial support for, as well as giving his warm personal backing to, the building of the Syakyusn-Syume temple, begun in 1989, and given renewed impetus in 1996. He is also pledged to establish a Buddhist university, as well as a publishing base. He also presents himself, the first Buddhist president of Kalmykia, as an active thinker and ideologist, having set out his ideas in a book, *Kalmykiya – zemlya dukha: natsional'naya ideya* (*Kalmykia – Land of the Soul: the National Idea*) (Elista, 1997). The field report from the Keston research team is worth quoting verbatim at this point:

> In this book Ilyumzhinov asserts the existence of a certain 'single flow of soul', which unites paganism, Buddhism, the wisdom of the epics, and

> national traditions and customs. But Ilyumzhinov does not limit himself to the popular wisdom of the Kalmyk people alone; he gives great respect and support to the Russian Orthodox Church, he has had an audience with the pope in the Vatican and, until her death, he used to visit the Bulgarian prophetess Vanga to ask her advice. He not only attends Buddhist services, but also, at the time of church festivals, Orthodox ones as well. At the beginning of his presidential term Ilyumzhinov put forward a project for building a cathedral for all religions, although he dropped it when he became convinced that it was impossible.
>
> From 1993–96 the eclectic ideology of a 'single flow of spirituality uniting the religions of East and West', of a 'planetary faith', seemed to be echoed in the ideology of the Unification Church. Thus the Moonies were, for a few years, supported by the Kalmyk authorities and allowed into schools and institutes of higher education. However, following harsh criticism from the Russian authorities, the Elista administration withdrew its support, drove the Moonies out of their schools and cancelled their registration.

This is in addition to the president's plan of making Elista the chess capital of the world – but that is another story.

Paganism

Nowhere is the superficiality of the Soviet eradication of religion more obvious than with the dramatic reemergence of paganism in several areas of Siberia and even European Russia. In the process it has also become obvious that the attempted tsarist conversion of pagans to Orthodoxy was also a failure in many places.

When the Keston research team was in Yakutia (now renamed Sakha), they were told a delightful story of how pagan practices survived in the Soviet period. The new Soviet regime, noting how totem poles had replaced Orthodox worship as soon as the grip of tsarist imperialism relaxed, ordered their demolition. The response was to put a bust of Lenin on top and continue the libations at the foot of the pole, which the communist authorities found to be acceptable.

Superstition and all kinds of occult practices replaced religion even in top circles in the Soviet Union and evidence of this was legion, especially towards the end of the communist period. Brezhnev always retained allegiance to his faith-healers and 99 per cent of Russians believed in UFOs, with the newspapers feeding them vivid examples. Even Lenin had a high regard for the philosopher-painter, convert to Hindu mysticism and then founder of his own mystical religion, Nikolai Rerikh (1874–1947). I remember when I was an exchange student in Moscow in 1959 witnessing the huge success of an exhibition of Rerikh's paintings – and this was at the time when the renewed atheist campaign was moving into full swing. His two sons, Yuri, who died in 1960, and Nikolai, who died in 1993, aged 89, promoted their father's beliefs all their lives. The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge growth in Rerikh's popularity again and Keston's field team has produced a 19-page report on this, which contains a detailed history of this movement up to the present. His philosophy has brought a Russian influence to bear on the many 'new-age' ideas which have been flooding into the country.[17]

Whether the Rerikh philosophy should be classified as neopaganism or some derivative of Buddhism–Hinduism is a moot point. True Russian paganism has much

deeper roots and has made an astonishing comeback in the southern Volga area, just north of Buddhist Kalmykia. The republics of Mordovia, Udmurtia, Chuvashia and Mari El are all affected to a greater or lesser degree. Their status as autonomous republics during the Soviet era just allowed them to cling on to their languages, but put a strait-jacket on any attempt to revive their national identity. When Gorbachev came to power the removal of this oppression changed the situation dramatically.[18]

The late conversion of these nations to Orthodoxy meant that paganism survived longer than it did in the rest of Russia. The worship of pagan gods in holy groves probably continued up to the communist period and possibly never totally died out. Also, pagan survivals were incorporated into Orthodoxy itself. Now, however, there is a concerted attempt to revive paganism emanating almost exclusively from the intelligentsia. For them Russian Orthodoxy is the religion of the 'occupiers' and, as such, became tainted by communism during this century. The present revival, therefore, does not come out of the blue. In an effort to preserve the fragile oral traditions, the leaders have begun systematically to compile a compendium of national traditions, religion and history. The first printed religious text in the history of Mari paganism, a collection of prayers, appeared in 1992.

By contrast, communist atheist policies caused the Orthodox Church to lose considerable ground. There were seven churches open in Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of Mari El, in 1917, but the last of these closed during Khrushchev's antireligious campaign in the early 1960s, leaving the city as the only capital of an autonomous republic in the USSR without a single place of worship. By the mid-1990s there were 35 parishes functioning in the whole of Mari El (neighbouring Chuvashia has 126). The 44 clergy seem concerned, the Keston team's report states, to focus their ministry on Russians rather than the Mari people.

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church believed that Mari El should have its own separate diocese (it had previously been attached to Kazan'). It also turned out that this would be the hundredth diocesan see under the administration of the Moscow Patriarchate (not all within Russia, of course), so Patriarch Aleksi II arrived in Yoshkar-Ola on 24 July 1993 with due pomp to inaugurate it.

The patriarch could not avoid the theme of paganism in his speeches. Speaking of the danger emanating from foreign religious expansion, he stressed that local Orthodox clergy did not want to fight paganism and that

> the traditional faiths and religious organisations of our country must live peacefully together and not oppose one another. Some Mari are Christians and some are pagans. The Russian population here is at root Orthodox, but the Orthodox will not inspire war and hatred towards other traditional creeds.[19]

It is interesting to observe, in the light of the new law which would come into effect four years later, that the patriarch sounded much keener to counteract the effect of foreign missions than that of the revival of paganism, a phenomenon which one would have expected to cause him extreme disquiet.

The challenge to the Orthodox is clearly to produce prayer and liturgy in the local language and to seek converts among Mari people capable of proselytising among their own people. This, however, is bound to be a slow process and meanwhile paganism seems poised to make more rapid headway. The rise of paganism in Mari El is causing increasing waves in the political sphere. Pagans from neighbouring republics are beginning to regard Mari El as the model and some kind of interrepublican pagan political union in the lower Volga region is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Islam

The rise of Islam on Russian soil is far too large a topic to cover adequately in this paper. Aspects of it have been covered by articles in *RSS* in recent years.[20] It is a subject clearly destined to increase greatly in importance, especially in the political sense. The disaster in Chechnya has already ended with the first rupture of unity in the Russian state. To all intents and purposes, Grozny has won its independence, despite the Russian genocide, and President Aslan Maskhadov openly declares that his republic operates under Muslim law, while rejecting the writ of Moscow.

Less well known are other areas where Islam is less solid among the population, but where, like Buddhism, it has made considerable headway in the last few years. An interesting example is the republic of Adygeia in the south on the Black Sea. The Adygs were converted to Islam in the sixteenth century, when they came under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. They then resisted Russian colonisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Under pressure, the majority emigrated to Turkey in the 1850s–1860s and the remainder became an ethnic minority in their own land. In the Soviet period they suffered badly. The last Muslim congress was held in the mountain village of Adamia in 1925. Subsequently every single mosque was closed and all the clergy suppressed. As a gesture towards the people, however, they became an 'autonomous area' within Krasnoyarsk *krai* in 1936.

In June 1991, with great symbolism, the same village hosted the first congress of Adyg Muslims in recent times. They adopted statutes and elected an aged expert on Islam, Moss Ibrakhimovich Chekib, as mufti. He died three years later and his successor is Said Khuako, who returned to Adygeia after long exile in Syria, where, of course, he had had opportunity to become fully versed in Islam.

This is a region where Islam has virtually died out. However, the changed circumstances of recent years rapidly began to have an influence. Here is an extract from the Keston field survey carried out in 1997:

> A major influence in the revival of Islam in the republic has been that of the Adyg repatriates, some 500 in number, who returned home at the beginning of the 1990s, descendants of those forced to emigrate at the time of the Caucasian War. They now play a leading role in the Islamic community. Not only is the mufti himself a repatriate, but so are a number of other imams. Outstanding among them is Azmet Tashu, a repatriate from Bosnia, imam of the mosque in Adygeisk, leader of the Muslim youth movement and organiser of the first madrassah in the republic.

What had survived was the '*khazbe*', a system of rules for personal behaviour and moral norms, which predated Christianity, Islam and communism in the region and held on under each. These rules affected all aspects of life and bonded the people together: weddings, funerals, family, social and work relations, the inferior status of women, solidarity with the clan and relations with other groups. Within the '*khazbe*' many relics of magic and the occult survived. Naturally, a purer form of Islam has come back with the repatriates. What is very significant is that, while Adygs are a small minority compared with Russians in the area, they hold political sway. The report reads:

> The Islamic revival is largely supported and directed by the leadership of the Republic of Adygea and personally by its president, Aslan Aliyevich Dzharimov. Despite the fact that Adygs constitute only 20 per cent of the population (Russians are approximately 75 per cent), the government has

> been formed along ethnocratic lines, giving the Adygs control of all major institutions. ...
>
> The revival of Islam is central to the politics of consolidation of the Adyg people. Thanks to the government's financial assistance and the pressure it has exerted on business structures to sponsor projects, in the period 1991–97 nine mosques were built in the villages ... nine are currently under construction and 22 more are planned. In 1997 work began on a major mosque in the city of Maikop, with financial support from Syria.

Young people are studying Islam in Syria, Turkey and Egypt. However, the introduction of Islam as a subject of study at Adygeisk University has not found favour with students. The president has several times brought together the Muslim clergy in order to urge them to unify Islamic practices over the whole Adyg people.

By contrast to Adygea, which is on the fringes of Russian territory, Tatarstan is in the heartland and has sometimes been called the crossroads of Europe.[21] The Russian conquest of Kazan' was a major stage in the expansion eastwards of the empire. Today the population is about fifty–fifty Russians and Tatars, and the proportion of Orthodox and Muslims is similar. Both are expanding, but Orthodoxy is naturally viewed by many Tatars as the religion of the overlords.

In the early days after the collapse of communism both sectors of the population made threatening noises, but no confrontation developed. Rather the reverse. Tatarstan may be seen as one of the areas in the world where Christian–Islamic relations are better than the average. That is not to say, however, that they are easy, especially as the region is one which may be taken to illustrate the revival of Orthodoxy at its most positive.

This article has excluded a discussion of the revival of Russian Orthodoxy. However, despite all the impressive information about the revival of Buddhism, paganism and Islam, it is obvious that the Christian Church is destined to be visibly and actively present in Russia in a major way in the new millennium. The failed experiment of state atheism destroyed so much, yet what it has left behind proves beyond doubt that human agency, however systematic its efforts over a long period of time, cannot eliminate the faith and that the future of Russia and the future of Orthodoxy are inseparable. However, this will now be in a pluralistic society in which the most disparate elements will have to learn to live with each other. Laws favouring one group over another threaten not only to lead to heightened tensions, but even to cause disaster by exacerbating ethnic conflict – and Europe today is only too aware of the possible consequences of that.

Notes and References

1. See G. P. Fedotov, *The Russian Church and the Revolution* (London, 1928).
2. Quoted in Michael Bourdeaux, *Gorbachev, Glasnost and the Gospel* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1990), p. 44.
3. The present author was an eyewitness to these events, recounted in Bourdeaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–64.
4. For the debate leading up to this new law, see Bourdeaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–86. The full text and analysis are in the journal of Keston Institute, *Religion in Communist Lands,* vol. 19, nos. 1–2, 1991, pp. 119–45.
5. See, *passim*, John Witte and Michael Bourdeaux (eds), *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: the New War for Souls* (Orbis, Maryknoll, 1999).

[6] See the treatment at generous length (738 pages) in *Emory International Law Review* (Atlanta, GA), vol. 12, no. 1, Winter 1998, especially the exhaustive discussion of the law by W. Cole Durham and Lauren B. Homer, 'Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations: an analytical appraisal', pp. 101–246. A succinct and telling summary is by Janice Broun, 'New Russian law puts religious freedom at threat', *The Month*, July 1998, pp. 225–61.

[7] For an account, partly based on eyewitness experiences, of the Khrushchev period, see Michael Bourdeaux, *Opium of the People* (Faber and Faber, London, 1965), pp. 202–33.

[8] Translation in Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets* (Macmillan, London, 1969), pp. 154–55.

[9] See, for example, Michael Bourdeaux, *Risen Indeed: Lessons in Faith from the USSR* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London and Crestwood, NY, 1983), pp. 13–37.

[10] See Mark Elliott and Sharyl Corrado, 'The 1997 Russian law on religion: the impact on Protestants', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1999, pp. 109–34.

[11] Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness* (Croom Helm, London, 1996).

[12] All these facts, except for the description of the monastery in Buryatia and the death of Bidiya Dandaron, are taken from the as-yet-unpublished report of the Keston team's expedition to Kalmykia.

[13] *Uchitel'skaya gazeta*, Moscow, 12 December 1972; translation in *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 1, nos. 4/5, 1973, pp. 40–42.

[14] *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 1, nos. 4–5, 1973, pp. 43–47.

[15] See, for example, Luboš Bělka, 'Buddhism in Estonia', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1999, pp. 245–48.

[16] Here I revert to the unpublished field report.

[17] See the article 'The Rerikh movement ...' in this issue of *RSS*.

[18] The Keston team compiled a report on the Volga republics before the Pew project, into which it has been incorporated, officially began: 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, 1995, pp. 233–48.

[19] *ibid.*, p. 247.

[20] See especially *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 24, nos. 3/4, 1996, which is wholly devoted to the subject of Islam in Russia and the former Soviet Union; and Anna Zelkina, 'Islam and security in the new states of Central Asia: how genuine is the Islamic threat?', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 27, nos. 3/4, 1999, pp. 355–72.

[21] See Sergei Filatov, 'Tatarstan: at the crossroads of Islam and Orthodoxy', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 26, nos. 3/4, 1998, pp. 265–77.