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Religious Life in Siberia: The Case of Khakasia

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Russia and the world at large have recently been seeing the evolution of particular regional political and economic situations. So far, however, no one has taken full note of the large variations in the nature and level of religiosity and the role of religion in the various regions in Russia. One of the least understood areas is the religious life of Siberia, which has been obscured by myths and prejudices.

In contrast to the situation in the United States, most of the Russian pioneers who populated new territories beyond the Urals were not very religious. The first settlers included many exiles and social outcasts, people on the margins of society. The government officials who ended up in Siberia usually had relatively low qualifications and standards of behaviour. The surviving written accounts by travellers and local Siberian authors describe the Siberian population of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at a low level of religiosity and morality.

One of the main features of religious life in Siberia from the time of the first settlers to the present day has been the weakness of the Orthodox Church. It is not simply a question of lack of priests and the extreme size of the dioceses. Historical accounts tell of the extremely low moral, spiritual and educational level of the priesthood. With rare exceptions, religious activists, ascetics and educated clergy did not seek a life in this frozen and remote region, preferring to remain in European Russia, 'Holy Rus', whose very stones witnessed to a Christian heritage.

Orthodoxy in Siberia was traditionally weak, then; but there were many religious dissidents in Siberia who had a strongly-held faith. Old Believers were among the very first settlers, seeking out remote places where they could build their communities. These Old Believers were those who were most dedicated to their faith: when discovered by the authorities they would often abandon their farms and go deep into the taiga. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, if they were unable to flee, they would sometimes take the extreme step of setting fire to themselves. Members of other dissident faiths, such as the Molokans and Skoptsy, also found Siberia to their liking. At the end of the nineteenth century there was a significant growth in the number of Baptist believers in Siberia. Thus Siberians who had a strong faith were generally non-Orthodox and dissident.

Russians today think of Siberia as a purely 'Russian land' where there are very few non-Russian nationalities and religions. For an inhabitant of Moscow or St Petersburg any talk of the multiethnicity of Siberia seems like nonsense. The fact is, however, that there are a great many non-Russians in Siberia. First, there are the native peoples of Siberia: Muslim Tatars and various Turkic and northern peoples whose religious beliefs are pagan and who have in part resisted christianisation. Then

there are the Poles and Germans. Most of the Poles were exiled to Siberia by the tsarist authorities, with the result that all over Siberia large and flourishing Catholic communities sprang up. Before the Revolution every large Siberian town had a Catholic church. Most of the Germans were exiled during the Stalinist era following the abolition of the Volga German Republic.

For centuries all this religious variety existed under one dominant set of conditions: the lawlessness of the authorities and cruel state repression far more severe than in European Russia. Large numbers of disempowered exiles, constant shifts in population, the dominating influence of the army and the prison system, the low educational level of the population and the corruption and irresponsibility of the local authorities meant that in Siberia there were not even the beginnings of civil society which could be detected in European Russia. Nikolai Leskov, one of the best informed on the religious life of Siberia in the nineteenth century, has left accounts of almost unbelievable religious repression (including forcing the nominally Orthodox population to take the sacrament).¹ Cruelty and lawlessness on the part of the police was also characteristic in the Soviet period, when Siberia became a region of prison camps, exile and secret military installations.

It is in Khakasia, a small republic in southern Siberia, where the particular features of the religious life in Siberia stand out in sharpest relief.

Before Khakasia was made part of Russia it was inhabited by native Turkic peoples (before the Revolution they were officially called Minusinsk Tatars) who were neither Muslim or Christian. The Khakasians (the name given to the consolidated Turkic tribes at the beginning of the twentieth century) were traditionally pagan, with shamanism playing a dominant role.

The territory of present-day Khakasia was incorporated into Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century. From the outset the incoming population divided into two very different groups: first, the Old Believers, who were fleeing official persecution by settling in the remoter reaches of the country; and, second, the 'state people', Cossacks, government officials and later resettled peasants. The Old Believers adhered strictly to their faith and remained closed: they did not attempt to convert the Khakasians to Christianity and usually found a *modus vivendi* with the native population. The 'state people' took the best land, burdened the Khakasians with taxes and forcibly converted them to Orthodoxy. Khakasia was unlucky. In neighbouring Altai Arkhimandrite Makari (Glukharev), an educated and compassionate priest, did missionary work among the Altai and left them not only with the good memory of a 'kind pastor' but also with a tradition of Altai national Orthodoxy:² by contrast the Khakasians' experience of Orthodoxy was one of violence and russification. The last mass baptism of the Khakasians took place in July 1876, with troops and militia in attendance. All Khakasians subsequently officially declared themselves Orthodox but almost all of them continued to believe in pagan gods and practise shamanism.

In the nineteenth century exiled Polish Catholics arrived in the region and began to campaign for the opening of churches. Khakasia was also the first region to witness the arrival of Baptist believers, the first of whom were exiled from southern Russia in the 1870s.

At the beginning of the twentieth century this diverse society, used to lawlessness, isolation and division along confessional and ethnic lines, began with the rest of Russia to edge towards democracy, civil society and the rule of law. The events of 1917 set this process back by centuries, caused conflicts to become more deeply rooted and reinforced the powerlessness of minority groups.

When the communists came to power, in keeping with the policy of supporting

national minorities Khakasia was given the status of an autonomous republic. Despite the fact that in the twentieth century the Khakasians have comprised only a small proportion of the population (today 10 per cent), this autonomous status helped to preserve their language and culture.

However, it was not the nominal Khakasian government that determined how the life of this new republic was going to proceed during the 70 years of communist rule. The reality was that this was a region of concentration camps, where the prison authorities were all-powerful; it was a region of huge industrial complexes (including hydroelectric power stations, mines and aluminium production) where Germans, Ukrainians and other 'suspect' people were sent to work in exile. The policy of official atheism was pursued with particular vigour and cruelty. Orthodoxy, used to relying on both the police and the local authorities to enforce adherence to the faith, soon collapsed without these twin pillars of support. For decades Orthodoxy was represented by one tiny church on the outskirts of Abakan whose congregation was a handful of old women.

It was not as easy to deal with the religious minorities, however. Numerous campaigns against the Old Believers, the arrest of religious leaders and the destruction of their village communities did not extinguish the Old Believers in Siberia. The Yenisei basin (Krasnoyarsky *krai* and Khakasia), Altai and Kemerovskaya *oblast'* were all areas where the stubborn Old Believers would time and time again flee from the Soviet authorities, leaving their farms and villages and going deeper into the remote forests in order to reestablish their communities and follow their religious practices. In the 1970s the well-known Soviet writer and naturalist Vasili Peskov found one such remote community, the extended Lykhov family. He wrote a number of enthusiastic descriptions of their ability to survive, but was not bold enough to say anything in his wordy accounts about their religious faith.

Official policy was that exiled Germans were to lose their national and cultural identity and become 'Soviet people'. Throughout the Soviet period, however, congregations of German Catholics and Protestants continued to worship in secret. They had neither priests nor religious books – sometimes not even a Bible. The Scriptures and prayers were passed on from memory. Two years ago in the remote village of Borodino a 90-year-old German woman ('Mother Francesca') died. She was the *de facto* leader of a secret Catholic community throughout the Soviet period. It was the exiled German Protestants working on building sites and in mines in the region who became the most fearless leaders of Baptist, Pentecostal and Adventist communities, which were mainly made up of Russians. In the 1970s Khakasia, and particularly the mines of Chernogorsk and the building sites of Sayanogorsk, became one of the centres for the movement of the most radical non-registered groups of Pentecostals and *initsiativniki* Baptists. Arrests, the destruction of church buildings and the removal of children from believers' families were common. Chernogorsk was the home of the Vashchenko family of Pentecostals who managed to gain access to the US Embassy in 1978 and lived there for five years until they were given permission to leave Russia.

The native population, the Khakasians, did not fare much better. They were persecuted with just as much vigour for their pagan leanings.

Then came the collapse of Communism. At some point in 1990 the population found itself to be living in conditions of religious freedom. The oppressed believers began to organise a normal religious life.

The early 1990s saw the emergence of the Khakasian national movement, which had its own particular religious content. The first national movement was *Tun*

(Renaissance). From the outset *Tun* had an anti-Orthodox, pagan orientation. Its members organised the first ‘festivals’ (*prazdniki*), which were an attempt to revive national pagan prayer-gatherings, known as *tun-pairam*. They urged the revival of shamanism. In the early 1990s a pagan movement began to emerge and was officially registered as a religious organisation in 1994, called ‘The Khakasian Heritage Centre: the Society for Traditional Religion, Khakasian Shamanism, “*Akh Chayan*”’. Members of the local intelligentsia play a leading role in this society. From the outset the movement has had three distinct tendencies, which may in time develop into separate religious movements.

(1) *Traditional shamanism*. This group is led by university lecturer Tat’yana Kobezhgova, and writers Galina Kazachinova and Vera Tatarova. The main aim of its members is ‘to revive the traditional world view of the Khakasians’. This involves the religious practices of shamanism and the worship of spirits, as well as the revival of national epic literature, in which they seek a religious content. They are trying to revive shamanistic healing practices, and they hold national festivals and ‘prayer days’ (the Khakasian New Year celebration *chelpaz*, sunworship, worship of the holy mountain Tszykh). They are reviving the practice of casting spells and of offering sacrifices to the spirits they worship: they are polytheists. They have no system of doctrines and are hostile to Christianity. This movement consists of a few thousand members.

(2) *The ‘Young Shamans’*. This movement is led by theatre director Valeri Chibachkov, artist Tat’yana Dushinina and university lecturer Larissa Azhiganova. Its members are attempting to achieve a synthesis of Khakasian shamanism and ‘the universal experience of occultism and mysticism’. They have no recognised spiritual leader or set doctrines and their neoshamanist ideas are eclectic and vague, so it is possible to make only very general remarks about their religious leanings. The worldview of the ‘Young Shamans’ includes contemporary Russian and western parapsychology and in a belief in extrasensory perception and in magic. They are seeking ‘common ground with Orthodox mysticism’ and cooperate with the *Reikh* movement. They find ideas similar to their own expressed in works of art (‘we regard Pushkin’s poems as a holy text’). The movement was formed by ethnic Khakasians, but now has a more multiethnic membership, including Russians and Germans. However, the ‘Young Shamans’ believe in the particular sanctity of Khakasia-Shambhala and ‘all Siberia’.

(3) *Burkhanism*. This movement was founded by one charismatic public figure, Viktor Batanayev, an ethnographer and professor at the university of Abakan. Batanayev and his followers, still small in number, reject shamanism as the lowest, most primitive form of religious life. Batanayev believes that the shamanism of the Khakasians rests on a much more developed national monotheistic religion, which has more in common with Altai Burkhanism and ancient Turkic Tengrianism. He calls this religion ‘Khakasian Burkhanism’: ‘Burkhanism is the traditional religion of the Khakasians. It has much in common with Tengrianism and has borrowed a lot from Tibetan lamaism.’ He is now ‘reconstructing’ Burkhanism, which he believes will eventually have its own doctrines, temples and priesthood.

The Old Believers have also seen a gradual revival. Since the collapse of the planned agricultural system the Old Believer communities have gradually been regaining a

level of prosperity. Old Believer settlements which are hundreds of kilometres away from each other across the huge distances of Central Siberia are now beginning to make social and religious contacts and to make pilgrimages to secluded monasteries and to spiritual leaders deep in the taiga. Khakasia is one of the main areas of Old Believer settlement, and Old Believer communities live their own life with little reference to the secular authorities.

The Protestant groups have also benefited from the new freedoms. The first three or four years of the Gorbachev reforms led to some weakening of Protestantism: a great many active believers, Germans and other nationalities as well, emigrated from Russia. Nevertheless Baptists, Adventists and Pentecostals quietly got on with the task of preaching the faith and building their churches. German Lutheranism is facing the most complex situation. Because of the dispersal of their small congregations, lack of religious education and isolation these conservative Pietists have a vague confessional adherence to Lutheranism coupled with the most unexpected deviations from Lutheran teaching. Thus the revival of Lutheranism is coming up against particular difficulties. The problem is that the centralised revival of 'true' Lutheranism is being financed and led by *de facto* appointees from the Federal Republic of Germany, and this 'true' Lutheranism imported from Germany sits ill with the realities of Russian life. Newly-arrived pastors from Germany are seen as too liberal by the conservative Russian Germans. Meanwhile from the German perspective the Russian pastors and Lutheran activists are ignorant and primitive, promoting all kinds of unacceptable doctrines. Therefore the official church authorities very often refuse to recognise them and integrate them into church life. It is very expensive to provide pastors from Germany with what is for them an acceptable standard of living. Therefore very few are sent: there are only a few in the whole of Siberia. Even if they are very conscientious it is extremely difficult for them to pay more than occasional visits to the scattered and remote communities; and the congregations react with suspicion to these well-fed and self-assured teachers from the West.

It is not in fact the Germans who are most successful in spreading the Lutheran faith, but the Ingermanland Church (a revived Lutheran Church established by a Finnish ethnic group living in the Petersburg region) and the Estonian Lutheran Church (whose membership is mainly Russian). These two Churches are attracting local Germans, Finns, Russians and native peoples. In the mid-1990s a member of one of these congregations, Deacon Pavel Zayakin, a Russian, founded a Lutheran mission in the village of Tuim, around 200 kilometres from Abakan. His mission became very successful, attracting people of many nationalities. The first converts have now gone to one of the seminaries of the Missouri Synod in the United States to train as pastors.

A more primitive expression of Protestantism has been the emergence and the dramatic growth of the Glorification Church (*Tserkov' Proslavleniya*). This Church grew up among the traditional nonconformist Pentecostal groups in Chernogorsk. Many of the established Pentecostal leaders had emigrated at the beginning of *perestroika*. In the early 1990s charismatic missionaries from the religious movement 'Word of Life' founded in Uppsala, Sweden, started to recruit members from the Pentecostal congregations. One of the offshoots of this movement was the Glorification Church. The teaching of the Churches which have come out of this movement, based on 'prosperity theology', is very simple: a true Christian, a member of the movement, should be rich, healthy and happy. It is impossible not to agree with one of the leaders of the Catholic community in Abakan who said the Glorifica-

tion Church was ‘as sweet as a cheap boiled sweet – and just as hollow’.

The leaders of the Glorification Church soon adapted to the conditions of post-Soviet Russia: they recruit converts from among the newly-rich businessmen and often successfully intervene in local and regional election campaigns by supporting candidates who are sympathetic to the Church. The Church owns one of the largest bookshops in Siberia. It is also the owner–manager of a football team called *Reformatsiya*, whose annual earnings are around US\$100,000. Because of the high fees offered, professional footballers play for the team. Although they are loyal enough to their sponsors, they are by no means necessarily believers. The modern, western-style church building is in the very centre of Abakan. It is one of the few places in this small provincial town that is protected by suspicious and well-equipped security guards. Church leaders informed us that they were forced to employ security services in 1990 after a mysterious fire in the church.

Even critics of the Glorification Church are forced to admit that this religious organisation is one of the fastest-growing in Khakasia. The community in Abakan is acting as a centre from which the movement is spreading throughout Siberia (branches of the Church in other towns are variously called ‘Living Water’ (*‘Zhivaya voda’*), ‘Living Spring’ (*‘Zhivoi rodnik’*), ‘Church of the Testament’ (*‘Tserkov’ zaveta’*) and so on), including neighbouring Tuva, the only region in Russia where Buddhists are in the majority. The Glorification Church is also having some success in Mongolia – around a dozen children travel from Mongolia to study in the Church’s two schools in Khakasia.

What about the Orthodox Church? The Church was introduced to Khakasia in the early seventeenth century by government officials; in 1917 government officials removed the Church, and then returned it in 1995. In 1994 prime minister Smirnov of Khakasia and the president of the Congress of Deputies and *de facto* head of the executive, Shtygashev, asked Patriarch Aleksii II to establish a diocese in Khakasia. In 1995, after talks between Shtygashev and the patriarch, a diocese was set up, with one of the more passive bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, Vikenti (Morar’), at its head. Since then, on the initiative of the authorities and with their political and financial support, five churches have been built in various parts of Khakasia. There are a few active and respected priests in the diocese who are concerned for the spiritual welfare and religious education of the people, but this does not change the essence of the situation, which is that the Russian Orthodox Church returned to Khakasia as an official state organisation, with more in common with the bureaucracy and morally dubious large enterprises than with its people.

From 1996 restrictions on religious freedom began to make themselves felt. The authorities began with a crackdown on the activity of foreign missionaries. But this was only the beginning of worse difficulties to come. In 1997 the passing of the repressive federal law on religion significantly altered the situation. In Khakasia and all over Siberia religious minorities perceived this as the beginning of a new wave of repression. An atmosphere of fear and hatred began to affect Old Believers, Catholics, pagans and Protestants alike. *Iniitsiativniki* Baptists are again saying that they are prepared to suffer for Christ at the hands of the state and the official Church.

In the government offices of Abakan lists of desirable (‘traditional’) and undesirable Churches are being drawn up. It is interesting that Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses, well-established groups in Khakasia, do feature alongside Orthodoxy, Islam and Judaism as traditional religions. Catholics and Lutherans are also included, but with one important caveat – only Germans and Poles can belong to these denominations.

The first steps to 'bring some order to religious life' were taken against the Glorification Church. In January 1998 the local official responsible for relations with religious organisations described the Church in a radio interview as 'one of the most destructive totalitarian sects', which 'turns people into robots'. He added philosophically that movements like this had come into Russia from America, 'a gutter which has always flowed with all kinds of rubbish in which Protestantism and all manner of nontraditional religions have been able to develop'. Faced with actions by the authorities that are fostering a climate of xenophobia, the leaders of the Glorification Church are not publicising their links with the 'Word of Life' movement (based not in the United States, but in Sweden). Instead they are promoting their Abakan-based leader, who they claim was an unregistered priest and was persecuted by the Soviet authorities. (Critics of the Church are doubtful about these assertions.)

The leaders of the Glorification Church are right to be concerned about the new Law on Freedom of Conscience. Under the terms of this law the Church could lose many of its legal rights for ten years. It might be able to avoid this by becoming part of an 'all-Russian centralised religious organisation'. The Church has therefore been attempting to gain admission to one of the Russian unions of Pentecostals. At the same time it has been boasting of its links (both real and imagined) with politicians and businessmen in the hope that these might help it to avoid sanctions. Opponents of the Church claim that its members are attempting to bribe government officials with offers of money and trips abroad. The Glorification Church is active in politics. Russian legislation forbids the political involvement of religious organisations so the Church has registered its newspaper (*Proslavleniye*) as an independent publication. This paper actively encouraged people to vote for particular candidates in every election, in particular Boris Yel'tsin. However, political lobbying has not spared the Church from sanctions. Despite its active support for the mayor of Abakan in the elections, in February 1998 the city procurator of the capital of Khakasia, following the letter of the law, called for the closure of the Church's Bible school, as well as for the cessation of charitable and evangelistic activities in state institutions such as retirement homes.

The Glorification Church was one of the first victims of the new law, but it is the meek Lutherans who have been dealt the hardest blow. Deacon Pavel Zayakin's mission was placed under investigation following the visit of Lutheran pastors from the USA at the end of 1996. Soon after the pastors' departure Zayakin and members of his congregation were visited by members of the federal security services (FSB) and the local militia. They questioned members of the community about their foreign connections and their religious views, testing the authenticity of their Lutheran beliefs. Members of the FSB suspected the Lutheran mission of espionage. This was complete nonsense: even during the Cold War the town had never been closed to foreigners and the only industrial enterprise in Tuim, a factory for processing non-ferrous metals, had been closed for over a year at the time of the American visit. Government officials, who found the existence of the Lutheran mission not to their liking, were evidently trying to intimidate members of the congregation.

Zayakin's Lutheran mission was registered in 1996 under the terms of the 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience. According to this law ten adults could form a group and petition for registration as a religious organisation. The law did not demand that all ten persons 'requesting the establishment of a religious organisation' should be baptised or should have been confirmed as full members of a given Church: the law guaranteed the neutrality of the state in matters of ecclesiology; and indeed it did not use terms such as 'baptism' or 'confirmation'. Article 17 expressed the principle of

the neutrality of the state: 'A religious organisation is a voluntary union of citizens formed for the purposes of joint profession and teaching of the faith.' Thus a newcomer, who was still to go through the spiritual preparation for full membership and participation in the sacraments, could still be a 'founder member'. However, the republican authorities interpreted the law in their own arbitrary fashion. The plenipotentiary for religious affairs began to claim that a person who had been baptised into a different faith could not 'according to the law' become a founder member of Zayakin's congregation, even if he had read and signed the parish statutes on the clear understanding that they were Lutheran in nature. The regional authorities sent officers of the FSB to meet members of Zayakin's congregation. They succeeded in persuading two of the ten founder members to retract their signatures. Zayakin replaced these with two other members but the authorities insisted that it was too late to alter the 'incorrect' registration of the mission. Zayakin was told that his only course of action was to apply for new registration under the terms of the stricter 1997 law.

If the authorities were to apply such arbitrary logic more widely in the application of the law it could become an effective measure against any religious organisation that had fallen out of favour. At any moment the authorities could send officers of the FSB to the homes of believers to question them about documents that they might have signed months or years previously. In a country where citizens are still easily intimidated, fear alone could force believers to bow to the *diktat* of the authorities who might be displeased by the activity or the very existence of one or another 'religious organisation'.

In 1997 the Lutherans of Khakasia began an intense two-year legal struggle in an attempt to ensure their continued existence. At that time it seemed that Khakasia, like the rest of Russia, was once again going to experience widespread repression of religious freedom. Pastor Zayakin lodged repeated appeals against the efforts of the republican authorities (the procuracy, the FSB, the local 'plenipotentiary') to deprive his church of registration and against unfavourable court decisions. The case eventually came to the Russian Supreme Court, which upheld the rights of the Khakasia Lutherans.³ The case of Zayakin's church was one of the most widely-known scandals of 1997–98; its outcome shows that despite constant setbacks there is still real hope that legality and respect for human rights will prevail in Russia.

Notes and References

- ¹ N. S. Leskov, 'Sibirskiy kartinki XVIII veka', in Leskov, *Sobraniye sochinenii v 12 tomakh*, vol. 12 (Pravda, Moscow, 1989), pp. 137–86.
- ² On the religious situation in the Altai republic see S. Filatov, 'Altaisky burkhanizm: vera ili mechta o vere?', *Druzha narodov*, no. 2, 1999, pp. 126–33.
- ³ Tat'yana Titova and Roman Lunkin, 'Khakassia Lutherans win court victory, but expect further battles', *Keston News Service*, 27 November 1998; Roman Lunkin, 'Lutherans win latest round in Khakassia', *Keston News Service*, 2 March 1999.

(Translated from the Russian by Suzanne Pattle)