

## **Russia's Native Peoples: Their Path to Christianity**

ROMAN LUNKIN

Ever since the early 1990s the national republics within the Russian Federation have been seeking to assert their sovereignty and revive everything connected with their history and culture, including their traditional religion, whether that is Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism or paganism. However, it has become clear over time that advocates of the rebirth of a given national culture on the basis of a historical faith comprise only a small part of the local intelligentsia and of the local population, and that their total number is not as large as the leaders of national movements believe.

The first euphoric years of national self-assertion have passed and inevitably a certain cooling has set in towards traditions that politicians and intellectuals spoke of as the preserved essence of the given nationality. People have started to feel the need for a living faith that does not depend on tradition and rites that are no longer understood, but which will be relevant to their everyday life. During the period of greatest openness the leaders of traditional religious groups were not able to give an adequate response to those longing for faith, weighed down as they were by organisational, financial and political problems. By now they have missed their chance. There came a point when no individual – even one with only a basic education – would go to a church or a mosque if he could hardly understand what was going on. As a result, many simply gave up on religion as a whole in disappointment or considered it better not to join any of the denominations on offer. One of the reasons for this is the general weakness of religious roots among the Russians themselves, which has meant that new Protestant and Catholic churches have been drawing members not only from peoples of Islamic or pagan origin but also from traditionally Orthodox populations.

There is a general exodus from traditional religions, then, and it is likely to continue in the twenty-first century. At the same time traditionally non-Christian peoples are starting to turn to Christianity in its various denominations. This process is barely perceptible at the moment, but seems likely to accelerate. It is affecting some of the indigenous peoples of Russia such as the Tatars, Bashkorts (Bashkirs), Chuvash, Sakha (Yakuts), Udmurts, Khakasians, Tuvinians and Kalmyks.

To many of the local nationalities in Russia Christianity is still a new and unexplored religion, despite the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church, backed by the Russian authorities, has been trying for several centuries now to christianise the non-Russian native populations of the Russian Empire. The process of christianisation went in parallel with russification and began simultaneously with the establishment of a centralised Muscovite state. Christianisation began in Tatarstan in the sixteenth century and in the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century. Conversion to the Orthodox faith was closely bound up with the colonisation policy of the tsarist

authorities; it involved pressure from the state machinery and pointless mass baptisms, and therefore had a minimal impact on the mass of the population. In certain places there was a high level of attendance at church by members of the local ethnic population, but this was most often prompted by a desire that the fact should be noted by officialdom. Russification was particularly superficial among the small nationalities of the Far North. The language of the Orthodox liturgy – Old Church Slavonic – was largely incomprehensible to them. Systematic translations into national languages and missionary societies began to appear only in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In everyday life pagan beliefs and practices persisted unchanged. Evangelistic work, which had begun to bear fruit in the form of ethnic members of the clergy and the Gospels in native languages, was interrupted by the communist seizure of power in 1917.

In the post-*perestroika* period missionary work by the Russian Orthodox Church amongst the non-Russian population of the Russian Federation has been sporadic at best and has not been crowned with great success. Peoples who regard themselves as historically Orthodox and who have preserved their faith, such as the Chuvash and the 'Kryashen' Tatars in Tatarstan<sup>1</sup> who are baptised Orthodox, were converted before the Revolution. Orthodoxy was propagated among the Tatars in two ways: by mass settlement of Russian Orthodox and by the christianisation of the indigenous population (not only Tatars but also the pagan Chuvash and Mari). In the course of the first 150 years after the annexation of the Kazan' Khanate in the sixteenth century the Muscovite powers clearly set themselves the goal of complete christianisation of the local population by force. They destroyed almost all the mosques and did not hesitate to use extreme measures against those who opposed them, liquidating them wholesale, moving them out and settling Russians in their place, or applying punitive financial sanctions. However, the Russians abandoned their aim of complete christianisation of the Tatars in 1788, when the Ufa Muslim Spiritual Directorate was set up.

In 1989 Archbishop Anastasi (Metkin) of Kazan' and Tatarstan started services for the Kryashen in their own language. He actively promotes services in local languages and ordains Chuvash, Kryashen and Tatar priests. Tatars from traditionally Muslim families which were atheised in Soviet times are also turning to Orthodoxy, but they do not constitute a distinctive group in the Church and are becoming assimilated to the Russians.

A second missionary initiative by the Orthodox Church is to be seen in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), where Sakha (Yakuts) are being attracted to the Church through energetic missionary work on the part of Bishop German (Moralin) of Yakutsk and Lensk.

In the postsoviet national republics, as in Russia as a whole, the level of religiosity does not indicate that people are following the precepts of a particular religion. It is the Christian missionaries who have turned out to be successful in interesting and attracting members of the 'small nationalities', refuting popular slogans calling on them to return to their 'roots'.

Translations of the Scriptures into the national languages, as well as the use of national themes and examples in preaching and a respectful attitude towards national history and culture, play a crucial role in the missionary work of Catholics and Protestants. Missionary Churches typically have large social work programmes independent of ethnic group or faith and open to all sectors of the population. The work of their missionaries, especially those of the Pentecostals and charismatics, is thorough, even aggressive, seeking to reach every individual and every village. One

of their most attractive features is that they have no links with the ideology or religion that is handed down from above, whether it is paganism, Islam or Orthodoxy. Protestants typically follow nontraditional forms of worship and encourage informal relationships between church members; these are rarely features in traditional denominations. Without doubt a key element in the preaching of a number of Protestant Churches is coded criticism of the official religion, of its ritualism and corruption.

The christianisation of traditionally Islamic peoples – the Tatars, Bashkorts and peoples of Dagestan – is proceeding quite energetically. Local government officials are not keen to see Islam growing in strength, so they are deliberately placing no barriers in the way of missionary activity by Christians of all denominations. Paradoxically it is the Muslims who present more of a problem to the local authorities than the Protestants in these Muslim republics. For former Soviet apparatchiks Islam is an enigma, an uncontrolled, possibly uncontrollable, and now potentially dangerous phenomenon (as the struggle against 'Wahhabism' testifies). The authorities are trying to bring Islam under their control (as in Tatarstan) or to deny it any real possibility of development (as in Dagestan); or else they are forced to play different groupings within the various Spiritual Directorates off against each other, avoiding recognising the supreme authority of any of them (as in Bashkortostan). In this kind of situation, however hostile the Islamic nationalists or the Islamic and Orthodox clergy may be towards the Protestants the policies of the authorities objectively promote religious liberty. Tatar, Bashkort and Dagestani Christians thus feel more or less free to worship, and it is in the Churches that people of these nationalities can gain novel and lively religious experience of a kind which is too often missing from their traditional faith.

The clearest and most revealing example of this growing tendency is found in Tatarstan. At the start of the 2000s, there is now talk of the mass conversion of Tatars to Protestantism, and the process of the formation of purely Tatar Christian congregations has now begun in the republic, albeit on a small scale. Muslim activists are more intolerant of this trend than of the rare conversions of Tatars to Orthodoxy. Amongst leading clergy in the dioceses, and particularly within the muftiate, there is growing resentment on this score and pressure on the authorities to restrict the rights of Protestants to engage in 'proselytism'.

In spite of persecution of Protestants in 1994–95, when their services were broken up with the help of the militia, and when a court case was brought against Nikolai Solomonov, the leader of the charismatic Spirit of Life (*Dukh zhizni*) Church, Protestants and to a lesser degree Catholics are noticeably active in the republic.

Charismatic and evangelical Churches are large, influential and active, and are constantly acquiring new members, both Russians and Tatars. The Scriptures are being translated into the Tatar language. One Church with services in Tatar is the charismatic Cornerstone (*Krayeugol'ny kamen'*) Christian Church, headed by Pastor Roman Usachev. It is attracting a considerable number of people from the Russian and Tatar intelligentsia. Services in the church in Kazan' are attended by up to 1200 people (30–40 per cent of whom are Tatars). Most of these are people with higher education, such as musicians, teachers and doctors. The Church has its own school, teaching a range of subjects, which was established in 1994 and is housed in its own building in central Kazan'. Members of the Church are teachers at the school. Tatars are joining Baptist communities too, and there are five Tatar Baptist pastors in Tatarstan. Baptists engage in charitable activity, cooperating with local government social services. The pastor of the Baptist church in Zelenodol'sk, Dmitri Romanov,

believes that any Russian patriotism must be avoided, as it always amounts to politics; the work of the Church must be international.

One group conducting direct preaching among the Tatar population is the Tatar Autonomous Church of Evangelical Christians, headed by the Tatar pastor Takhir Talipov. This Church has six congregations in Tatarstan. Up to 200 people attend the church in Naberezhnyye Chelny. In these churches all services are held in Tatar.

One of the biggest Christian Churches in Tatarstan, with several thousand members, is the Pentecostal Aven-Ezer Church in Naberezhnyye Chelny, the religious headquarters for the Volga-Kama region of the Russian Union of Pentecostals. The pastors stress the multiethnic composition of their Church, which includes Tatars, among whom the Church is conducting active preaching. In 1998 Aven-Ezer began building a House of the Gospel (*Dom Yevangeliya*), the Pentecostals' first church building in Tatarstan.

The Lutheran parish in Kazan' is attended not only by Chuvash, Ukrainians and Russians, but by Tatars as well. Under their pastor, Christian Herrman, the Lutherans consciously strive to be open to everyone and readily welcome Tatars who consider themselves Muslims. Pastor Herrman, who is of the Pietist tradition, attracts people by his openness. He preaches personal piety, which requires membership of a church and, most importantly, work in hospitals, kindergartens and schools.

Thanks to their europeanised culture, the Tatars were bound at some point to be attracted to Catholicism. The first Catholic parish in Tatarstan was founded in Naberezhnyye Chelny in 1993 on the personal initiative of Nataliya Kandudina, a convert to Catholicism who had asked the leader of the Catholics in the European part of Russia, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, to send a priest to the city. The parish is made up of Russians and Tatars, mainly from the intelligentsia. In 1995 a Catholic parish was founded in Kazan' with the arrival of a priest, four nuns and three brothers from the Order of the Institute of the Incarnate Word, an order established in Argentina in the mid-1980s with the slogan 'evangelisation of culture'. In Kazan' Catholicism immediately won a large following amongst Russian and Tatar students.

The Bashkorts and Tatars in Bashkortostan are no less attracted to Christianity than in Tatarstan. The Bashkort authorities operate a 'fair and equal' policy towards all confessions. Problems with Christian preachers arise only if they start claiming that they have a special mission among the traditionally Islamic population of the republic. Christian clergy therefore invite Bashkorts and Tatars to church, but do not provide special services for them; nor are there churches with services exclusively in the Bashkort language, for example. We should also bear in mind that in Bashkortostan Islam has less influence than in Tatarstan, and that most Bashkorts are historically less firmly rooted in Islamic culture than the Tatars.

The biggest church in Bashkortostan is the Life of Victory (*Zhizn' pobedy*) Church led by pastor Vladimir Sil'chuk. Its congregation includes about 1000 Bashkorts and Tatars. Some of the hymns are sung in the Bashkort language and there is Bashkort Christian literature available. The pastor thinks that there is no need for special missionary techniques to reach the indigenous population since they are sufficiently receptive to simple preaching. The leader of the Baptists in Bashkortostan, Petr Zhuk, agrees; he believes that the Bashkorts and Tatars 'have a burden for their people' and communicate their faith to their own relations. The Baptists make efforts to distribute the Gospels in the local peoples' own languages in order that Christianity should not appear to them to be just the 'Russian faith'. The Pentecostals, led by Bishop Vladimir Mal'tsev, are more active among the Tatars and

Bashkorts. His Church uses informal missionary methods, such as inviting Bashkorts to take tea in traditional Bashkort manner round their own style of samovar while Christian songs are sung in the Bashkort and Tatar languages. In Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, there is the phenomenon of 'secret Christians', especially among the Tatars: these are people who cannot openly attend church services every Sunday. It might be that a Tatar husband thinks that his wife is betraying the Islamic faith by frequenting Christian meetings. In such cases the pastors recommend that the people concerned attend house groups rather than full-scale services. Missionaries generally prefer to work with mixed families rather than with purely Tatar or Bashkort families. In some parts of Bashkortostan there are Pentecostal pastors of Tatar and Bashkort nationality; and there are even Mari pastors, working with Mari young people who have lost their native roots and language. On the basis of their missionary experience the Pentecostals claim that the Tatars, Bashkorts and Mari are at the moment more open to mission than the Russians, and that women of Islamic background feel that it is only in Protestant communities that they are fully free to express their religious feelings. The Pentecostals in Bashkortostan are happy with the religious policies of the republican authorities, and the bishop says that he often has meetings with Talgat Tajutdin, the mufti of the Central Spiritual Directorate in Ufa, who does not object to Bashkorts and Tatars praying in Christian churches, on the grounds that 'Allah will sort it out later'.

In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan dissatisfaction with the spread of Christianity among the Muslim population has been expressed within the framework of Russian federal legislation and has not descended into extremist actions. In Dagestan, however, the conversion of members of the native population to Christianity encounters brutal opposition. Many native inhabitants of Dagestan consider Orthodoxy, and Christianity in general, as essentially the Russian religion, which they tend to regard as intrinsically hostile. But the activity of the charismatic Hosanna Church in such a dangerous region where military clashes occur frequently shows that Christianity can have a future once it has lost its label as the 'Russian faith' and has become closer to the local peoples of Dagestan with the help of preaching and the Bible in native languages. The pastor of the Church, Artur Suleimanov, has been able to resolve the problems of ethnic identity in the Church with the help of sensitive work with the relatives of Dagestani converts.

In 1995–97 Muslims would come every Sunday to services held by the Hosanna Church in order to disrupt them; they would jump onto the stage and seize the microphones from the leaders. Now, however, they are behaving in a more civilised way: a number of committed opponents of the charismatics from Islamic educational institutes will arrive at the end of the service and try to do 'antievangelisation'. The pastors are being careful not to aggravate the situation.

When he was a member of a Baptist congregation, Suleimanov, who is an Avar, used to pray for the salvation of the peoples of Dagestan. Most of the Dagestanis who attend his Church are from the Lak ethnic group. Some new converts have been driven out of their homes, and many have received threats; the Church tells newcomers that they must love their relatives all the more. When angry relatives of the new convert come to see him, Suleimanov tries to reassure them. The pastor and the relatives often find a common language and sometimes the relatives even join the Church too.

The Hosanna Church makes wide use of translations of the Gospels into Dagestan's national languages produced by the Swedish-based Institute for Bible Translation. Pastor Suleimanov uses them to try to show that Christianity is a religion

for people of all nationalities, and not just a 'Russian faith'. At services in house groups the preaching is conducted in local languages; members of the Church write hymns in Avar, Lak and other languages of Dagestan's many nationalities.

The Hosanna Church conducts Christian missions in several Dagestani villages, mostly in southern Dagestan where the situation is more stable than in the north. Some congregations already exist there, and there are individual Christians, both open and secret. Many Christians hide their faith as local reaction can be negative. The Church says that one of its members was killed in an Avar village in early 1999. In Derbent, the capital of southern Dagestan, a congregation of the Hosanna Church has been formed on the basis of the Vineyard (*Vinogradnik*) Church. A Christian from Krasnoyarsk had preached in Derbent for two years and was successful in attracting some Lezgins to Christianity.

The Hosanna Church has attracted many people through its musical and dance groups, which perform Dagestani folk dances, and its theatre group, which puts on regular performances. It runs a Sunday School and church members sponsor a children's home. Up to 600 people attend services in the church in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala: half of them are young people; some 80 per cent are Dagestanis, mostly Laks, though there are also Avars.

There are just ten Orthodox parishes in Dagestan, compared with more than 3000 mosques. Most of them are quite weak and many believers meet in prayer houses as the churches have been destroyed. Despite the fact that the Orthodox parish in Makhachkala is declining as Russians leave Dagestan, sometimes ordinary Dagestanis attend services, light candles and pray if they have been unable to resolve their problems at the mosque. Even unbaptised Dagestanis come to confession simply to be able to discuss religious subjects.

While it is charismatics and Baptists who have had an impact on some of the native nationalities in Dagestan, relatives sometimes come to the Orthodox Church complaining that their loved ones have been lured away from Islam into the 'Russian faith'. It transpires that they should be complaining to the charismatics, who actively engage in proselytism. The Orthodox are afraid that the atmosphere of tension and hostility resulting from Protestant activity might affect them too: aggressive Muslims regard all Christian Churches as essentially the same.

Conducting missionary work among the Adygei ethnic group of the North Caucasus, who are likewise of Muslim origin, has been the local Evangelical Christian Hope (*Nadezhda*) Church, which is a member of the Christian Missionary Union. The Church has distributed Bibles and films in Adygei to the Adygei congregation in Maikop, which is led by Pastor Aleksandr Kornev. The Adygei authorities and local nationalists are bitterly critical of and hostile to this Church, and missionaries have also received threats from the Adygei branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB). Adygei who associate with the Church are threatened with ostracism and told they will be refused traditional wedding or burial ceremonies.

Peoples of the Buddhist tradition, which has retained its temples and clergy, as well as members of other traditional confessions, are feeling pressure from Christian missionaries, who are targeting people the Buddhist clergy regard as potential Buddhists. The Tuvinians and Kalmyks, for example, may turn to Christianity not only because they are torn from their roots, but because they are consciously or unconsciously seeking new ways in which their peoples might develop culturally or because they want to tune into western values and imitate a western lifestyle.

Since the mid-1990s Protestantism has been spreading rapidly in Tuva among both Russians and Tuvinians. This growth is unhindered by the official policy of the Tuva

republican government, which is to support three basic religions: Buddhism and shamanism for the Tuvinians and Orthodoxy for the Russians. In Krasnoyarsk the Baptists are doing successful missionary work, as is the Pentecostal Christian Missionary Society (*Missionerskoye obshchestvo Khristian*) led by pastor Aleksandr Mironenko. The Protestants have already translated a good proportion of the Scriptures into the Tuvinian language.

There are, however, sporadic protests against Protestant missionary activity on the part of the Buddhists, and particularly against the Glorification (*Proslavleniye*) Church which originated in Khakasia.

In the mid-1990s the Glorification Church became the biggest Christian organisation in Khakasia and Tuva, overtaking other Protestant denominations and the Russian Orthodox Church. Over 50 per cent of its members are from local nationalities. The Church's missionary department sends missionaries all over Russia and other countries of the CIS. Church members work in an energetic, high-handed and even brazen way. The Church's paper reported on a mission trip to Tajikistan:

A team of five people from the Bible School preached the Gospel in this Muslim country ... Jesus is Lord there too, and He is stronger than Islam ... they divided the town of Leninabad into five parts and evangelised it almost completely ... Islam was trounced!

Some of the missionaries got into a school and requested the head teacher to assemble all the pupils in the main hall. Many 'accepted Jesus', though one young girl felt unable to do so.

After a little while the spirit of Islam appeared and started to strangle the girl. The desperate students started trying to drive out the spirit of Islam in this Islamic school. They shouted at it so much that ... it eventually left the girl. When she came to herself again they asked her: Who is your Lord? She replied: Indeed, it is Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

In Kalmykia, where Buddhism has also been the traditional faith, the Kalmyk Bible Society is at work on a translation of the Bible into Kalmyk. There have been attempts to organise a national Catholic Church in Kalmykia, with some success. The whole enterprise was characteristic of the religious ferment of the early 1990s. It was then that Aleksei Kikshayev, a member of the local Kalmyk intelligentsia, made a study of various religions and decided that the true faith was Catholicism. He travelled to L'viv in western Ukraine where he found a Latin-rite Catholic church, declared 'I am a Catholic!' and asked the priest to baptise him. The priest asked him some questions, and it became clear that Kikshayev knew absolutely nothing about Catholicism. The priest provided him with literature and told him to go back to Kalmykia and do some studying. Kikshayev turned out to be a determined man and a year later he returned to L'viv; this time he passed the test. He was baptised and returned to Elista, the Kalmyk capital, where he started a vigorous campaign to promote Catholicism. He was constantly giving lectures in universities and houses of culture and writing articles for the local press. Thanks to him the Kalmyks heard about Catholicism for the first time and the local Poles and Germans were reminded about the faith of their ancestors. A priest arrived in Elista in 1993. A community has gradually arisen, now numbering some 100 people, mainly Russians, Armenians and Kalmyks.

In other national republics, where the historical faith is paganism, much depends on how intensively these peoples were subjected to christianisation in the past and

whether they have preserved their ancient traditions in the form of rites and prayers that continue today, with active shamans in the villages, or whether this is little more than an ethnographic reconstruction by members of the local intelligentsia. In the latter case active evangelisation can easily penetrate everyday pagan customs and even use them to bring the Christian message home, reworking traditional culture in a Christian mould.

The peoples of the Far North were reached only recently by Christian missionaries, and they may well be attracted by the idea of bringing their own attitudes and way of life into line with modern conditions: for them Christianity will tend to represent the values of civilisation. At the same time, successful missionaries are those who have tried to reconcile the concepts and customs of the local peoples with Christian concepts and symbols and to show that native culture has a place in the framework of Christian worship.

Christian missionaries have been exceptionally successful among the indigenous people of the Kamchatka peninsula, the Koryaks. The Full Gospel Church (*Tserkov' Polnogo Yevangeliya*) founded seven churches in the space of just a few years in their traditional homeland, the Koryak Autonomous *Okrug* in the Far North, and the congregations are over 80 per cent Koryak. Harsh natural conditions make mission difficult. Some churches can be reached only by helicopter. There is also a high level of poverty. Koryaks who live in settlements rather than raising deer are usually prey to alcoholism and tuberculosis and receive little education; Russians tend to treat them with contempt. The Full Gospel Pentecostal missionaries try to break down these stereotypes: they are open to all and ready to help anyone. Relatives of converted Koryaks notice how people of their nationality become healthy members of Christian church communities, on an equal standing with others. Services are usually conducted in Russian, since young Koryaks tend not to know their own languages, but the pastors encourage the young people to study their native culture and to learn traditional economic skills such as raising deer and fishing. Pentecostal services in the Far North usually feature native drums and traditional Koryak deer-skin clothing. Some Christian songs have been translated into Koryak and Aleut (for the Aleuts who live on the Komandorsky Islands). In 1999 the Full Gospel Church organised a conference 'Reconciliation' (*'Primireniye'*) in the Kamchatkan capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to which it invited all the indigenous peoples of the Far North who had been reached by Christian missionaries. From Kamchatka itself came Koryaks, Aleuts and Evenks, who praised the Lord in Koryak songs and national dances which had originally had now-lost pagan meanings.

In the northern part of the island of Sakhalin, preaching is being conducted among the native population of the island, the Nivkhi, by the Sakhalin Regional Association of Churches of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (*Sakhalinskoye oblastnoye ob'yedineniye tserkvei Khristian Very Yevangel'skoi*), a Pentecostal denomination led by Bishop Petr Yarmolyuk. As a result of evangelisation in Nogliki in northern Sakhalin, a church has been founded in the village of Val, which is attended by Nivkhi and led by a Nivkh pastor, Ivan Parkizin. He tries to preach Christianity through the medium of Nivkh culture and customs as he seeks to prove that there is someone higher than the ancestors who have been revered by the Nivkhi since time immemorial.

Catholic missionaries from the Salesians of Don Bosco (St John Bosco) are at work among the Sakha people of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), a northern nationality which has been more extensively touched by western civilisation. Before 1917 Catholicism in Yakutia was exclusively the religion of the Polish and



Lithuanian political exiles and was the second largest religion after Orthodoxy. This allows the Catholics to argue that Catholicism is therefore a 'traditional religion' in Sakha. However, descendants of the exiled Poles are not particularly active and Catholic parishes are predominantly Russian, although the number of Sakha – mainly members of the intelligentsia and young people – is steadily rising. The head of the Salesian House in Yakutsk is a Slovak, Fr Andrej Parubčik. More than 300 young people come here regularly to use the sports hall, meet their friends, and take lessons in the computer class or in the carpentry and sewing workshops. The Salesians see as their main goal the creation of an educational atmosphere for young people within the House, which is dedicated to Don Bosco. Missionary work began in 1991 in the town of Aldan, south of Yakutsk, where there was a Catholic church before the Revolution. The work is led by another Slovak, Fr Josef Pravda, who had a great deal of experience of underground work in his homeland in communist times. The community is now some 60 people, and a youth centre with its own chapel has been built. The community also includes some Catholics from among the Evenks who live in the towns of Chagda and Kurany. Catholic priests are often invited into local schools to conduct lessons. The Salesians are also heavily involved in charitable work, distributing clothing to the needy and providing free medical treatment. This help is invaluable to the impoverished Sakha population, which has suffered like other peoples of the Russian Far North.

The pastors of the Protestant Word of Life (*Slovo zhizni*) Church are making a special study of the history of the Sakha and their festivals and customs, and are learning the Sakha language. Vitali Mikhailov, an assistant to the pastor, believes that the Sakha pagan summer festival Yyssakh can be compared with Easter and can be celebrated at family level. The Church of Evangelical Christians, of the North-Eastern Union of Evangelical Christian Churches, has organised churches in Tiksi and Neryungri in which most of the members are Sakha. A Sakha has become pastor of the Tiksi congregation.

The originally pagan Finno-Ugrian peoples were exposed to active government-sponsored christianisation from an early date, but it was in the nineteenth century that Christianity began to penetrate their national life, with the appearance of the first native-born Orthodox clergy. After the years of Soviet atheism christianisation more or less began again from scratch, and now Protestants were involved as well as Orthodox. In these regions Christianity has had to tackle a *mélange* of Christian and pagan concepts in the national consciousness.

In Mordovia Christianity began to spread gradually from the second half of the sixteenth century after Russian armies occupied the territories of the Kazan' Khanate and missionary monks arrived to accomplish what was essentially a programme of forced conversion. Despite everything, paganism has long survived among the peoples of Mordovia – the Erzya and Moksha, together known to the Russians as 'Mordovians'. From the late eighteenth century preaching of Christianity began in the Erzya and Moksha languages. At the end of the nineteenth century various parts of the Bible were translated into the Mordovian languages by Ivan Barsov. Missionary activity by Nikolai Il'minsky, who worked among the peoples of the Volga, led to the gradual growth of a national intelligentsia and the appearance of a purely Mordovian clergy which was able to play its part in the cause of national rebirth. A Mordovian cultural and educational society was formed at the first general assembly of the peoples of the Volga region in Kazan' in May 1917. The Mordovian deacon Fedor Sadkov spoke up forcefully for the promotion of 'ethnic bishops' and for preaching in native languages. He considered 'Mordovian' Orthodoxy as a key

element in the national revival. Services are still not being held in the native languages in this diocese, despite the fact that most of the clergy are Mordovians.

The only Church which has a policy designed specifically for the indigenous peoples of Mordovia is the Rebirth (*Vozrozhdeniye*) autonomous Evangelical Christian Church led by pastor Anatoli Bogatov, who is an Erzya by nationality. This is a very evangelistically-oriented and open Church. It recognises the problem of providing services and preaching in the Erzya and Moksha languages, but has not so far succeeded in producing pastors who can do so. Bogatov himself is in favour of setting up independent national Churches throughout Russia. He is opposed to Baptist traditionalism and sees himself as a follower of the socially-active teachings of Prokhanov. Bogatov's aim is to double the size of his congregation before long and to begin missionary work among Mordovian civil servants and public employees. Meanwhile in the Mordovian capital Saransk the Lutheran Church led by deacon Aleksei Aleshkin and his artist brother Andrei, both Erzya, is equally active. Services are held in the Erzya and Moksha languages. The Lutherans target the local national intelligentsia, who want to embrace European culture with the help of Christianity but at the same time preserve their Mordovian cultural roots.

Christianity began to spread among the traditionally pagan Udmurts as early as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, initially in the northern regions of the lands where Udmurts had historically settled, as Russian settlers arrived there. However, until the middle of the nineteenth century christianisation was basically carried by the use of police methods. Pagans were subjected to persecution, and holy woods, meeting places and cemeteries were destroyed. Udmurt nationalists today are hostile to the Orthodox Church, which they view as a russifying force.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that nothing is being done for the Udmurts today in the diocese of Izhevsk and Udmurtia. Some prayer books in the Udmurt language have been reprinted and the deacon Mikhail Atamanov, a doctor of philology, has translated the New Testament into contemporary Udmurt. Most of the Udmurts who consider themselves Christians are in practice dual-believers; only about ten per cent are Orthodox Christians. However, the Russian national orientation of Orthodoxy has prevented the Orthodox Church and the Udmurt nationalist movement from establishing any kind of constructive relationship.

Amongst Udmurts and Russians Pentecostal groups of various kinds are experiencing particularly strong and rapid growth, which from 1990 to 1995 was facilitated by American Pentecostal missionaries. Pentecostals and charismatics in Izhevsk, the capital of Udmurtia, publish one of Russia's most widely-circulated interdenominational Protestant papers, *Vera i zhizn'* (Faith and Life).

The Pentecostal Church which is growing fastest among Udmurts as a result of its missionary activity is the local Philadelphia Church. It has been holding some services in Udmurt since 1993. Several Udmurts are now training to be pastors. About a quarter of the church membership is Udmurt. When preaching, pastors use images from Udmurt pagan mythology that are in keeping with Christianity. A video cassette of the Biblical cartoon *Superbook* is distributed in the Udmurt language. Pentecostals are helping deacon Atamanov of the Orthodox Church with his translation of the Bible into Udmurt. From 1992 to 1997 the Church also worked with the biggest Udmurt nationalist group, *Kenesh*, until the latter came out in open support of paganism. Missionaries from the Philadelphia Church have also been working successfully among Tatars in Udmurtia, organising more than 20 campaigns by 1998. The Church is also conducting missionary activity in the Republic of Mari El and on the island of Sakhalin in the Far East.

Native peoples in Russia are turning to Christianity as part of the process of their reorientation to new values – embodied in Russian Orthodoxy, or in American Protestantism, or in European Catholicism and Lutheranism. National culture, whether Islamic, Buddhist or pagan, inevitably loses something; but it inevitably also gains from new ideas and ideals and is spurred to further development. For new believers their new faith frequently means a lot more to them than does the faith of traditionally Christian nations, where the majority are nominal believers only.

The smaller national groups, especially in the Far North, seem to find it easy to accept a new religion while preserving everyday customs that are tied in with paganism. Among Buddhist and Muslim peoples, their faith is primarily a phenomenon of the cultural and social spheres and for a large part of the population has ceased to be a matter of personal faith. Native peoples of Siberia, the North Caucasus and the Russian Far East are becoming Christians, turning their backs on complex and centuries-old religious traditions they no longer understand. They are choosing a simple but living, all-embracing faith to which, like the early Christians, they are testifying actively and zealously.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> See Sergei Filatov, 'Tatarstan: at the crossroads of Islam and Orthodoxy', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 26, nos. 3/4, September–December 1998, pp. 256–77.
- <sup>2</sup> *Golos very*, nos. 3/4, 1996.

(Translated from the Russian by Felix Corley and Philip Walters)