"I Came not to Bring Peace, but a Sword": The Politics of Religion after Socialism and the Precariousness of Religious Life in the Russian Arctic*

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Abstract: In the post-Soviet period, new opportunities have been created for cross-cultural interaction revealing a global religious marketplace. The Russian Arctic seemed to have become an attractive land for international Protestant missionary activities. Since the mid-1990s, scholars began to register the growing influence of evangelical movements among the indigenous population of Siberia and the Far North. Based on a case study of religious communities in the Polar Ural Mountains and the Yamal peninsula, the article addresses the transformation of postsocialist religious landscape into a "battlefield" of different missionary principles and strategies. The picture was also amplified with the persistence of Soviet atheistic discourse on "destructive foreign religious sects" and local authorities' policy of putting pressure upon and intimidating Protestant religious associations. The endurance of Soviet anti-religious ideology and the issue of "destructive sects" dominated local public discourse and influenced the ways in which the local authorities reacted to recent religious rearrangements. This article explores the background of the emerging diverse and competitive religiosity in the Arctic and across post-Soviet Russia and describes the main tensions that determined religious activity in the Russian Arctic.

Key words: evangelical mission, the Russian Arctic, indigenous peoples of Siberia and the North, post-Soviet politics of religion, inter-confessional relations, religious conflicts. Baptism, Pentecostalism.

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Introduction

In the post-Soviet period, new opportunities have been created for cross-cultural interaction revealing a global religious marketplace. The Russian Arctic seemed to have become an attractive land for international Protestant missionary activities. Since the mid-1990s, scholars began to register the growing influence of evangelical movements among the indigenous population of Siberia and the Far North[1]. Here, "at the end of the earth", there exist people whose "paganism" still lives on in the form of numerous sacred places as well as in everyday life. The global phenomenon of short-term missions reached even the most remote places of Russia, transforming and rearranging the Siberian religious landscapes, making it a "battlefield" of different missionary principles and strategies.[2]

Multiple Evangelical ministries from the former Soviet space, as well as from different foreign countries (Western and Northern Europe, United States, Canada and even from Cameroon, Australia and Korea) have been working in the Polar Urals and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO), which is the case study of this article. They evangelized, organized conferences, established religious infrastructure, translated and published literature in local languages. As a result of missionary activities, a highly competitive multi-religious landscape has developed here, with diverse religious domains: a number of Protestant movements, the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, and native religious practices.

The picture was amplified with the persistence of Soviet atheistic discourse on "destructive foreign religious sects" and local authorities' policy of putting pressure upon and intimidating Protestant religious associations. The endurance of Soviet anti-religious ideology and the issue of "destructive sects" dominated local public discourse and influenced the ways in which the local authorities reacted to recent religious rearrangements.

In this article, I explore the background of the emerging diverse and competitive religiosity in the Arctic and across post-Soviet Russia, and describe the main tensions that determined religious activity in the Russian Arctic.

I see the main source for the precariousness of religious life of Arctic Protestant communities in religion-state relations and the state policy based on the "sectarian" discourse and the binary opposition "traditional/non-traditional religions", within which the Russian Orthodox Church is represented as traditional against the background of non-traditional, hence foreign and alien, Evangelical missionary movements.

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[1] Olga Rybakova, "The Evangelist Communities of Magadan Oblast," *Sibirica. Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2009): 1-21; Mathijs Pelkmans, ed., *Conversion after Socialism. Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union* (NY, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009); Andrew Wiget and Olga Balalaeva, "Crisis, Conversion, and Conflict: Evangelical Christianity, Rapid Change, and the Eastern Khanty," *Sibirica. Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2007):1-29.

[2] Gary Brumbelow, "The Other Side of Russia: Evangelical Ministries in Siberia," *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 3 (Spring 1995):1-3; Alexey D. Krindatch, "Patterns of Religious Change in Postsoviet Russia: Major Trends from 1998 to 2003," *Religion, State & Society* 32, no. 2 (2004):115-136.

Religious Persecutions that Never Ended?

In early spring 2011 I was sitting in a tiny but cosy house used as a Charismatic prayer house in Salekhard city, Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, North-Western Siberia. The prayer meeting had just finished and the pastor with a few other believers stayed in the church, having tea and answering my questions about religious life in the Yamal and the Polar Ural. Believers were telling me stories about police arresting a pastor in the middle of the night and then letting him go back home in his slippers when it was freezing outside; about a church member fired from his job with the comments from his boss: "I don't need sectarians here, I don't need problems here at work"; about TV journalists entering a prayer house without permission and then making a fraud program; about humiliating reports the church had to submit every year to the state authorities. Then the pastor continued with a story on how he participated in a Christian conference in Moscow. He remembered how an Evangelical pastor from Pakistan who presented at the conference, asked not to be recorded for safety reasons. "And when I began my presentation about our community in Salekhard I also asked not to be recorded either. So, things like that are going on here, believers in Salekhard experience the same troubles as those in Pakistan. And nobody knows how bad it is here... Everything is like in Soviet times. In big cities, in Moscow, they cannot even imagine that anything like that is still possible".

This story echoes the general atmosphere of missionary activities by newly organized Protestant communities in the Yamal and the Polar Urals. The phenomenon of religious harassment against the background of mushrooming post-Socialist religious diversity is what determined local religious life and people's conversion careers.

Since the post-Soviet period, the territories of the Polar Ural and Yamal tundra have become a zone of intensive Evangelical missionary activities with frequent cases of conversion to Protestant Christianity among the native people (mainly, the Nenets and the Khanty). And while "traditional" indigenous customs and sacred sites, along with the Russian Orthodoxy, were promoted on a public level, the rural Nenets and Khanty people often eagerly embraced the Christian Evangelical message.

Increasing cases of conversion to Protestantism often met with violent anti-conversion attitudes from both native society and local authorities. In 2006, when I first arrived in the YNAO, I was surprised by the level of agitation – in public discourse and everyday life – concerning the issue of Evangelical conversion in the tundra. Everyone discussed the appearance of "sects". From everywhere I could hear stories about wandering missionaries who burned Nenets "idols" (traditional ritual objects and sacred sites) and destroyed Nenets culture, about Nenets converts who had given up their ancestors' gods, who sacrilegiously violated tundra traditions and hence would soon die in poverty being punished by gods and people. There were gossip about weird sectarian meetings in homes; about tundra Nenets children in residential schools who gathered in bathrooms to pray and to read the Bible; about "sectarian chums" in the tundra, which you better avoid when migrating with your reindeer stock. Local authorities were alerted to visiting missionaries and the police carefully watched the activities of Protestant communities mushrooming throughout the vast tundra of Yamal peninsula and the Polar Ural Mountains.

The public discourse had nearly exploded with the discussion of "sectarian missionaries", who were believed to manipulate ordinary people, making them into converted zombies who brought their last property to the church, who burned sacred sites in the tundra and destroyed the traditional culture of indigenous peoples. In the Yamal Okrug, no matter whether on regional TV programs, seminars, or publications in local media, everyone debated the appearance of new "sects" in the tundra. In November 2012, a seminar was held in the Komi Republic titled "Indigenous peoples as an object of influence from an alien culture in the Russian North" (*Korennye narody kak ob'ekt vozdeistviia chuzherodnoi kultury na Russkom Severe*), during which the participants (among whom were social and political activists, businessmen, and Russian Orthodox priests) discussed the influence of such "alien cultural components" as Baptist missionaries among Nenets reindeer herders, arguing that "sectarian" missionary initiatives threaten the traditional cultures of the peoples of the North.

In my conversations with Yamal officials, they too expressed their concern regarding the arrival of "sectarians". The Head of the Yamal State Duma and the President of RAIPON[3], Sergei Khariuchi (a Nenets by origin) told me, "With great regret, in my opinion, Protestant culture is a culture that pursues other objects, as I suspected. I always get signals from different parts of the tundra about the appearance of missionaries. In my opinion they are interested in putting people in economic bondage, dependence". In the same way, the Head of the Department on Affairs of Indigenous peoples of the North in Salekhard, Lidia Vello expressed her concern, "Unfortunately, there are some suspicions that they [Protestant missionaries] exert massive pressure. They purposefully travel all over Russia! And purposefully cover precisely indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. This speaks to the unhealthy tendency of their activity. And why isn't our state concerned with that? He [a missionary] has intruded, impertinently and shamelessly, and preached. And we can only guess and suspect what kind of methods they use. We never publicize it anywhere."

Another official, who asked not to be named, reported that almost every missionary coming to Yamal was being watched by the Federal Security Service. The person was convinced that some "sectarian missionaries" used hypnotic or other illegal physiological techniques in order to convert people. Arguing that "every new religious movement has at its foundation first of all a physiological approach", some YNAO officials even requested an investigation from the Moscow State Research Centre of Social and Forensic Psychiatry on the psychological methods of pressure used by "sectarian" missionaries. It seemed to be the last hope for local officials to prove the illegality of missionary initiatives.

Although in conversations with me the officials expressed only their personal opinions, and the official regional politics was regulated by the federal law granting religious freedom and freedom of consciousness, at the level of everyday practices, newly converted people experienced a range of social inequalities and discriminations, being stigmatized as "sectarians". If urban believers lived under the risk of being fired from their jobs, their tundra brothers in faith faced sometimes no less serious hardship in their relations with

[3] RAIPON – Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North.

state authorities. For example, there was an incident when some Baptist nomadic Nenets were denied provisions in a tundra trading outpost. A woman who refused to sell them foodstuffs explained that a state deputy recently visited that trading outpost, ordering her to treat tundra believers as toughly as possible, and not to serve them at all.

Likewise, Nadia, a Nenets Evangelical believer, told me:

> We are being teased as Baptists, as if Baptist is an abusive word. So, when we went [to prayer meetings] we were ashamed when were asked where we were going. We lied, saying that were going on a visit to a friend. Once a believer was carrying the Bible in his bag, and someone asked him, "Aren't you carrying God in your bag?" [...] People stopped dealing with us. When we arrive [to someone's campsite], they close their *chums* and don't let us come in and have some tea – they are afraid of Baptists.

Nadia's sister, Marina, continued later on:

> At the beginning we were cussed out, "Oh, Baptists, Baptists!" saying that we are sectarians. But we tried not to react to that. We are not sectarians – we don't scarify anybody, don't tear up cats or anybody else, don't sacrifice our sisters or brothers. We just believe, read and glorify.

If actual local politics was not always as consistently oppressive towards new religious movements as it was sometimes represented by believers themselves, nevertheless, the idea of religious persecution, martyrdom, and spiritual resistance were those stumbling blocks upon which the life of many Arctic religious communities was built. The motive of ongoing religious oppressions remained the dominant frame throughout discourses and the constituent pattern for believers' system of identities, as well as their social expectations and political attitudes.

Church-State Relations

The stereotype of evangelical "sects" as the product of foreign missionary initiatives was evoked by the general public attitude toward non-Orthodox denominations as *non-traditional*, and the dichotomy "traditional/nontraditional religions" (then officially legalized by the Law of 1997) further extended to "Russian/foreign". Even those Evangelical movements that existed in Russia over a century were considered, in public opinion, as foreign.[4] Such categories as alien (*chuzherodnye*), dangerous, totalitarian cults, and destructive sects became frequent terms to refer to various non-Orthodox religious movements. As the Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, who later became the Patriarch, said, "For many Russians today, "non-Orthodox" means those who have come to destroy the spiritual unity of the people and the Orthodox faith – spiritual colonizers who by fair means and foul try to tear the people away from their church"[5].

[4] Zoe Knox, "Religious Freedom in Russia: The Putin Years" in *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies,* edited by Mark D. Steinberg, and Catherine Wanner (Indiana University Press, 2008), 281-314.

[5] Cited in John Jr.Witte and Michael Bordeaux, eds, *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New Wars for Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 73.

Hence, as recent as the foundation of the new Russian state, the government began to change its politics towards regulating religious life in a quite traditional Russian frame of state-church relations: following a centuries-old tradition of state control over religious activities, and associating political stability with controlled religious uniformity.[6]

In 1993, the new Constitution was adopted by the Russian Federation guaranteeing full freedom of conscience and freedom of religion regardless denominations. Despite the declaration of religious freedom and religious tolerance, however, it was never fully observed in the everyday life. Similar to the Soviet legislation that on paper guaranteed freedom of conscience, but violated it in practice, post-Soviet freedom of religion was relative and never fully in practice. As I could observe in the Polar Urals and the Yamal region, religious freedom, although affirmed on paper, was consistently violated on the level of everyday life. Regional authorities often based their policy on the Soviet-style "sectarian discourse", sometimes publicly complaining against the so called "totalitarian sects" or "destructive cults". The Soviet model of strategies beyond the law remained a dominant frame of post-Soviet Russian social life, and the religious sphere was no exception.[7]

Furthermore, some regions adopted local legislation significantly contradicting the actual federal laws, and discriminatory towards religious missionary activity and religious minorities.[8] As Homer and Uzzell report, from 1993 to 1997, more than one-third of Russia's 89 provincial governments enacted laws shrinking the rights of foreign religious organizations and religious minorities; some of them were really repressive and denied basic rights of believers to profess their faith and to perform religious rituals.[9] Those religious groups defined as "sects" obtained a "second-class" status in comparison with the so called "traditional religions", and were required to undergo an annual registration procedure, providing information on sources of funding, number of members, forms and methods of attracting new members, as well as how their doctrines differed from traditional religions, etc.[10]

Zoe Knox refers to the annual reports of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2000, 2003 and 2006, in which Russia was mentioned as one of the countries where human rights and religious freedom were discriminated against.[11]

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[6] Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, "Introduction: Rethinking Religion in Modern Russian Culture" in *Sacred stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, edited by Mark D. Steinberg, and Heather J. Coleman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007), 1-21; Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Sacred after Communism" in *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies*, edited by Mark D. Steinberg, and Catherine Wanner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1-20.

[7] Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

[8] Lauren B. Homer and Lawrence A. Uzzell, "Federal and Provincial Religious Freedom Laws in Russia: A Struggle for and Against Federalism and the Rule of Law" in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New Wars for Souls*, edited by John Jr. Witte, and Michael Bordeaux (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 284-330; Knox, *Religious Freedom*; Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainian and Global Evangelism* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 134.

[9] Homer, *Federal and Provincial*, 297.

[10] Homer, *Federal and Provincial*, 296-297.

[11] Knox, *Religious Freedom,* 282-283.

The 2006 report stated, "The deterioration in conditions for religious freedom and other human rights appears to be a direct consequence of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Russian government and the growing influence of chauvinistic groups in Russian society, which seem to be tolerated by the government".[12] Thus, along with the "westernization" as anti-Soviet pathos, the general anti-Western, nationalistic and even xenophobic sentiments were growing in early post-Soviet Russian society. The religious sphere with the new legislation, general attitudes and public discourses revolving around "foreign religions" revealed itself as one of the most typical conflicting zones of post-Socialism. Indeed, the Russian Orthodox Church played a considerable role in the designing of the new political trend on the regulation of Orthodox and non-Orthodox rights. In the words of the Metropolitan of Kursk Yuvenalii, "Europe-imitation (*yevropeinichanie*) became an illness of Russian life and created a danger of the dissolution of Holy Orthodoxy in a strange (*nevidannyi*) combination of all heresies, under the masks of which is hiding an image of the Beast".[13]

Finally, provincial legislation practices have been federalized, and in 1997, a new Federal Law "On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations was adopted".[14] The Law was the state reaction on increasing foreign missionary work, and a response to already existing regional practices in Russia, as well as the outcome of the intense pressure coming from the Orthodox Church.[15] The Law eventually assigned and legalized already existing categories and the language of religious discourse in Russia, framing the religious landscape within traditional/non-traditional categories.

Since the beginning of Putin's era, the Orthodox Church has appeared as one of the most influential and powerful institutions in Russia. Its increasing political power and the intimate relationship between the Kremlin and the Patriarchate in some respects was furthered by the idea of conflation of national and religious identities. The historically rooted articulation between being Orthodox and being Russian has revealed itself with no less intensity in post-Soviet Russia.[16]

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[12] Cited in Knox, *Religious Freedom*, 303.

[13] Cited in Anatoly Krasikov, "Globalizatsiia i Pravoslavie" in *Religiia i globalizatsiia na prostorakh Yevrazii*, edited by A. Malashenko, and S.B. Filatov (Moskva: Moskoskii Tsentr Karnegi: 'Neostorm', 2005), 46.

[14] Federal'nyi Zakon ot 26 Sentiabria 1997 No. 125-FZ "O Svobodesovesti i o religioznykhob"edineniiakh" in *SobranieZakonodatel'stva RF* 29, No.3, Article 4465 (September 1997). See also Krasikov, Anatoly, "From the Annals of Spiritual Freedom: Church-State Relations in Russia," *East European Constitutional Review* 7, no. 2 (1998): 75-84; Mark Elliott, "Evangelism and Proselytism in Russia: Synonyms or Antonyms?" *East-West Church Ministry Report* 8, no. 4 (2000):1-2; Knox, *Religious Freedom*; Wallace L. Daniel and Christopher Marsh, "Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect," *Journal of Church and State* 49 (2007): 5-17.

[15] Krasikov, *Globalizatsiia i Pravoslavie*, 47-50; Daniel, *Russia's 1997 Law*; John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[16] Knox, *Religious Freedom,* 287-8. On the perception of the Orthodoxy as an integral ingredient of national, ethnic, family and community identities in pre-Revolutionary Russia see also Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and spiritual revolution, 1905-1929*, Indiana-Michigan series in Russian and East European studies (Indiana University Press, 2005); Heather J. Coleman, "Tales of Violence against Religious Dissidents in the Orthodox Village" in *Sacred stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, edited by Mark D. Steinberg, and Heather J. Coleman (Indiana University Press, 2007), 206.

Thus, "Russian" and "Orthodox" were traditionally regarded as synonyms in nationalistic discourse. Conversely, non-traditional religions and foreign missionaries more frequently came to be interpreted as endangering the Russian nation and Russian culture, as being "detrimental to Russia's moral fabric".[17] As Zoe Knox points out, "the dichotomy of the traditional/nontraditional divide can also be extended to Russian/foreign, legitimate/illegitimate, and safe/unsafe".[18]

Unlike Orthodox attitudes, Evangelical religiosity did not conflate religious/congregational identities with national or ethnic ones. The Evangelical notion of "born-again" and the pathos of rupture it entails (rupture from the social and personal past and surrounding present) notably differ from the Orthodox concept of inherited ethno-religiosity.[19] This is what allowed Evangelical Christianity to avoid cultural barriers more easily, but simultaneously it made its missionary initiatives in Russia so challenging.

Arctic Religious Diversity: Dialogue, Competition, Conflict

> Something was burning inside my heart. I thought, I had already told [the Word] to the Russians, but the Nenets and Khanty still didn't know. What if I'd tell them? So, I took skis and went to the Khanty. First, they set dogs on me, but I escaped on a pile of logs, praying to the Lord. Then a woman rescued me, driving the dogs away and saying, "Come on, I'd give you some tea!" I was happy enough. Eventually I pestered them all by telling about God. They were giving me tea and I was telling them about Jesus Christ... They all were living in such a poverty, miserable hovels, half underground. I visited them every second day, skiing many kilometers. Then Canadian missionaries arrived. Although they were Pentecostals, it didn't make any difference to me, as long as I didn't preach alone. They brought [humanitarian] aid, clothes, and money...
>
> Then I came to ask a mayor of the village for a little house for our prayer meetings. He gave me a part of a hut [*barak*], where nobody wanted to live, for it was believed to be a cursed place. We'd taken it, brought chairs and a pulpit and began to preach. Eventually an entire settlement was converted [*uverovat'*] – everybody except the mayor and his family.
>
> Then I joined efforts with Kolya [a local Evangelical minister] and his Americans [missionaries]. There were also Germans who often visited us; together with them, we dug up [*izlopatit'*] the whole tundra. They were truly hard workers. And they supported our church a lot, setting it on its feet...
>
> But at the end of the day, I once arrived in the village and found that the prayer house was closed down. When I asked the mayor, what had happened, he answered that an Orthodox priest had come here saying, "Have you propagated sectarians here?!" And that's it, they closed us. We couldn't do anything. The priest made a big change [*perevorot*]. And the mayor asked us not to come here anymore;

[17] Daniel, *Russia's 1997 Law,* 10; Coleman, *Tales of Violence*; Knox, *Religious Freedom*; Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics,* 214.

[18] Knox, *Religious Freedom,* 304.

[19] Wanner, *Communities of the Converted,* 136.

> otherwise he'd call the police. He also said that the Orthodox Church was going to build its chapel here to gather people. But they haven't done it yet. Instead they are going to build a new church in front of the government [in Salekhard].
>
> When this village was closed to me, I simply went on and started my missionary work in the next village and so on, until the story wouldn't repeat itself.

This story, narrated by a Russian Evangelical missionary from Salekhard city, is a typical image of the first missionary activities in the post-Soviet North. The story embraces all parties engaged in a cross-cultural encounter: local missionaries (the so-called "group BUR": the Belarusians, the Ukrainians, and the Russians); short-term foreign missionaries, who financially supported religious communities; the tundra and rural settlements (as a special missionary target), inhabited mostly by indigenous people (the Nenets or the Khanty), but majorly governed by ethnically Russian authorities; local authorities who were in power either to tolerate or to resist the religious initiatives of their citizens; and the Russian Orthodox Church that stayed under government protection and sought power through local authorities, basing its policy according to an assumption of historical priority.[20]

Siberia became one of the most striking spots of post-Soviet changes on the Russian religious map, and was associated with an increasing presence of various Protestant denominations and churches in its vast territories.[21] With the fall of the Soviet Union and opened frontiers, numerous Protestant missionary movements targeted Siberia and the Russian Arctic – those "godless" lands and pagan strongholds, which were considered as a spiritual blind spot on the map of the world evangelization.[22]

However, unexpectedly for some visiting foreign missionaries, the Far North turned out not to be an empty "godless" space. Despite this popular view, the Siberian conversion saga had been sparked not only by the foreign missionary crusade, but was also contributed to by *internal* "*re-colonization*" from within the post-Soviet space.

Historically, Siberia was a place for exile and deportation. During the Soviet period, a number of prison camps were built on the territory of the Polar Urals and Yamal. Numerous Protestant believers were imprisoned or deported to the Far North as a result of Soviet anti-religious campaigns. Many of those "persecuted for the faith" settled in Siberia after

[20] The Orthodox Church has no intensive missionary work among the indigenous population in Siberia. Orthodox adherents in the Russian Arctic are mainly Russian incomers. In most cases Orthodox activities in the North are confined to building churches and chapels in towns and villages as markers of territory control. Being under the state protection the Church claims to hold power over the territory, and cooperates with local authorities in order to resist Protestant 'expansion'. According to the assumption of *historical priority* and strengthened by the state support, the Orthodox Church cultivates the idea of being traditional and pristine in the Arctic (cf. Wiget, *Crisis, Conversion, and Conflict*, 4). Hence, local indigenous activists and native intellectuals in the Yamal and the Polar Urals often present the Russian Orthodox Church as a truly 'traditional' Nenets religion that never comes into conflict with 'indigenous' Nenets religious practices.

[21] Krindatch, *Patterns of Religious Change*, 131; Svetlana M. Dudarenok, "K voprosu formirovaniia 'novogo' konfessional'nogo prostranstva na rossiiskom Dal'nem Vostoke" in *Svoboda sovesti v Rossii: isotricheskii i sovremennyi aspekty*, vol. 2. (Moskva: 2005). http://www.rusoir.ru/03print/04/14/index.html (accessed on 3d October 2008).

[22] Krindatch, *Patterns of Religious Change.*

their discharge, continuing to plant religious communities here. This laid the groundwork for further post-Soviet religious activities in Siberia and the Far North. Thus, for example, the Arctic city of Vorkuta (Komi Republic) – "the symbol of suffering of God's people for the truth", the area of the biggest Soviet prisons, forced labour camps and places for deportation – eventually became a home for numerous Pentecostal communities and one of the most significant mission sources in the Russian Arctic in 1990s-2000s.

It was also the general post-Soviet economic crisis that contributed to the Siberian missionary movement, particularly in the Russian Far North. The majority among the first missionaries and founders of Arctic churches were newcomers from Ukraine and Southern Russia, who came to the Far North during the 1980s-1990s (the time of intense economic crisis) in pursuit of employment in the sphere of Northern extractive industries and in search of the so called "northern bonuses" (augmented salaries, longer holidays, etc.). Many of the incomers were believers and active members of Christian evangelical churches at home, since historically Ukraine was the home for the largest Protestant communities in the Soviet Union and in Europe.[23] Many migrants arrived here for temporary work, but stayed for their entire lives, organizing religious communities in the same way as in their homes left on "the mainland". Among such migrant workers were the then-Baptist bishops of the Tiumen' Region, Pavel Rodak and Sergei Kubata, who began to plant churches and organize religious infrastructure in the 1990s.

These planted seeds of the first evangelical groups were now growing into communities and registered churches, attracting new adherents, as well as calling for new religious workers from the "Big land" after the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, it was Russia itself and Ukraine that supplied the first missionaries and pastors for Arctic churches.[24]

Alexei Teleus, the Bishop of Baptist churches in the YNAO, who also left Ukraine 20 years ago, aiming to work as a geologist in the Far North, told me a story of church-planting in the post-Soviet Tiumen' Region. By the time of the beginning of missionary activities in the 1990s, there were only two officially registered Baptist churches in the entire Tiumen' Region (a territory more than twice the size of France). In Salekhard, the capital of the YNAO, the first Baptist church was registered in 1991, thus opening ways for further dissemination of Christian Evangelical diversity in the Yamal and the Polar Urals. A few years later, there were established communities of Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics in every town, village and the remotest tundra settlements of the Yamal and the Polar Ural region.

At the beginning of the missionary movement, when Federal politics had not yet moved toward the restriction of foreign missionary activities, the cooperation between local missionary communities and international Christian organizations was well arranged, providing good financial support for the Arctic missionary campaigns, for building prayer houses, buying necessary transportation, and organizing charity work among the Northerners.

During the 1990s, several missionary trips called "Jesus to the Peoples of Siberia" were taken on boats to the North, organized by a well-known Baptist minister Iosif Bondarenko,

[23] Wanner, *Communities of the Converted.*

[24] As Wanner, *ibid.*, reports, in 2001 over a third of Ukrainian missionaries worked in Russia.

an active figure of the Soviet-era religious underground and a former political prisoner "for the faith". The Russian Union of the ECB organized its missionary project "*Mnogotsvetie Rossii*" (Multicolored Russia), with the priority of bringing the Gospel to the indigenous peoples and migrant workers in the Far North. A significant impulse for missionary movements in the Yamal and the Polar Urals was sparked by the Association "*Dukhovnoe Vozrozhdenie*" (Spiritual Revival) organized by Peter Deyneka's Russian Ministries. No less important was the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement in the Far North. Alongside the international impact (for example, the Canadian Pentecostal mission of the Bill Prankard Evangelistic Association, American Kenneth Copeland Ministries), there were local Pentecostal and Charismatic mission centers in Vorkuta, Novyi Urengoi, and some other northern cities.

At first the newly organized Protestant movements worked generally in urban spaces. However, as some missionaries reported, it was sometimes unexpectedly revealed that beyond the borders of the renovated and well-organized infrastructure of Arctic towns, there was another world of tundra people, who spoke unknown languages, wore strange clothes and worshiped their own gods.

An Evangelical minister in Salekhard explained it as follows:

> We made an original discovery: strange people arrived from the tundra and came to our church. And the church's face began to change, because increasingly more Nenets began to come to the church and to pray to God. Then we realized that local Russian people who have been living here all their lives knew nothing about the Nenets. If you ask them right now, who are the Nenets, they wouldn't answer you. People don't know. So, we realized that they [Nenets] are pagan people. And the question arose, how to work with them, how to bring the Gospel to them? They suffered social needs and spiritual needs, but we didn't know what to do with them and couldn't understand any words [in Nenets]. How could we give them spiritual food if we didn't know their language and culture? This was how we began our research, our social work and preaching among the indigenous people.

Thus, in the late-1990s numerous missionary programs were launched, targeting particularly the indigenous population in the tundra and remote ethnic settlements. Several groups of Bible translators arrived in the Yamal and the Polar Urals with the purpose to translate the Gospel to the Nenets and Khanty languages. Mission centers were getting snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles and boats in order to reach the most distant tundra sites.

Many young and full-of-energy brothers and sisters in Christ arrived in the tundra for the so called "youth work" (*molodëzhnoe sluzhenie*). They were not considered missionaries in a proper sense, but rather beginners or probationers who prepared people for upcoming missionary work. Most of them usually arrived during summer time with the aim to organize tundra Christian camps, but there were some young Christian workers who visited Nenets chums more regularly, staying in the tundra and villages for several months and longer. They were usually engaged in Christian education, preaching and reading the Bible, but also helped in household and child minding, were teaching illiterate Nenets to read and to write, as well as provided instructions in hygiene and sanitation. Once, a

family of converted tundra Nenets told me a story about a Ukrainian believing sister, who spent several months at their chum teaching them music and singing.

On the emerging religious spectrum there was one missionary church that particularly distinguished itself in the Arctic mission. The Baptist Brotherhood of the International Council of the Churches of Evangelical Christians Baptists (ICCECB), previously known as *Initsiativnkiki* movement, became the most successful in its missionary activity among the indigenous people, particularly amongst the tundra Nenets. With its mission center in Vorkuta (Komi Republic), equipped with modern vehicles, satellite communication, and most importantly, with a well-organized religious network throughout the post-Soviet area, the Brotherhood spread its influence all over the Yamal and the Polar Ural tundra regions.

Initsiativnkiki movement in the Arctic

The origins of the *Initsiativnkiki* movement go back to the 1960s, a time of toughening up of the Khrushchev's policy towards religious organizations, and the attempts of the total control over religious life by state authorities.[25] The subsequent split within the Union of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists triggered an open protest movement against both the Soviet anti-religious policy and religious conformism of Church leaders. A reform Baptist movement headed the so-called "Initiative group" (*Initsiativnaia gruppa* or *Initsiativniki* movement) – a team of young and passionate believers who devoted their lives to the struggle against the Soviet regime, advocating radical separation of the church from the state. Renamed as the Council of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (CCECB), the protest movement had become religious dissent, and took the brunt of the Soviet-era religious persecutions.[26] Refusing any kind of relations with the state, rejecting official registration, the Brotherhood was illegal during the Soviet period, and its leaders were regarded as criminals during the 1960s and 1970s. Dozens of the Brotherhood's members were arrested and imprisoned, and some leaders spent over twenty years in prisons and labour camps.

In 1989 a church historian, Walter Sawatsky,[27] noted that the CCECB has been experiencing a decline, gradually but steadily losing support and its members, who were tired of long-term persecutions and harassment. The CCECB remnant has become more purist and exclusivist, noted Sawatsky, and he questioned their ability to survive. However, despite their illegal status and state persecutions, the reform Baptist movement has been gradually developing its organizational network and well-established underground activities. The post-Soviet period proved the Brotherhood's viability – the radical religious movement thrived, increasing the number of its members. With a new name –

[25] Walter Sawatsky, "The New Soviet Law on Religion," *Religion in Communist Lands* 4, no. 2 (1976): 4-10; Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals since World War II* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 131; S.N. Savinskii, *Istoriia Yevangel'skikh Khristian-Baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii i Belorussii*, chast' II (1917-1967) (Sankt-Peterburg: 'Bibliia dlia vsekh', 2001), 210-221; Tatiana Nikol'skaia, *Russkii protestantizm i gosudarstvennaia vlast' v 1905-1991 godakh* (Sankt-Peterburg: European University at St. Petersburg Press, 2009), 172-180.

[26] Sawatsky *Soviet Evangelicals,* 160-165.

[27] Sawatsky *Soviet Evangelicals,* 151-152.

International Council of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists – it maintained its unity in the entire post-Soviet space; and its fifteen associations united radical and unregistered Baptist communities in the CIS, the Baltic countries, and those emigrated to the US and Canada.

Brotherhood's contemporary policy, social attitudes and the system of identities are deeply rooted in the Soviet-era religious persecutions. The motive of on-going religious persecutions and the position of flat refusal of any kind of relations with the state and local authorities are still the most important constituent motives in their identity-building. Its adherents describe themselves as living as in the olden times (*po-starinke*): they follow the most severe discipline rules affecting every aspect of everyday life, have an ascetic morality, and a strictly prescribed dress-code.

The radical Baptists reject official registration of their communities and churches (which is believed to be tantamount to divorce from Christ), renounce the authority of the state in the life of the Church, and oppose any kind of political or social involvement with the "world", or politicizing the Church, thereby persistently building a wall between "the Church" and "the world". Moreover, their highly tied and regulated network structure with highly elaborated rules and norms is reminiscent of an alternative state within the state, where all church-citizens live according to and are judged by Church laws.

Since the early 1990s, the Brotherhood established a mission to the Russian Far North, and the rural Nenets (dwelling in the immense tundra space in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Komi Republic, and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug) became the main target of the Brotherhood missionary initiative in the North. The highly tied religious network of the Brotherhood and material support allowed for organizing well-equipped mission trips to the remotest parts of the Arctic tundra. Missionaries, pastors, and church activists from different parts of the Brotherhood network were sent to the missionary centres in Vorkuta (Komi Republic), Nadym, and Salekhard (YNAO). There, provided with snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, and satellite communication devices, they went deep into the European and Siberian tundra regions, living for 3-6 months in northern villages or migrating with herdsmen from campsite to campsite. When one missionaries were leaving a place, another groups of Christian workers were on their way to the North.

Full of enthusiasm and religious zeal, as a Nenets believer once said to me, "They are the romantics of the tundra, like those romantics of the 1970s, who first arrived to master the North". Similar to Soviet "missionaries", who undertook "cultural trips" (*kul'tpokhod*) with the aim of mastering the Arctic and plugging backward northern peoples into Soviet modernity, contemporary Baptist missionaries also devoted their lives to bringing the Christian message to backward heathens, to convert them from the darkness of their "spiritual backwardness" into the light of faith. Simultaneously, they drew the natives into many aspects of their own culture, which they conveyed both verbally and nonverbally in their everyday routines.

For many missionaries, even after many years of their life in the Arctic, tundra space and its lifestyle still seemed strange and alien. However, more missionaries got the feel of tundra life and its inhabitants; some of them could impress with their excellent knowledge of nomadic routes and maps of nomadic campsites; they got accustomed to tundra

lifestyle, constant migration, and food. As I argue elsewhere,[28] bringing the new style of life, they themselves were eventually converted to an indigenous conceptualization of nomadic tundra lifeway, deeply immersing themselves into the indigenous world and its values.

Religious "Warfare"

Some places of the Yamal and the Polar Ural tundra became a significant frontier site in terms of cross-cultural encounters between native people and missionaries. Among such places was Beloiarsk village, where I conducted my fieldwork during 2006-2012. Located a relatively short distance from urban centers, Beloiarsk was, at the same time, the gateway to the tundra, with numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic groups (Nenets, Khanty, and Komi) living near the village and frequently visiting this sedentary space. Hence, it attracted missionaries from all over the world. In a small village lost in the snowbound tundra, I met missionaries from Western and Northern Europe, United States, Canada, and even from Cameroon, Australia, and Korea. The village and surrounding tundra also turned out to be at the epicentre of many conflicts associated with Protestant missionary initiatives, when heated conflicts between missionaries and local authorities, converted and non-converted natives increasingly attracted public attention.

Beloiarsk religious life most eloquently reflected the Arctic religious landscape with blurred boundaries between different religious denominations, which oftentimes triggered tensions between various religious groups. The situation of religious rivalry sometimes let to cases when Evangelical missionaries themselves adopted the Soviet-style anti-sectarian discourse. Expressions like the following one, told by a local Evangelical minister, were not exceptional:

> Nowadays there are many missions that want to come here, but we don't let them [come here]. Because they do only harm. I am sure there exist destructive sects. Never mind that they want to evangelize and so on, we don't let them come here, don't cooperate with them, and sometimes even prevent them from their activity. I would rather complain against them to the local administration than let them go to the tundra.

These words reflected the general atmosphere of religious interrelations in the Russian Arctic, when the increasing diversity in the religious landscape resulted in competition between numerous religious movements, when the battle for Russian souls caused commotion and inter-religious tensions.[29]

The conflict environment was supposed to maintain distinct symbolic boundaries between each religious domain. However, in believers' personal lives, these boundaries remained transparent and flexible: people travelled within the religious landscape, crossed

[28] Tatiana Vagramenko, "Chronotopes of Conversion and the Production of Christian Fundamentalism in the Post-Soviet Arctic," *Sibirica: Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian Studies* 17, no. 1 (2018): 63-91.

[29] Mathijs Pelkmans, "Introduction" in Conversion after Socialism. Disruptions, Modernisms ad Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union, edited by Mathijs Pelkmans (NY, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 1-16; Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 186-192.

the symbolic borders, changed religious affiliation or were part of two religious domains at the same time. Multi-religious and multiple-conversion experiences became a nexus for the interaction between different belief systems, and people's religious life was determined by the continual experiencing of symbolic borders: constructing, maintaining, and crossing borders of religious domains.[30]

While crossing religious borders, believers often grasped the general conflicting attitudes. As a result, religious "warfare" was transferred and expanded into other dimensions of everyday life, particularly determining social relations in the tundra. One could hear many stories from the tundra, when converted Nenets who belonged to different religious communities (for instance Baptist and Pentecostal groups) refused to communicate with each other and to cooperate in their daily tundra activities, or broke up traditional marriage alliances, sometimes even dividing their pastures according religious principles.

Many missionaries acknowledged the problem that their own religious tensions had been transmitted into tundra social relations. "Unfortunately, this spread into the tundra", argued one of them. "And people there began to get separated [*delit' mezhdu soboi*], arguing with each other and saying: "you are a Baptist, and you are a Pentecostal!" A split occurred for that reason... Because different groups of the Nenets and Khanty have been converted from different missions. And often one missionary says [about the other]: "these are not true believers, they are from devil". And as a result, we've got a conflict [in the tundra]."

Evangelical interreligious tensions were perplexed with general anti-sectarian discourse and local authorities' policy of hostility towards newly established Protestant communities. In addition, the emerging political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church also affected the dynamics of religious life in the Arctic.

Conclusion

To sum up, the post-Soviet process of "unmaking and making of relations"[31] implied multidimensional trajectories, and one of them was the thriving of diverse new and old religious movements. The rapid influx of foreign missionaries and evangelicals, and the mushrooming of local religious communities all over the post-Soviet lands, and the flourishing of all sorts of religiosity dramatically changed the religious landscape and restructured religious life in the post-Soviet space. The construction of shamanic temples, Orthodox churches, Protestant prayer houses, mosques and Buddhist temples in the same environment became a feature characteristic of the highly competitive Siberian religious landscape.[32]

By the late 1990s, the boom of religiosity eventually began to subside throughout the Russian Federation. Previously rapidly growing churches, temples and prayer houses began to experience decline and welcomed a fixed and moderate number of parishioners. The

[30] Tatiana Vagramenko, "'Blood' Kinship and Kinship in Christ's Blood: Nomadic Evangelism in the Nenets Tundra," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 11, no. 1 (2017):151-169.

[31] Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*.

[32] Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, "Whose Steeple is Higher? Religious Competition in Siberia," *Religion, State & Society* 33, no. 1 (2005): 57-69.

1997 Federal Law and the following regional laws harshly restricting foreign missionary activity dramatically influenced the development of Evangelical movements in Russia. Some scholars reported significant declines of Evangelical congregations in various regions of Russia in early the 2000s.[33] Although the "crises of faith and power"[34] remarkably influenced the intensity of religious life, in general, however, the religious landscape of post-Soviet Russia remains dynamic, and is characterized by a diversity of movements and forms of religiosity, competitiveness for followers and power between various religious organizations, and is intertwined with local political and cultural movements, having close and complex interrelations with diverse kinds of nationalistic, ethnic and cultural "awakenings".

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[33] Rybakova, *The Evangelist Communities*, 12.

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