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### Recommended Citation

Michael Bourdeaux, *The New Russian Law on Religion: A View from the Regions*, 49 DePaul L. Rev. 139 (1999)

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol49/iss1/4>

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# THE NEW RUSSIAN LAW ON RELIGION: A VIEW FROM THE REGIONS\*

*Michael Bourdeaux\*\**

## I. INTRODUCTION

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

Not everything has been easy and simple in the sphere of church-state relations. Religious organisations were not free from being affected by the tragic developments that occurred in the period of the cult of personality. Mistakes made with regard to the church and believers in the 1930s and the years that followed are being rectified . . . . Believers are Soviet people, workers, patriots, and they have the full right to express their convictions with dignity. *Perestroika*, democratization and openness concern them as well—in full measure and without any restrictions. This is especially true

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\* This essay was the basis of the 1999 Annual Lecture of the DePaul University Center for Church/State Studies (April 29, 1999).

\*\* Michael Bourdeaux was in the first group of British students to spend a year in Moscow on a governmental scholarship (1959-1960). He has devoted his life to a study of religion in Russia, founding the Keston Institute for this purpose. His latest book is *PROSELYTISM AND ORTHODOXY IN RUSSIA* (Michael Bourdeaux & John Witte eds., 1999).

1. See G. P. FEDOTOV, *THE RUSSIAN CHURCH AND THE REVOLUTION* (1928).

of ethics and morals, a domain where universal norms and customs are so helpful for our common cause.<sup>2</sup>

A communist leader had never before pronounced such a phrase as "our common cause." Gorbachev proved to be as good as his word, though of course his own experiment in democracy collapsed three years later. Not only shortage of time prevented the emergence of such a dialogue, but the churches suddenly became too strong to be tempted in this direction. Gorbachev made two promises: the right to celebrate the millennium of the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Kiev in 988 A.D. and the introduction of a new and just law on religion to replace Stalin's of 1929.

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

Gorbachev's promise of a new law took longer to implement, but when it was promulgated in September 1990, it went beyond everyone's expectations in proclaiming total freedom of religion.<sup>4</sup> The 1990 version of the law even permitted the teaching of religion in the Russian Republic state schools although the text for the whole Soviet Union did not go quite as far. Had this law remained in force for a sensible period of time, it would have been a major step in the painful evolution of Russia towards democracy. This is not the place to dis-

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2. See MICHAEL BOURDEAUX, *GORBACHEV, GLASNOST AND THE GOSPEL* 44 (1990) [hereinafter GORBACHEV].

3. The author was an eye-witness to these events. *Id.* at 47-64.

4. See *id.* at 65-86. The full text and analysis surrounding this debate appears in Giovanni Codevilla, *Commentary on the New Soviet Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations*, 19 *RELIGION IN COMMUNIST LANDS*, 119-45 (1991).

cuss the convoluted and secret processes which led to the abolition of this law in September of 1997. However, its replacement was a blueprint for the return of state control over religion, albeit of a different kind from that formerly exercised by the Communist Party.

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

What had happened during the seven-year interim from 1990 to 1997 was basically a revival of all forms of native religion, coupled with an invasion of cults from all over the world. Time might well have dictated that the resulting dangers were more perceived than actual.<sup>5</sup> The reaction was entirely out of proportion, but the old atheist guard believed that their day had come again. The resulting text was achieved by a secretive process, and skulduggery does not seem too strong a word in this context.

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

Confirming the right of each to freedom of conscience and freedom of creed, and also to equality before the law regardless of his attitudes to religion and his convictions; basing itself on the fact that the Russian Federation is a secular state; recognizing the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia's spirituality and culture . . . .<sup>7</sup>

So far so not very good, but just supportable: the juxtaposition of "secular state" and "the special contribution of Orthodoxy" is bound

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5. PROSELYTISM AND ORTHODOXY, *supra* note \*\*.

6. See *Symposium, Soul Wars: The Problem of Proselytism in Russia*, 12 EMORY INT'L L. REV. 1 (1998). See also *New Russian law puts religious freedom at threat*, THE MONTH, July 1998, at 255-61 (providing a succinct and telling summary).

7. For an exhaustive discussion of the 1997 law, see W. Cole Durham & Lauren B. Homer, *Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations: An Analytical Appraisal*, 12 EMORY INT'L L. REV. 101-246 (1998).

to lead to misunderstandings somewhere along the line. A truly astonishing phrase follows

[R]especting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions and creeds which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples; considering it important to promote the achievement of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect in questions of freedom of conscience and freedom of creed; hereby adopts this federal law.<sup>8</sup>

So what is this "Christianity" which is separate from the Russian Orthodox Church? We are not told. This, we must remind ourselves, is part of the law of the land, not some casual commentary by a careless journalist. We can only assume that it means in fact Catholicism and Protestantism, the first of which had a toehold on Russian soil, the second rather more. Representatives of Islam, Buddhism and Judaism were naturally delighted to find themselves named and protected under the new law. But what are the other "religions and creeds which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples?"

Confusion is already rife, but the main text will show that there are three tiers of privilege. The Russian Orthodox Church, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, encouraged by this special mention, will abrogate to itself in the form of the local clergy the right of deciding, when appealed to by the local state official, which other religions or denominations are to be granted the right of registration. It apparently has first claim on the loyalty of some 160 million people. Any other religion may be considered "traditional" if it was in existence fifteen years before the decree—1982—which takes one right back to the end of the Brezhnev years. The extreme discrimination of those years is perpetuated today. Any group not in existence before the decree must re-register conditionally every year for the next fifteen years. This is to prove its credentials and even though these groups have virtually no rights: no printing and distribution of literature, owning property, hiring halls, or inviting foreign guests. Those familiar with the period of "stagnation" (*zastoi*), as Gorbachev called it, will know that this was a time of widespread discrimination, with a ban on such groups as Methodists (except in Estonia), Lutherans (except in Latvia and Estonia), some groups of Baptists who had separated from the Moscow-dominated All-Union Council, Byzantine Catholics (the "Uniates" or Greek Catholics of Ukraine), Jehovah's Witnesses and many others. Some of these groups had been notably present before the Revolution. For example, Lutherans were in Siberia in the 17th century and in St. Pe-

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8. See *Symposium*, *supra* note 6, at app.

tersburg from its founding (see the magnificent church, now being restored, on Nevsky Prospekt). The Anglican (Episcopal) Church had owned property in St. Petersburg and Moscow, with flourishing congregations before the Revolution. Subsequent abolition of their chaplaincies would logically have meant that they fell foul of the "fifteen-year rule," but of course for diplomatic reasons it would have been inconceivable to take back in 1997 the church in Moscow where worship had vigorously resumed in 1991.

What are the "other religions and creeds which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples?" Such a vague, indeed meaningless, phrase may not be susceptible to an obvious interpretation, but one surprising answer will suggest itself later in this paper, when I come to discuss the rise of traditional paganism.

## II. A PERSPECTIVE FROM HISTORY

Every Soviet leader put his personal stamp on atheist policy (Lenin's seizure of church property, Stalin's purge of the whole church leadership, moderation during World War II, Khrushchev's renewed physical onslaught, Brezhnev's hunting down of the "dissidents"), but the long-term aim of eliminating religion from the face of society continued to stand. Much of this policy was successful, if the word "face" is taken literally. The effects of the devastation on the groups will persist long into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and may never be repaired. Every church institution at local, diocesan, or national level was systematically destroyed. If churches of any denomination continued to exist up to World War II, they were entirely isolated units and therefore all the more vulnerable to persecution. There was no literature, no teaching, no charitable work, and no communal activities outside the four walls of a registered church. The number of the latter did indeed grow following Stalin's concessions during the last decade of his life. Some institutions re-emerged after the War, such as eight theological seminaries and two academies, one heavily-censored journal, and a politically-controlled central administration (the Moscow Patriarchate). The Baptists—the only legal Protestant group—were accorded some of these privileges, but without the theological education. The Catholics had two churches and nothing else. Under Khrushchev all these gains came under renewed threat, but his premature removal from office halted the downward spiral, without allowing any restitution of recent losses.<sup>9</sup>

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9. For an account, partly based on eye-witness experiences of the Khrushchev period, see MICHAEL BOURDEAUX, *OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE* 202-33 (1965).

Beneath the surface, however, the elimination of religion had not proceeded as smoothly, as the propagandists never tired of reporting to the Soviet press. Indeed, there was something frenetic and despairing in the tone of the constant assertions in the press that religion was of course dying out, "but . . ." after the qualifying conjunction, the reader would find diversified accounts illustrating the ways in which survivals of religion persisted long after the destruction of the institutions. In the process it was also revealed that the overlay of Orthodoxy, which spread throughout Siberia and the Russian south with the expansion of the empire, was thin indeed and recent research provides evidence of the most remarkable revival of pre-Christian religion.

What of the survival of Orthodoxy itself in the Russian heartland? The evidence is manifold and widespread. But Boone illustrates it better than Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The meager volume of his published work is suffused with an underlying allegiance to the Christian faith. Later, during the long period when his works were banned, he revealed himself as an overt believer in Christianity. His first publication, the novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*,<sup>10</sup> an account of life in a labor camp, which Khrushchev permitted to back up his anti-Stalin campaign, gives a strong account of how prayer sustained one of the inmates. His second and last published work in the Soviet period, a collection of prose poems, contains a remarkable essay which expresses horror at the desecration of Russia's precious Christian architectural heritage, publication of which inspired a new generation to try to do something to preserve the remaining tatters. An excerpt gives the flavor.

When you travel the by-roads of Central Russia you begin to understand the secret of the pacifying Russian countryside. It's in the churches. They trip up the slopes, ascend the high hills, come down to the broad rivers, like princesses in white and red, they lift their bell-towers-graceful, shapely, all different-high over mundane timber and thatch, they nod to each other from afar, from villages that are cut off and invisible to each other they soar to the same heaven . . . . But when you get into the village you find that not the living but the dead greeted you from afar. The crosses were knocked off the roof or twisted out of place long ago. The dome has been stripped and there are gaping holes between its rusty ribs . . . . Our forefathers put all their understanding of life into these stones, into these bell-towers. Ram it in, Vitka, give it a bash, don't be afraid! Film-show at six, dancing at eight.<sup>11</sup>

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10. ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN, *ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH* (1998).

11. MICHAEL BOURDEAUX, *PATRIARCH AND PROPHETS: PERSECUTION OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX* 154-55 (1969). The author then peers into the building and sees a youth club meeting. *Id.*

## III. RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

The revival of religion, especially among the intelligentsia of Moscow and Leningrad as early as the 1960s is amply documented.<sup>12</sup> Those writers who have attributed it in some way to the *perestroika* of Gorbachev are in serious error. What Gorbachev did was to take the lid off a seething cauldron, facilitating the rebirth of religious institutions nationwide and giving voice to the pent-up spiritual aspirations of the Russian people [one meaning of *glasnost*]. This is the context in which we must view the sudden events of 1988.

One major effect of all this, as well as releasing a wound-up spring, was an influx of foreign missionaries of many denominations and religions. They were encouraged by the 1988, and 1990 legislation, and especially by the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991. At this time too, Russia, Ukraine, and other former constituent republics began to turn urgently to the West for advice and economic support, which soon led to more access and a partial relaxation of visa restrictions. This was not to last. The new law on religion of 1997 was only one aspect of the gathering spirit of resentment against the West in Russia, underlined by the adoption of the new law by the Duma with a majority of over 300 votes in favor.

However, if the main intention of the new law was to protect and encourage Orthodoxy over all other religions (an interpretation based on the first part of the Preamble), then it has signally failed. The revival of all religions, those mentioned in the second part of the Preamble and many others, is one of the most interesting, significant, but least-known factors in the recent development of Russian society. It deserves to be studied and documented, to be set alongside the endless accounts of economic deprivation in the countryside. A window of opportunity has opened for the implementation of such work and it is on the interim results of this as seen from the perspective of approximately half way through a three-year study that this article is based.

In 1998, Keston Institute (Oxford, UK) secured a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia to carry out a nationwide and comprehensive survey of religious institutions in every region of Russia, leading to the establishment of a permanent database which can be constantly revised. Never before in history could there have been such an undertaking. In Tsarist Russia such ideas did not exist. In the Soviet period there was no access for political and ideological reasons. There is now a window of opportunity, which is not guaranteed to

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12. See, e.g., MICHAEL BOURDEAUX, *RISEN INDEED: LESSONS IN FAITH FROM THE USSR* (1983) (documenting the resurrection of religion in the USSR among intelligentsia).



remain open indefinitely. However, this is not an American (or British) project, despite the origin of the financial support and the nationality of its director (the present author). It is primarily a Russian project for Russians, with the field-work carried out by experienced Moscow-based sociologists of religions. For the moment, most of the material remains in Russian, much unpublished. However, there are plans to make it systemically available in the original language. We are seeking ways of making as much as possible available in English.

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

The new law has not even begun to control the explosion of all religions, from Russian Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Catholicism, through Islam and Buddhism to paganism, with more than a sprinkling of new-age religions and a revival of ancient Russian sects. Nor could it exercise such control, even if the will were there—which it certainly is not in many of the regions. There have been a number of recent violations of religious liberty resulting from the passing of the new law, but overall one would have to classify these as relatively minor irritations rather than as harbingers of the intention to initiate a nationwide purge.<sup>13</sup>

The remainder of this article takes a brief look around the regions and picks out some dominant trends, but only briefly touches on the revival of Orthodoxy in the Russian heartland, which is a subject on its own and which has already been adequately studied by the late Jane Ellis.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. BUDDHISM

Buddhism was a recognized religion under the Tsars.<sup>15</sup> Buryatia, the Siberian region bordering on Mongolia, had forty-six monasteries

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13. Full details of these violations are on file with the Keston Institute.

14. See generally JANE ELLIS, *THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: TRIUMPHALISM AND DEFENSIVENESS* (1996) (chronicling the revival of Russian Orthodoxy from its earliest signs to present policies).

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

and 150 temples before the Revolution. It is not widely known that Buddhism was also indigenous in one corner of Europe, Kalmykia, part of the melting-pot of diverse ethnic peoples in the Lower Volga region, where they had settled in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following migration from northwest China. From ancient times the Kalmyks had close links with Tibet and respected the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama. The Russians did not interfere in their religious affairs until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when they made half-hearted attempts to convert them to Orthodoxy. Those Kalmyks who did convert had the right to leave their villages and settle in Russian towns. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Tsarist administration abolished the Kalmyk Khanate and many Buddhists found their way back to their Chinese homeland. Buddhism continued to exist, but was never as strong again.

There was a revival of Buddhism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following a renewal of ties with Tibet after a visit of the Kalmyk lama Baaza Maknudzhev to the Dalai Lama and the holy sites of Lhasa. Links were also established with Buryatia. The loosening of imperial controls in 1905 led to a short period of revival and stability, with ninety-six centers of worship of various kinds in the Astrakhan-Kalmykia region, with 1,600 recognized Buddhist lamas. Major decisions for further development were taken after the February Revolution of 1917. However, the subsequent Civil War and the advent of an atheist regime soon rendered these null and void, despite the establishment of a Kalmyk Autonomous Republic in 1920. The final flourish was the All-Soviet Buddhist Assembly in Moscow in 1927, at which the Kalmyks played an important role, but this led directly into the period of total repression. The final purge of Kalmyk lamas began in 1931, with the leading figure, Sharal Tepkin, being sentenced to the camps. Reports from his exile in Kazakhstan indicated that he had carried out his priestly duties in prison, but he died some twenty years later without having regained his freedom.

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

In the interim, however, evidence began to emerge of Kalmyk survival. In Buryatia this was to a very limited extent permitted, for two

monasteries were registered at the end of World War II. A leading Soviet newspaper wrote of this in 1972, describing the Buddhist temple at Ivolga, just outside Ulan-Ude, the regional capital.

The busy Ulan-Ude to Kyakhta highroad. Crowds of hurrying pedestrians in the village streets. Hillocks along the roadside. Everything normal. Suddenly, beyond the snow-covered road, some curious-looking buildings, glittering in all the colours of the rainbow. Can it be some sort of mirage? No, it is a Buddhist temple - a *datsan*. You push open the gate and find yourself in another century, in another world. Carved pagodas with marvellously curved steep-sided roofs, strange sculptured animal, the white structures of chapels, resembling miniature Indian temples. Silence. The only sound is the tinkling of the bells under the roofs of the pagodas, caused by the wind, and a strange scraping sound. We move closer. An elderly woman is turning the handle of a "holy" prayer wheel decorated with Tibetan hieroglyphics. She rotates it a full circle and a bell rings. That means the prayer has been registered and the sin forgiven. Then her companion, a young girl aged about ten, moves up to the prayer wheel. She has a lively, smiling face, and she turns it as though it were some sort of game. She looks admiringly at the chapels, decorated with the Buddhist and national Buryat ornamentation. She is obviously attracted by their artistry . . . . Then mother and daughter move on to one of the buildings, where the daily service is taking place. One can hear the monotonous mumbling of the priest - the lama . . . . In essence, the teachers have closed their eyes to the problem and refuse to appreciate all its complexities. In Upper Ivolga children are exposed to particularly strong religious influence . . . . Time passes, and the number of believers in the Buryat Republic decreases very slowly. Its ranks are constantly being reinforced with older people, who received their education in Soviet schools . . . . Buddhism is not as harmless as it looks.<sup>16</sup>

This article, too, was not as harmless as it looked at the time. In fact, it was a preparation for the arrest of perhaps the greatest figure of Buddhism in Soviet times, Bidiya Dandaron. He had studied Oriental languages in Leningrad in the 1930s and was twice imprisoned (1937-1942 and 1947-1954). Dandaron survived to enjoy eighteen years of freedom (1954-1972), during which time he became active again as a teacher, translator, writer of articles which circulated in *samizdat*, and founder of a secret Tantric sect. This was suppressed in 1972, Dandaron was arrested, tried from December 18-25, 1972 (less than a week after publication of the above article), and transferred to Vydrino prison in Irkutsk. Keston College (as it then was called) first exposed these events just after the trial, publishing the full *samizdat*

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16. UCHITELSKAYA GAZETA, Moscow, 12 December 1972 (translation in 2 RELIGION IN COMMUNIST LANDS 40-42 (1973)).

testimony from Dandaron's friends and supporters.<sup>17</sup> This did not, however, prevent his death in prison in unknown circumstances a year later.

Dandaron's influence was perhaps more felt in Europe than in Siberia. It is clear from this evidence that Buddhism maintained an existence, part overt, part in secret, during these long years of suppression. Set against this, it is not such a surprise that there were strong influences ready to lead to an open revival as soon as this became possible in the Gorbachev period.

In 1985, a sociological survey reported that already 30% of rural Kalmyks and 23% in towns called themselves Buddhists. Also, 48% of families had preserved religious objects and 98% celebrated the holidays of the Buddhist calendar—these results may be skewed against religion, because at this time atheist policy was still in full swing.<sup>18</sup>

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

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

Two tendencies are replacing Kalmykian allegiance to Tibet. Some local believers are beginning to look more and more to Japan and Korea for their education and inspiration. Just as important, however, are the increasing links with the Buddhist communities of western Europe. Those who speak for the Kalmyks are beginning to increasingly

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17. *Id.* at 43-47.

18. See GORBACHEV, *supra* note 2, at 44.

emphasize their own European identity and underline their role as the "only European Buddhist country." Bator Elistaev, seen as a leader of the younger intelligentsia, considers himself a pupil of the Parisian lama, Deni Eiserinka-Francois. These young people pursue lively personal contacts, as well as set up daily contact on the Internet.

The President of Kalmykia, Kirsan Iliumzhinov, has now begun to play an active role as well. He secured financial support, and gave his warm personal backing, to the building of the Syakiun-Syume temple. The temple was begun in 1989, but was then given renewed impetus for completion in 1996. Iliumzhinov is also pledged to establish a Buddhist university, as well as a publishing base. He presents himself, the first Buddhist president of Kalmykia, as an active thinker and ideologist, having set out his ideas in a book, *Kalmykia - the Soul of the Earth: the National Idea*.<sup>19</sup> The field report is worth quoting verbatim at this point.

In this book Iliumzhinov asserts the existence of a certain "single flow of soul," which unites paganism, Buddhism, the wisdom of the epics, and national traditions and customs. But Iliumzhinov does not limit himself to the popular wisdom of the Kalmyk people alone; he gives great respect and support to the Russian Orthodox Church, he has had an audience with the Pope in the Vatican and, until her death, he used to visit the Bulgarian prophetess, Vanga, to ask her advice. He not only attends Buddhist services, but also, at the time of church festivals, Orthodox ones as well. At the beginning of his presidential term, Iliumzhinov put forward a project for building a cathedral of all religions, although he dropped it when he became convinced that it was impossible. From 1993-96 the idea of eclectic ideology of "a single flow of spirituality uniting the religions of East and West," of a "planetary faith," seemed to be echoed in the ideology of the Unification Church. Thus the Moonies were, for a few years, supported by the Kalmyk authorities and allowed into schools and institutes of higher education. However, following harsh criticism from the Russian authorities, the Elista administration withdrew its support, drove the Moonies out of their schools and cancelled their registration.<sup>20</sup>

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

## V. PAGANISM

Nowhere is the superficiality of the Soviet eradication of religion more obvious than with the dramatic re-emergence of paganism in several areas of Siberia and even European Russia. It has also be-

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19. KIRSAN ILIUMZHINOV, *KALMYKIA-THE SOUL OF THE EARTH: THE NATIONAL IDEA*.

20. Kalmykia Field Report, *supra* note 15.

come obvious through the Keston team's research, that the attempted Tsarist conversion of pagans to Orthodoxy was a failure in many places.

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

Superstition and all kinds of occult practices replaced religion even in top circles and evidence of this was legion, especially towards the end of the communist period. Brezhnev always retained allegiance to his faith-healers and 99% of Russians believed in UFOs, with the newspapers feeding them vivid examples.

Even Lenin had a high regard for Nikolai Rerikh (1874-1947), the philosopher-painter, a convert to Hindu mysticism, and a founder of his own mystical religion. Rerikh was born in St. Petersburg, but emigrated to the United States and thence to India. Encouraged to return in 1926, he brought with him a file of Himalayan soil to "pour on the grave of our brother, Mahatma Lenin."<sup>21</sup> I remember, when I was an exchange student in Moscow in 1959, witnessing the huge success of an exhibition of Rerikh's paintings. This was at the time when the renewed atheist campaign was moving into full swing. His sons, Yuri, who died in 1960, and Nikolai, who died in 1993, promoted their father's beliefs throughout their lives. The 1980s and the 1990s saw a huge growth in Rerikh's popularity again and Keston's field team has produced a nineteen-page report on this, which contains a detailed history of this movement up to the present. His philosophy has brought a Russian influence to bear on the many "new-age" ideas which have been flooding into the country. Here is an excerpt from the report:

Under the influence of Rerikh's teaching individuals are emerging who in their own ways embody his "striving for Unity." In the village of Arakchino in the suburbs of Kazan there is an artist and sculptor, Ildar Khanov. He has for a long time been practising yoga and his pictures belong to the mystical art of the "cosmic" school. Khanov has long entertained the idea of building a universal temple which would unify all religions. Svyatoslav Rerikh approved this idea and even the sketches of the temple itself, feeling Khanov's closeness to his father's views . . . . The most unexpected people

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21. This is taken from the as-yet-unpublished report of the Keston Team's expedition to Sakha.

have been giving financial support to this project: businessmen from South Korea sent a sculpture of the Buddha, while a general of the Bundeswehr sent a telescope. After completing the building of the temple, Khanov has been preparing to open a centre of aesthetic education in it. Children of five or six are to learn yoga, systems of breathing, drawing and music. Ildar Khanov himself has become known in the area as an "extra-sensory healer . . ." In November 1994 the proceedings of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church appeared, one section of which was entitled, "Pseudo-Christian sects, neo-paganism and occultism." The conclusion was, "Paganism, astrology, theosophy and seances (as founded by Yelena Blavatskaya) have re-appeared . . . There is renewed propaganda for the teaching of 'Living Ethics,' introduced by the Rerikh family."<sup>22</sup>

Whether the Rerikh philosophy should be classified as neo-paganism or some derivative of Buddhism-Hinduism is a moot point. True Russian paganism has much deeper roots and has made an astonishing comeback in the southern Volga area, just north of Buddhist Kalmykia. The republics of Mordovia, Udmurtia, Chuvashia and Mari El were all affected to a greater or lesser degree. Their status as autonomous republics during the Soviet era just allowed them to cling on to their languages, but put a straight-jacket on any attempt to revive their national identity. When Gorbachev came to power, the removal of this oppression changed the situation dramatically.<sup>23</sup> The late conversion of these nations to Orthodoxy meant that paganism survived longer there than it did in the rest of Russia. The worship of pagan gods in holy groves probably continued up to the communist period and possibly never totally died out. Also, pagan survivals were incorporated into Orthodoxy itself. However, there is a concerted attempt to revive paganism emanating almost exclusively from the intelligentsia. For them Russian Orthodoxy is the religion of the "occupiers" and, as such, became tainted by communism during this century.

Due to considerations of space, we reproduce here only information relative to Mari El, but the whole report contains sections on Mordovia and Chuvashia as well, where the basic features are similar, but without having reached quite the climactic proportions of Mari El. The Mari people divide into a christianized minority, but the majority are now practising pagans.

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22. This section is based on a report compiled by the Keston team, before the Pew project officially began. Sergei Filatov & Aleksandr Shchipkov, *Religious Developments Among the Volga Nations as a Model for the Russian Federation*, 23 RELIGION ST. & SOC'Y, 233-48 (1995).

23. IZVESTIYA, Moscow, 19 January 1998.

According to a recent survey conducted by Mari sociologists, 5-7% are "pure" pagans, 60% are of dual faith (a self-designation describing those who both visit sacred groves and attend church, believing that in these different ways they are worshipping the same God) and only 30% are Orthodox believers, mostly Russians. 200,000 Mari live outside their territory, the descendants of fugitives from christianization, in Bashkiria, Tatarstan and the Urals. Up to 90% of these are "pure" pagans. Pagan creeds are being reborn in Mari El in a process of "confluence." On the one hand, practically every village has a *kart* (pagan priest), who is a figure of authority and who preserves pagan traditions from generation to generation. On the other hand, members of the Mari intelligentsia are moving towards paganism, seeking in it a force to defend the nation against russification. At the end of the 1980s cultural, social and political organizations with a pagan ideology arose, and in the 1990s they took concrete shape in the form of the political organization Kugese Mlade (Earth of the Ancestors), the culture union Mari Ushem (Mari Union) and the youth movement U Vi (New Force). The leaders, motivators and rank-and-file members of the organizations have been recruited from the artistic intelligentsia and include writers, artists, leading journalists, folklorists, university lecturers and professors of Mari language and literature.<sup>24</sup>

The Mari are still proud of the way in which they sided with Ivan the Terrible in the conquest of Kazan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that the folk memory of this battle is livelier than any event connected with the Revolution or World War II. Every ten years the nation used to converge on one place—the grave of Chimbulat, a hero of the 11<sup>th</sup> century—for an act of universal prayer. The Russians blew up the grave in 1830, but the meetings continued in other places. The report continues:

Mari paganism was fully functional right up to the October Revolution. Most villages still had their pagan priests, and sacred groves were not cut down (in contrast to Mordovia, Udmurtia and Chuvashia). Hereditary unbaptized pagans ("pure Mari") considered themselves upper class, as it were, and would not marry anyone who had been baptized as a Christian. Before and immediately after the Revolution conferences took place which brought together all the pagan priests of the nation. Persecution of paganism intensified in the 1920s. Priests were repressed and every pagan prayer ceremony was the occasion for a police investigation. It became the custom to meet at night to pray. Only once, in 1949, did the Soviet authorities permit a national prayer meeting, dedicated to the victory over the Germans in 1945. Tens of thousands of believers gathered and the meeting lasted for more than a week. This event

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24. This is taken from the as-yet-unpublished report of the Keston team's expedition to Mari El.



became engraved in the national memory as an important historical landmark.<sup>25</sup>

The present revival, therefore, was not unexpected. In an effort to replace the fragile oral traditions, the leaders have begun to systematically compile a compendium of national traditions, religion, and history to replace it. The first printed religious text in the history of Mari paganism appeared in 1992, a collection of prayers for all occasions. The report continues:

Since their revival in 1991 public prayer meetings have been held every year and the question of the ritual side of the cult has been raised. Most of the priests are trying to restore the ancient rites in their purest form, including the sacrifice of large numbers of animals. Horses, bulls, sheep and geese are slaughtered in sacred groves. These are considered the most worthy creatures for sacrifice, but for the peasants the practice is ruinous; it also put off townspeople who have never had to encounter blood in their daily lives . . . [Therefore today are substituted] bread, honey and butter for the traditional blood sacrifice.<sup>26</sup>

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

However, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church correctly believed that Mari El should have its own separate diocese (it had previously been attached to Kazan). It also turned out that this would be the hundredth diocesan see under the administration of the Moscow Patriarchate (not all within Russia, of course), and as a result, on July 24, 1993, Patriarch Alexi II arrived in Yoshkar-Ola with due pomp to inaugurate it. The subsequent events are worth recounting in some detail.

Just two years earlier, in 1991, Nikandr Popov published his pagan service book, and in the same year paganism was registered as an official religion. The republican parliament also passed a law which, while officially referring to the natural environment, stated that "religious cult zones" [i.e. sacred groves] were to come under the protection of the state and "no traditional Mari place of prayer is to be cut

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25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

down or developed in any other way.”<sup>27</sup> Every village has its sacred grove, several dedicated to individual purposes, such as healing, veneration of ancestors, or women’s gatherings. An actual temple is being built on a sizeable plot on the outskirts of Yoshkar-Ola, designated to house an ethnographic museum and a hotel. In 1991 the first Mari president, Vladislav Zotin, was to be inaugurated. Here is the report of the event, as recounted by Sergei Filatov and Alexander Shchipkov, of the Keston team:

The inauguration ceremony took place in the national theatre and Zotin invited Bishop Anastasi of Kazan to bless his presidency. However, the pagan lobby in the government intervened in the preparations for the inauguration and demanded that the unbaptized Zotin agree to a pagan blessing alongside the Orthodox one. So Bishop Anastasi found himself in the theatre auditorium standing near to the high priest, that passionate champion of pure paganism, Alexander Yuzykain. The first Mari president was thus blessed by two faiths, but he was not going to disguise his own Orthodox sympathies. A year later Zotin was publicly baptized into the Orthodox Church and had his flat consecrated. The next day this was the talk of Yoshkar-Ola . . . . Several months later Zotin asked Patriarch Alexi to make Mari El a diocese in its own right, independent of Tatarstan . . . . Zotin insisted that the new bishop be named and consecrated in Yoshkar-Ola and not in Moscow, as is often the case . . . . The three-day visit was packed with meetings with official personages: the president, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet and the secretary of state. Everything underlined the social and political significance of the visit, from reception at the highest level to meetings between the Patriarch and members of the local intelligentsia and business world. The Patriarch appeared on local television with greetings to the whole Mari nation. Protocol had no precedent for a meeting between the Patriarch and the pagan leader, which caused distress in pagan circles. A senior high priest, Kayimov, dressed in his priestly robes, tried independently to meet the Patriarch, but he was stopped by guards. However, the Patriarch did not avoid the theme of paganism in his speeches. Speaking of the danger emanating from foreign religious expansion, he stressed that local Orthodox clergy did not want to fight paganism and the “the traditional faiths and religious organizations of our country must live peacefully together and not oppose one another. Some Mari are Christians and some are pagans. The Russian population here is at root Orthodox, but the Orthodox will not inspire war and hatred towards each other in traditional creed.”<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to observe, in the light of the new law which would come into effect four years later, that the Patriarch sounded much

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27. Filatov & Shchipkov, *supra* note 22, at 246.

28. *Id.* at 247.

keener to counteract the effect of foreign missions than of the revival of paganism, a fact which one would have expected to cause him extreme disquiet. The challenge to the Orthodox is clearly to produce prayer and liturgy in the local language and to seek converts among the Mari suited to proselytize among their own people. This, however, is bound to be a slow process; meanwhile, paganism seems poised to make more rapid headway.

The rise of paganism in Mari El is causing increasing waves in the political sphere. Pagans from neighboring republics are beginning to regard Mari El as the model and a kind of inter-republican pagan political union in the lower Volga region is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

## VI. ISLAM

The rise of Islam on Russian soil is far too large a topic to cover adequately in this paper. It is a subject clearly destined to greatly increase in importance, especially in the political sense. The disaster in Chechnya has already ended with the first rupture of unity in the Russian state. For all intents and purposes, Grozny has won its independence, despite the Russian genocide, and President Aslan Maskhadov has openly declared that his republic operates under Muslim law, while rejecting the writ of Moscow.

Less well known are other areas where Islam is less solid among the population, but where, like Buddhism, it has made considerable headway in the last few years. An interesting example is the southern republic of Adygea on the Black Sea. The Adygs were converted to Islam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when they came under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. They then resisted Russian colonization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under pressure, the majority of Adygs emigrated to Turkey in the 1850s and 1860s, and they became an ethnic minority in their own land.

In the Soviet period Muslims suffered badly. The last Muslim congress was held in the mountain village of Adamia in 1925. Subsequently, every single mosque was closed and all the clergy suppressed. As a gesture towards the people, however, the Muslims were given an "autonomous area" within the Krasnoyarsk Territory in 1936.

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

lam had virtually died out. However, the changed circumstances of recent years rapidly began to have an influence.

A major influence in the revival of Islam in the republic has been the Adyg repatriates, some 500 in numbers, who returned home at the beginning of the 1990s, descendants of those forced to emigrate at the time of the Caucasian War. They now play a leading role in the Islamic community. Not only is the Mufti himself a repatriate, but so are a number of other imams. Outstanding among them is Azmet Tashu, a repatriate from Bosnia, imam of the mosque in Adygeisk, leader of the Muslim youth movement and organizer of the first medresseh in the republic.<sup>29</sup>

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

The Islamic revival is largely supported and directed by the leadership of the Republic of Adygea and personally by its President, Aslan Alievich Dzharimov. Despite the fact that Adygs constitute only 20% of the population (the Russians have approximately 75%), the government has been formed along ethnocratic lines, give the Adygs control of all major institutions . . . . The revival of Islam is central to the politics of consolidation of the Adyg people. Thanks to the Government’s financial assistance and the pressure it has exerted on business structures to sponsor projects, in the 1991-1997, nine mosques were build in the villages . . . nine are currently under construction and 22 more are planned. In 1997 work began on a major mosque in the city of Maikop, with financial support from Syria.<sup>30</sup>

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

By contrast to Adygea, which is on the fringes of Russian territory, Tatarstan is in the heartland and has sometimes been called the cross-

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29. This is taken from the as-yet-unpublished report of the Keston team’s expedition to Adygea.

30. *Id.*

roads of Europe. The Russian conquest of Kazan was a major stage in the eastward expansion of the empire. Today the population is equally Russian and Tatar, with the proportion of Orthodox and Muslims being similar. Both are expanding, but Orthodox is naturally viewed by many Tatars as the religion of the overlords.

In the early days after the collapse of communism both sectors of the population made threatening noises.

Between 1990 and 1993 Tataria saw an explosion of nationalist and separatist feeling, a trend which appeared to differ little from the processes which were taking place in many other regions of the former Soviet Union. Thousands of demonstrators turned out onto the streets of Kazan chanting separatist and antinationalist Slovans. The Tatar national parties, movements and organizations behind these demonstrations seemed to be expressing the views of the majority within Tatar society. Russians, not only those living in Tataria, were well and truly frightened by some of the harshest pronouncements on the lips of the Tatar nationalist leader, the poetess F. Bairmaova, who wrote: "Children from mixed marriages should be burnt in the crematorium . . . . All Kazan's Orthodox churches are build on the ruins of demolished mosques-these must be restored."<sup>31</sup>

Such threats proved to be idle. Nothing remotely comparable happened. Rather the reverse. Tatarstan may be seen as one of the areas in the world where Christian-Islamic relations are better than the average. That is not to say, however, that these relations are easy, especially as the region is one which may be taken to illustrate the revival of Orthodoxy at its most positive.

A potentially explosive problem is the conversion to Orthodox of Tatars. Orthodox priests usually state that "they are from families of atheists who had lost their faith." No-one has carried out an official count of the numbers involved, but it is clear that it is not a rare occurrence. There are ten Tatar priests within the diocese and many Tatar convert can be found in almost every parish. Tatarstan Orthodox parish life is rich and diverse. There are well-organized Orthodox associations not only in Kazan, but also in some other towns of the region. One such is the "Three-Saint Brotherhood in Elabuga and Naberezhnye Chelny," which is involved in publishing, educational and charitable work. Most exceptional and unique not only in Kazan, but in the whole of modern Russian Orthodoxy is the youth group founded by Maria Borisova, who is both a nun and a highly-qualified chemical scientist. She and her youthful community present a picture of healthy Orthodoxy. The work began in 1993 and in 1995 the "Orthodox Youth Community" was registered. At the beginning parents brought their children to the community

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31. This is taken from the as-yet-unpublished report of the Keston team's expedition to Tartarstan.

as they would to a club, so they would listen to stories from the scriptures instead of playing in the street. Later the group grew and it is now divided into three sections: 100 children, 40 teenagers and 150 adults. There are twice as many young men and boys as there are girls, which is completely uncharacteristic for the Russian Orthodox Church and is a local phenomenon. Every member has compulsory duties and permanent work within the community. Idlers are not tolerated. A large number of the members are young people from technical institutes, many of whom have come into temporary contact with charismatic churches but have found their spiritual home here. Activities in the community are varied - education programmes, charitable work, pilgrimages, concerts, which have a special value as a form of missionary work. At Christmas and Easter there are always big shows written by community members and young music groups are invited to participate. At New Year, to draw the young people away from drinking, there is a compulsory service, which gives this secular festival some spiritual meaning. At Christmas there is a special party to which students and young people are invited. Evenings of Christian songs are amongst the most popular concerts.<sup>32</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

It is fitting that we have concluded this arbitrary survey with a few words about the revival of Russian Orthodoxy, because, despite all the impressive information about the revival of Buddhism, Paganism and Islam, it is obvious that the Christian Church is destined to be visibly and actively present in Russia in a major way through the next millennium. The failed experiment of state atheism has destroyed so much, yet what it has left behind proves beyond doubt that human agency, however systematic its efforts over a long period of time, cannot eliminate the faith. It also proves that the future of Russia and the future of Orthodoxy are inseparable. However, this will now be in a pluralistic society in which the most disparate elements will have to learn to live together. Laws favoring one group over another threaten to lead not only to heightened tensions, but to disaster by exacerbating ethnic conflict. Europe today is only too aware of the possible consequences of that.

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32. *Id.*

