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Épopée et millénarisme : transformations et innovations

Vera Skvirskaja

## **Contested Souls : Christianisation, Millenarianism and Sentiments of Belonging on Indigenous Rural Yamal, Russia**

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Vera Skvirskaja

# Contested Souls : Christianisation, Millenarianism and Sentiments of Belonging on Indigenous Rural Yamal, Russia

## Introduction : Contested Souls

- 1 This paper explores the creativity, diversity and innovation of native people's engagement with post-soviet Christianity on rural Yamal, Russia. The area under discussion is populated by Nenets and Khanty as well as by Russian old-timers and more recent migrants from all over the former USSR ; it covers the vast terrain of the Yamal peninsula and the adjacent territory along the Ob river and Polar Ural mountains.<sup>1</sup> As elsewhere in Russia, economic and political transformations (the collapse of the USSR and the introduction of a market economy) and the concomitant host of social problems (unemployment, alcoholism, criminality) were widely seen as corrupting both individual people's souls (Pesmen 2000) and the collective soul of the people (*duša naroda*) ; a 'sick' or 'deformed' soul (*duša*) was both the cause and the result of many post-Soviet disorders.
- 2 The indigenous intelligentsia and political activists, just as their Russian counterparts, constructed the 'soul' as a problem that had to be resolved. The idea of traditional, indigenous values and morality was promoted as one way of healing the 'soul' and dealing with economic, ecological and social disorders. But precisely what kind of 'traditional' and non-traditional institutions (e.g. kinship, shamanism, family/kin-run reindeer-herding', the Church, etc.) were needed to restore people's morality was the subject of complex debates. Both among Muscovite intellectuals and in remote Yamal villages, there was a widespread understanding (informed by the teachings of Lev Gumilev) that each culture or ethnic group (*nacional'nost'*) had a specific faith 'attached to it'. In the words of one Russian clerk in his mid thirties : 'A person accepts a faith that is his culture and the most suitable for his environment, and that can be integrated into his worldview'.<sup>2</sup> Seen from the perspective of cultural authenticity, the political agenda of native ethnic revival was undermined in the first post-Soviet decades by pan-Russian Christianisation and by the increasing popularity of various Protestant denominations. Much as in other time and places,<sup>3</sup> the Russian Orthodox Church proved itself less intolerant of native beliefs and practices than the Protestant movements.
- 3 In this paper I use two case studies of particular individuals who underwent conversion into different types of Christianity – official Russian Orthodox Christianity and a Baptist denomination – to discuss emerging forms of religiosity. While the Orthodox Church has established close ties to the post-Soviet state and become one of the major political actors, Protestant denominations, which are considered Russia's 'non-traditional religions', have publicly been branded as '(Western) totalitarian sects' (*totalitarnye sekty*) that pose a threat to the country's 'spiritual security'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in spite of being ostracized by mainstream Russian society, Protestant missionaries were often more efficient than Orthodox priests in reaching out to geographically remote populations on Yamal ; by 2000, Protestant converts had become commonplace both in the tundra and villages.
- 4 Indigenous conversions and the general upsurge of religiosity on Yamal were reflections of more general trends in post-Soviet Russia. As is often the case during periods of great social and economic upheaval, new religiosity was marked by millenarian undertones heralding an approaching doomsday and promising bliss once certain moral values were restored. One explanation for post-Soviet processes of Christianisation, present both in popular thought (including Russian mass media) and social scientific literature, is that it had been necessitated by people's desire to fill the ideological vacuum left after the end of socialism.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, much of the revivalist and millenarian rhetoric on indigenous converts could be

- read as people's response to rapid economic marginalisation and stress, and/or expressions of resistance to the legacy of the Soviet state (*e.g.* the Soviet state is blamed for cultural Russification, the purging of shamans, the destruction of traditional ways of life, and so on).
- 5 There are some historical parallels between pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet indigenous attempts at revitalisation in Siberia : both rely on negative imagery of the externally imposed order of things (*e.g.* by 'Russians', 'communists', or 'missionaries', depending on the interlocutor) and the idea that it must be rectified. Yet, for an analysis of post-Soviet religiosity and its millenarian attitudes, the idioms of resistance to the dominant order and subversion of imposed structures and values (*cf.* Balzer 1999) are only partially revealing. Upon closer examination of indigenous converts' discourses, people's engagement with new religious ideas shows their aspiration to belong to wider society as well as their political orientation towards the state. Rather than simply 'filling' the ideological vacuum with something new (or 'old', traditional), novel and heterogeneous religiosity brought about by post-Soviet Christianisation has both revoked and deployed certain Soviet images and political forms.
- 6 Many native people seemed to interpret Christianity according to the Soviet model. Vakhtin (2009, pp. 35-36), for instance, gave an example of a Chukchi villager who called himself a priest and claimed responsibility for all Christian denominations indiscriminately, thus assuming a position analogous to that of a Soviet secretary of ideology.<sup>6</sup> Juxtaposing narratives, reminiscences and reflections of converts into different Christian denominations allows us to elaborate on Vakhtin's anecdote as well as to further Kharkhordin's (1998, pp. 958-959) point about the affinity between the Soviet collective with its system of circular social control and a Christian congregation, and discern the ways in which native, Christian and Soviet symbolic-political orders have been conflated in post-Soviet religious imagination and innovations.
- 7 The role of memory in shaping religious forms and experience has been addressed by Whitehouse in his discussion of modes of religiosity, where he set out to explore whether '... human memory, activated in different ways, might be said to mould political organization and ideology' (2000, p. 5). In brief, following the work of psychologists, he differentiates between episodic and semantic memory ; the latter is defined as general knowledge of particular 'schemas' resulting from recurrent actions – *e.g.* regular visits to a barber's shop or a church. Episodic memory, by contrast, refers to unique personal experiences, *e.g.* an initiation rite. These two different types of memory respectively characterise doctrinal (based on routinised forms of worship and large anonymous communities) and imagistic (deploying multivocal imagery and proliferating in face to face communities) modes of religiosity. Whitehouse, however, is quick to add that any religious tradition depends for its transmission on both types of memory ; all types of Christianity, for example, operate in the doctrinal mode but episodic memories account for some religious experience (2000, p. 11). While this article illustrates how memory does indeed impact on people's religious ideas and understandings, it does not attempt to sort the cases at hand into a universal classification of modes of religiosity on the basis of memory types. Just as some 19<sup>th</sup> century indigenous movements in Western Siberia were simultaneously rational, magical and revivalistic (see Balzer 1999, p. 95), early 21<sup>st</sup> century folk religiosity cannot necessarily be slotted into clearly demarcated modes.
- 8 What seems to fall outside Whitehouse's discussion of memory and modes of religiosity is the ways in which semantic memory whose content is derived from outside of the religious sphere/Christianity (*e.g.* semantic memory that precedes conversion) can reinforce, or contribute, to imagistic and doctrinal aspects of religion. As I will show through reference to multivocal post-Soviet religious innovations and images, semantic memory derived from 'general knowledge' acquired during the Soviet period has become integral to diverse and mutually hostile religious frameworks ; it has, to a certain extent, moulded and emotionally charged the religious understanding of both Orthodox and Protestant converts.
- 9 Shared semantic memory encodes people's experiences of the Soviet system, which was based on the constant replication of ideological and symbolic forms (films, literature, art, architecture, slogans, state rituals, work meetings '*sobraniia*', and so on), which provided instructions for almost every aspect of life and which created an order that, as Yurchak

(2003) has noted, people thought was forever.<sup>7</sup> Mundane and repetitive practical activities, like being employed and hence being a member of a Soviet work collective, ensured that Soviet ideology was part of everybody's consciousness and could not be counterpoised to something called 'everyday life' (see Humphrey 1999, pp. 7-8). Post-Soviet religious forms on Yamal have come to encompass native people's conceptualisations of Soviet ideology. Before I turn to what people who have become Christian themselves say about their 'worldviews', an introduction to the processes of Christianisation on indigenous Yamal, past and present, is in order.

## Background : the History of 'Interrupted' Christianisation

- 10 In the northern Ob' area, the presence and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church had been historically unstable. In contrast to the New World missions founded by different religious orders aiming to civilise and convert natives, Orthodox missions in Siberia were not frontier institutions ; instead they followed the expanding state's military and administrative apparatus. Missionaries tended not to live with prospective converts in the forest and tundra, preferring to reside in towns and villages.<sup>8</sup> And the secular authorities, the Russian Senate, periodically put missionary activities on hold in order to prevent unrest among the indigenous subjects, who were officially categorised as 'aliens' (*inorodcy*), and their defaulting on *yasak* (tax) payments.
- 11 On pre-revolutionary Yamal, the Obdorsk spiritual mission in the town now known as Salekhard was set up to deal specifically with the natives. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the mission had several travelling 'altars' or 'churches' (*pokhodnye cerkvi*) and a small group of missionaries who went on trips to the tundra and remote outposts. Some Christian literature was translated into native languages, but interactions between missionaries and natives were mainly conducted through interpreters. In Obdorsk (Salekhard), the mission opened a boarding school for native pupils, often orphans and children from poor families. Cultivating respect for the native way of life, the mission expected its graduates to be eager to return to their 'tribesmen' and in this way to disseminate Christian teachings and positive attitudes towards the Church in this hardly accessible milieu (Bazanov 1936, p. 80). Besides the missionaries' endeavours, the nomadic Khanty and Nenets gained familiarity with Christianity through the Orthodox Komi reindeer herders who migrated to the area in great numbers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- 12 A few Russian saints, in particular Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of travellers, as well as religious paraphernalia such as crosses and bells, became popular with Nenets and Khanty. Native shamans incorporated Christian symbols into their costumes and communicated with the spirits of Christian saints during séances. Sacrifices were made to the Orthodox saints depicted on icons and Christian missionaries were expected to be able to heal just as the shamans did (Homič 1995, pp. 247-252).
- 13 According to observers (Dunin-Gorkavič 1995, p. 56, Bartenev 1998, pp. 171-175 ; Šemanovskii 2005, pp. 15, 97-102), prior to the socialist revolution the overall outcome of several centuries of contact with Christians was only a very unevenly spread veneer of Christianity. The baptised Khanty and Nenets rarely visited church and were reluctant to follow Orthodox rituals, like church weddings and funerals, confession and performing the Eucharist. The Russian missionary Šemanovskii, who was based in Obdorsk for twelve years until 1910, reported in his diaries that some natives undertook baptism instrumentally to avoid customary obligations (*e.g.* of marriage) and the baptised shamans continued to practise their art without reservations. Šemanovskii also complained that : 'It is easier to carry out missionary activities where people have some religious needs [*zaprosy*]. The fanaticism of the pagans is more suitable for missionary purposes... Nowadays, Obdorsk's aliens are not fanatics and the majority of them are indifferent towards religion.'<sup>9</sup>
- 14 The postulated 'religious indifference' of nomadic Nenets and Khanty should not be taken at face value, for this judgement was also the product of a particular cultural vision that could not identify aspects of familiar religious practices among the natives. As in many Northern Asian societies (see Humphrey 1994, p. 192), Nenets and Khanty shamanism did not form a coherent ideology and anybody could use shamanic representations in prophecies, songs, domestic rituals, and so on. The (Russian) term 'shaman' (*šaman*) did not correspond

- to a single indigenous category. Various specialists (shamans, diviners, clear-seers, healers, etc.) were attributed magical power and were responsible for communication with different spirits and sacred authority (Homič 1978). Shamanizing and divination were not restricted to specialists : ordinary men and women as well as certain animals, i.e. dogs (Černecov 1987, pp. 60-67), were also seen as capable of shamanizing.
- 15 People's relationship with the material representations of their deities/'idols' (*siadai*, carved images) had defied Russian ideas of respect for the sacred realm. One moment they could be treasured as sacred possessions and the next regarded as plain pieces of wood (*deverviaški*, see Evladov 1992, p. 150). The images could be physically punished if spirits did not deliver what was expected of them. They could also be physically destroyed to release a spirit and let it travel when their human guardians saw fit.
- 16 The attempts of the Obdorsk spiritual mission to bring the natives to the Church were cut short by the socialist revolution. During the Soviet anti-religion campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, both the Orthodox priest and the native specialists identified as 'shamans' were discredited as exploiters and many were persecuted. But although even remote encampments of Nenets and Khanty were fully integrated into Soviet economic, political and educational institutions, people preserved many aspects of traditional ritual life and material culture well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 17 Atheist propaganda was a regular feature of the Soviet mass media, but in the later Soviet periods the marginalisation of believers was rather selective<sup>10</sup> and indigenous 'religious'/ritual practices were not, as a rule, subjected to public accusations of ideological misconduct. The Soviet authorities and farm management turned a blind eye to something that was seen as a sign of simple people's ignorance or backwardness. 'They kept all these idols and often shamanized [*šamanili*]', said one Russian veterinarian and former Communist to me as she shared her recollections. 'Women walked around the *čum*<sup>11</sup> with smoking coals on a frying pan mumbling something. Ah, I never said anything to them. It was not the right thing to do, but we really did not care.' As my Nenets tundra hosts remembered, when their *čum* were visited by the Soviet state farm directors or Party officials, the display of sacred things/'idols' did not provoke criticism from the visitors. This attitude was not due to the geographical remoteness of native herders and hunters, but to their social standing – they were often simply considered to be beyond criticism.
- 18 The collapse of the Communist Party's hegemony and the desire of the Orthodox Church to restore itself as a consolidating force in Russian society had once again raised the issue of the pagans' (*yazyčniki*, as they were now often publicly addressed) ideological orientation. The agenda of the Orthodox church in Salekhard, which was re-opened in the early 1990s, was conceptualised somewhat differently from those of its pre-Soviet predecessor. The main concerns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox missionaries were baptism and ritual observances. But for the post-Soviet Orthodox Church, as a headman (*starosta*) of Salekhard church told me, the foremost aim was to preach Orthodox morality, and that implied 'teaching people to obey power' (*slušať'sia vlast'*).
- 19 While cases of mass baptism of remote villages by travelling Orthodox priests were, in fact, common in West Siberia,<sup>12</sup> there were no special programmes to proselytise among the Nenets and Khanty on Yamal. The headman recalled that in the early 1990s native inhabitants often showed hostility towards the visiting Orthodox priests, but by 2001 very few places remained openly hostile to Church representatives. Limited funding was the major constraining factor for Salekhard church's work with the geographically remote population ; it did not venture into the tundra.
- 20 This lack of missionary activity was compensated for by the dissemination of Orthodox teachings through radio, television and state institutions. In tundra encampments, the presence of the Church was manifest in sermons and in the public debates regularly transmitted by Radio Russia (*Radio Rossiï*), where priests put forward their opinions on political and social matters. Some young reindeer herders were baptised while undergoing obligatory military service ;<sup>13</sup> they proudly flashed their chest crosses when they were back in the village. In the cases I encountered, upon their return to the tundra, the crosses belonging to the neophytes were added

to family collections of sacred things and the army chaplains were remembered as ‘good men to talk to about different things.’ For my tundra hosts, Orthodox Christianity had become a taken for granted aspect of post-Soviet culture, but for many, faith in God, which was seen as made real through praying, worshipping and specific observances, was largely understood as the Russians’ faith, a marker of *nacional’nost’* (ethnicity) that was not ‘theirs’. God was, as it were, the ‘Russians’ God’.

21 Unlike the Orthodox Church, divers Protestant missions were engaged in more systematic missionary work on the ground, regularly visiting tundra encampments and remote villages. Some Protestant missionaries were themselves recent Nenets and local Russian converts, others were Russian and Ukrainian migrants, and yet others were Westerners with funding that allowed them to rent large premises in Salekhard for public meetings and helicopters for field trips. For native and Russian missionaries, trade with the tundra dwellers was one of the main social settings used to disseminate the Gospel. Some missionaries worked from centres set up in villages, but they were few and far between.

22 One such centre was a Baptist house of prayer established in 1997 by a Ukrainian couple on northern Yamal peninsula. The mission conducted services three days a week and distributed printed materials and Bibles. Some of the literature, published abroad in Russian, focused specifically on Northern indigenous peoples, such as booklets about fights between Christian missionaries and Eskimo shamans in Canada and the conversion of Eskimo communities. The Baptist approach was not intellectual<sup>14</sup> and the missionaries were openly hostile to many aspects of both modernity (*i.e.* secular music, mass media, dancing, etc.) and indigenous practices, including ‘idolatry’, gender taboos, marriage strategies, animal sacrifice, modes of greetings and even facial expressions.

23 The Baptists’ main target was indigenous dwellers. In the missionaries’ own words, newcomers and migrants were ‘all too busy making a living to spend time in the mission’ – newcomers came to the North to make money and they did not have much spare time. Furthermore, the indigenous lifestyle and ‘pagan’ worldview seemed more acceptable targets than Orthodox Christianity or Islam. Life in the tundra was depicted as an aimless and joyless existence (‘herding, sleeping, eating’) and it was the native spirits (*duhi*) that were said to pose a threat to the well-being of the local community. ‘People complain that they hear voices here ; these are voices of the Devil. We understand that here there are many evil spirits whose only purpose is to kill [*umertvit*] humans... The Devil has his plan for these people,’ the missionary told me.

24 The Baptist mission stirred up controversial feelings in village and tundra communities. The Church, backed up on this matter by the state, had publicly condemned Protestant missions as Western religious ‘sects’ that strive for world domination (*cf.* Dvorkin 2000, pp. 40-41). In line with this reasoning, many locals referred to Baptists as ‘a trend from the outside’ ; Baptists were seen as a token of the permeability of the state’s borders and villagers found it ‘disturbing’ that the local authorities let these people into the region. Not only were the missionaries challenging new discourses on cultural authenticity with their Christian cosmopolitanism (‘we are one community of brothers and sisters the world over’), they were also seen as a token of the permeability of the state’s borders. Some reindeer herders I knew refused to trade or even converse with the Baptist missionaries after they had learned that they did not represent the official Orthodox Church. These negative attitudes were not entirely new, for in the Soviet Union, non-traditional religious organisations were not always registered with the authorities and were generally viewed as illegal or underground sects.

25 The mission, however, was successful in recruiting some followers and it was not seriously troubled by the villagers or the local authorities, who in other matters were inclined to adopt an ‘ethnic-nationalistic’ stand vis-à-vis newcomers.<sup>15</sup> Despite all the bad press and suspicions, it was simply hoped that the missionaries could keep people away from drinking and crime. One common view is summed up in the statement of one middle-aged Russian worker who called himself Orthodox and said that he would never approach the sect : ‘In Soviet times, drinking was about poor discipline, but now it is called a disease. The sect [*sektanty*] calls it a sin. Maybe if people start thinking about drinking as a sin it can help them to stop.’ The missionaries

appealed to the idea of (self-)discipline and like the Orthodox Church they extolled obedience (*poslušanie*) as a central value. Special prayers were made for children to obey their teachers at school, and for workers to obey their directors. Just like the official Church, the Baptist missionaries on Yamal exhorted people to 'obey their Tsars, leaders and managers' and for this reason they were left alone and were expected to do some good as a disciplinary structure.

## New Sensibilities and Identifications - Cases of Christianisation

- 26 The schematic positioning of the main agents of Christianisation as described above – the historical and official status of the Orthodox Church and the controversial status of Protestant missionaries – does not tell us much about the host of sentiments, emotions and aspirations of the followers of a particular religious confession or movement. Nor does it help us to understand what it means for them to be(come) Christians. In order to elucidate people's dispositions, I now turn to two case studies that deal with the words and 'worlds' of people who became Christian.
- 27 The first case study's main focus is on a member of the aforementioned Baptist mission, which preached the impending apocalypse and cultivated millenarian attitudes among their followers. The second centres on the famous Nenets female writer and entrepreneur, Anna Nerkagi, who became an active supporter of the Orthodox Church and decided to become a spiritual leader in her own right. Her millenarianism, expressed in the novel 'The Silent One' (*Molčaščii*, 1996), was structured around her concern for the wellbeing of 'her' people. Using the Christian imagery of salvation achieved through unification with the Saviour, the novel's finale features a collective purification-cum-purging by the divine fire ; as in many other millenarian ideologies, revival is promised through annihilation. Nergaki's millenarian vision aside, her take on Christianity represented an example of religious innovation that was common among many indigenous converts.
- 28 Thus the two case studies attempt to show the way in which different religious currents marked, at least formally, by millenarian ideologies shape subjectivities and create novel 'worldviews'. The ideological complexity of, and range of cultural references deployed in, these novel forms of religiosity are such that they do not unequivocally fit the categories of 'doctrinal' and 'imagistic' modes of religiosity (Whitehouse 2000) ; followers of each denomination combine the elements of both modes. As we shall see, despite the striking contrast between the two religious forms, in both religious frameworks, people's ideas of order and their expectations of power and charismatic leadership harked back to semantic memory engrained during the Soviet period.
- 29 The significance of this shared memory should be considered in the broader context of the effects of post-Soviet change on the locality. In 2001, much of the rural economy was still organised on several large reformed state farms specialised in reindeer-herding, although they were by then struggling to survive alongside the 'individual' reindeer-herding carried out by indigenous families, small kin groups and a handful of indigenous communes (*obščina*). The old state farms had lost their former economic might and were transformed into what Kharkhordin (1998, p. 962) has called 'the post-collective' – a situation where the ties that kept the 'contact group' functioning as a collective were radically loosened and the state no longer had a role in maintaining a collective and in setting up the goals of group activity (e.g. a production plan). In this environment, much of people's anxiety was triggered by fear of perceived or impinging anarchy and disorder. While it was difficult to assess at the time to what extent individual cases to be discussed below are representative of the 'groups' of believers, the subjective experiences and interpretation of these converts, however idiosyncratic they may appear, were a socially and culturally situated search for 'order'.

### Charismatic leadership : Jesus as Lenin

- 30 The core of the Baptist congregation consisted mainly of native women of all ages. During regular services, in their individual prayers, said both in Russian and Nenets, they asked for the well-being of reindeer and for order (*poriadok*) in the tundra and the village, sent their

blessing to their kinsmen in the tundra and asked for the redemption of young people and their unenlightened relatives. The people (*narod*) was said to be in grave danger from the hole in the ozone layer, environmental degradation, poor health etc. The apocalypse was fast approaching, making the conversion of unbelievers all the more urgent. When attending Baptist services and observing people's prayers (hands clenched, eyes shut) as well as listening to the missionaries' evocations of the Devil as incarnate in the television, mass media, native idols and spirits, it was tempting to see the movement in terms of the 'colonisation of consciousness' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991 ; see Robbins 2007, pp. 11-13). My chance meeting with a middle-aged Nenets woman whom I call Maria exposed the limitations of such an approach.

31 In some ways, the Baptists exemplified an imagistic mode of religiosity in that the religious life of many Baptist followers revolved around a life-changing episode such as their or their nearest and dearest suddenly stopping drinking. This 'miracle' had a profound impact on their new religious convictions, which were exercised in dogmatic fashion during meetings (monotonous readings from the Bible, repetitive prayers, sombre singing). Maria's husband was among those who believed they had been saved from alcohol by their conversion, but Maria, a teetotaler herself, was not initially drawn to the missionaries by their 'healing' powers.

32 Maria's story of how she found God was the tale of a simple woman (she had completed secondary education, spent half of her life in the tundra, and now worked at the kindergarten in the village), trying to navigate the confusing world of post-Soviet ideological production. She first became aware of her ignorance (*bezgramotnost'*) after she visited the church in Salekhard as a tourist in 1994. She travelled very rarely to the regional capital, and this was her first trip since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Salekhard, a relative took her on a tour to the church where she bought a little booklet about Jesus the Saviour. Maria knew nothing about Jesus and was curious to know who Jesus was, but the priest was too busy to talk to Maria.

33 Back home, she read the book, which described Jesus as 'a friend of children'. This formulation struck Maria, because she knew that Lenin was always called 'a friend of children'. Her interest in God was provoked by this simple phrase. She discussed it with her husband. 'Who was this Jesus, if he was as great as Lenin ? When did he live ?' Maria's husband, a former state farm worker, did not know either and she was too shy to ask around. She dropped these questions until the Baptists arrived in her village and distributed the Bible. Maria read the book, but could not understand everything that it said. She joined the mission together with her husband to get help understanding the words of the 'living God' (*zhivoi bog*), as she had come to call Jesus.

34 Maria and her husband became strict Baptist followers, which strained relations with some of their relatives and friends : they threw out their TV set and burned their sacred things (*hehe*), including ancestral images, and the husband gave up smoking and drinking entirely. However, Maria did not blindly dismiss her sacred things as representations of evil. She had her own view on 'paganism' and this was connected with traumatic events in her family and with her former Soviet self. Maria's father, whom she remembered only vaguely, was a shaman. He was imprisoned in the 1930s, but was later released and returned to the tundra. Maria was told that he was a strong shaman and that he could sew better than any woman (his ability to sew was a sign that he was a real shaman and could move between male and female realms). With some agitation, she told me that her father had suffered for his 'faith' (*za veru*) and that he had suffered unjustly.

35 She also recalled that she used to be 'a good Soviet person' and considered herself a 'modern' woman ; she was convinced that there was no such thing as God or gods. Maria remembered that her mother tried to talk to her about spirits or gods, but she ignored her words as 'lies'. Her grandmother could sing shamanic songs, but they did not make any sense : 'You have to be mad to understand that nonsense. Nobody could understand what grandma was saying.'

36 When Maria lived in the tundra, she observed all the prohibitions applied to women as a matter of course and participated in domestic rituals, such as the purification rite (*nibrava*), feeding ancestral images and the annual sacrifice to the sacred sledge (*hehe-han*) used to transport sacred possessions (ancestral images, sacred objects and idols). Before she met the Baptists she did not think of these practices as 'religious'. Maria's understanding of her Soviet self

endorses Ssorin-Chaikov's observation among the Evenki that during the Soviet period 'ritual practices proliferated by avoiding naming and narration, and by the loss of 'shamanism' as a fixed signifier within ritual frameworks' (2001, p. 3). What this implies is that 'shamanising' as something people did was mainly evident to the eye of the ethnographer or 'outsider', but might not be acknowledged as either 'shamanising' or religious ritual by those who performed these practices. The Soviet Maria 'did it' ('folk religion'), but this did not compromise her sense of her Soviet modern self. It went without 'naming'.

37 For the post-Soviet Maria, 'narration' and 'naming' became decisive for her becoming an ardent Baptist. The very ability to communicate in a comprehensible language in dealing with the metaphysical powers was essential for her new identity as a Christian. 'Our tundra gods do not talk ; they are silent gods (*bezmolvnye bogi*),' she told me. When I asked her to elaborate, Maria explained that since there were no more shamans, there was no way for her to understand and engage with the *hehe* and the spirits. It was a shaman's task to tell people about the dispositions of spirits. Maria did not know how to handle the *hehe* and how to address them. They were mute and therefore radically different from the speaking and living Christian God.

38 It is important to note in passing that Maria's concerns with the native gods' silence also implied that it was possible to understand *hehe* emotionally and intellectually. Perhaps, she said, if she had listened to her mother, she would have had a better chance of understanding. By drawing a boundary between her Soviet beliefs ('no God/gods') and her current convictions, she acknowledged that the native gods were no longer 'lies'. Ironically, the native gods were recognised as a repository of knowledge that became unattainable for Maria at the moment when she renounced her atheism and became a Christian. They were not so much 'evil' as 'mute' and hence, useless.

39 Maria's subjectivity aligned with her experience of the irreconcilability between 'silent gods', her Soviet self and her present-day religiosity. Her Christianity, however, was not only about new sensibilities. There is a well-documented overlap between certain Soviet discourses and the teachings of the Orthodox Church (Kharkhordin 1998). Soviet practices of self-discipline and hero identification had clear analogies in Orthodox moral theology, whilst the centrality of Orthodox obedience was not unlike Soviet idea(l)s of the self as enmeshed in a symbolic and ideological system that was always more significant than the individual. Maria's trajectory from atheist to Baptist followed these continuities in the social imagination.

40 The Baptists, of course, represented an 'anti-Church' movement and they opposed the ideological domination of the Orthodox Church. But Maria did not join the Baptist mission because she had any ideological reservations about the Orthodox Church. Like Vakhtin's (2009) Chukchi villager I mentioned in the introduction, she did not really see the difference between the two. What mattered was that Baptist Christianity propagated 'clean living' and a 'good society' based on respect and kindness towards others, where both were seen as no longer being enforced or endorsed by secular powers. The local Baptist community might have existed in the hostile environment of the village atheists, Russian Orthodox and indigenous traditionalists, but for Maria even the missionaries' cosmopolitanism ('we are one community of brothers and sisters the world over') was not unlike Soviet postulates about the solidarity of working class the world over.<sup>16</sup>

41 And she was also millenarian in her own way – a 'second coming' had already happened, for Jesus came into her world(view) shortly after Lenin had (almost) lost his quasi-divine political status. The local Baptists were her only opportunity to embark on a long-term process of learning about Jesus who was as great as Lenin. The model self constructed by Christianity and the hero figure of Jesus reinforced Maria's Soviet-style subjectivity, which was predicated on the idea of an 'obedient', but also a consciously involved, subject addressed by an authoritative discourse. While the native gods were silent for Maria, in the idea of the Christian God she found a way to deal with post-Soviet disorders.

### Divine hierarchies and 'a dilemma of the soul'

42 In 1996, Nerkagi's novel 'The Silent One' was published in a volume alongside her earlier works that explore themes of indigenous life in the manner of social realism and offer a critique

of the effects of Soviet modernity, such as disregarded indigenous gender roles and familial obligations. 'The Silent One', which brought Nerkagi a literary prize in Tiumen and was praised by Russian literati in Salekhard, was a different kind of novel – the familiar themes gave way to the anticipation of judgement day and a revitalisation to follow. In the preface she wrote :

43 'God forbid that my Words should be the final word for my small people<sup>17</sup> whom I love. I cannot say whether I am guided by God or by the Devil. If it is God, then it is his Will. But what if it is the Devil ? I am afraid... I see a collapse ahead. It will come to everybody. This is neither cancer nor AIDS ; we are faced with a very different disease. The soul is rotting inside of us.'<sup>18</sup>

44 Written in a genre that mixes allegory and phantasmagoria, the novel depicts a dark world of wild orgies and feasts, sexual promiscuity and poverty – a world with no families and no purpose. The plot loosely follows the story of Christ – the protagonist, who does not participate in the debauched life of the community, is killed by his own people ; he then rises from the dead as a Voice showing his tortures a divine image in the sky and calling them to follow him ; enlightened by his miracle, people enter into the raging fire asking God for forgiveness.

45 Nerkagi's search for new spirituality and take on revitalisation could not but provoke mixed feelings among the native intelligentsia in Salekhard. She was writing and publishing 'The Silent One' at a time when native activists, concerned as they were with the revival of indigenous religion in its authentic format, were organising folkloric performances featuring shamans. Yet, in contrast to other representatives of the urban native intelligentsia, Nerkagi has since the late 1980s spent substantial amounts of time in the near-Ural tundra in the trading post (*faktoria*) of Laborovaia. And it is there that she run her private reindeer-herding farm (*krestiansko-fermerskoe hoziaistvo*) and shop. She also built a chapel there in 1998 and popularised her version of Christianity in what she called 'The school of the spirit.'

46 In 2001 the trading post had fifty to sixty permanent residents and approximately fifteen of them were children who attended Nerkagi's primary school. Eleven were her adopted children from orphanage background. (The children of the nomadic tundra dwellers went to boarding schools in larger settlements.) The primary school followed a standard Russian syllabus and the additional component that Nerkagi designed herself and formally described as 'ethno-cultural education' was dedicated to the spiritual cultivation of the individual.

47 This spiritual cultivation and revival of Nenets culture could be achieved through 'labour' (*trud*). The idea was that the individual (*ličnost*) should be cultivated not by means of 'literacy', but through the idea of labour as the foundation of life and creative activity and as distinct from the idea of formal 'work' (*rabota*). In Nerkagi's view, the deficiency of standard Russian education was that it focused solely on literacy. Children were taught how to read, write, and count, but their spirit was not cultivated through practice.

48 'In Soviet times they talked about a 'calling' [*prizvanie*] and everything that was not your 'calling' you did not need. In my school one learns how to appreciate labour and simple human life. It is about learning how to appreciate life not as a heavy burden – everybody now complains that 'life is too hard' – but as a creative process.'

49 In the school, Nenets girls were taught native crafts like sewing and scraping hides, while boys learnt to make sledges, and lassoes, and were regularly taken on fishing and hunting expedition. However, the proper cultivation of indigenous subjects could not be achieved through labour alone ; according to Nerkagi, it had to be done in conjunction with learning and practising the 'one faith' (*odna vera*). That was the reason why the writer was particular about the name of her school and did not want to promote it as 'a school of the ethnos' but instead referred to it as 'the school of the spirit.'

50 In Nerkagi's usage of the term 'ethno-cultural education', 'culture' referred to the universal domain of 'faith' (*vera*). Without 'faith' one could not be 'cultured' (*kul'turnyi*), she said. The notion of 'one faith' was her original idea that she was eager to talk about with her signature eloquence. It is worth quoting it at length :

51 'I do not believe that there is Christianity and paganism. God is one, and that is how I bring up our children. My children are Christians and we would not start a meal without a prayer. It is not

possible to explain the feelings that I am experiencing and that our children are experiencing by something like Christianity or paganism. I am not into different religious movements or sects. My ethno-education is about the cultivation of the one faith – our own faith [*sobstvennaia vera*]. There is one God and there are gods, masters [*hoziaeva*] of the land. There are sacred sites and each site has its own master. There are small sites and big sites. That is what the children have to learn and how I explain it to the people. They should know about all the sacred sites on their native land [*rodnaia zemlia*] and how to do the rituals. This is the culture [*eto kul'tura*] – one has to understand the hierarchy of gods. Like there is a Governor and a Vice-Governor. So in the same way there is a divine hierarchy [*bozhestvennaya ierarkhiia*]. The gods of our land are real. In the Urals we have a Goddess-Hada [*grandmother*] and she has the same task as all other gods and God, to protect our people and guide them morally. She is as real as you and me.'

52 In her engagement with Christianity Nerkagi addressed a dilemma similar to one that many ordinary native dwellers were aware of, or uneasy about, at the time, namely to what extent becoming a Christian compromises their ethnic/indigenous identity and can be seen as a 'betrayal' of their people.

53 On the one hand, in the words of the new Orthodox converts, in order to have a good life it was now important to take care of one's 'soul' (*duša*).

54 On the other hand, many people rediscovered that a sense of being pagan (*yazyčniki*) was an integral part of their identity and were actively searching for their 'abandoned' spiritual traditions at the same time as they were introduced to Christianity with its omnipotent God who hated pagans. One rural women in her forties of mixed Nenets-Khanty descent and a recent convert to Orthodox Christianity reflected on her task of handling two religious realms simultaneously : 'For us, educated and modern people, it is not that simple, there is a dispute in my soul [*spor v duše*].' The woman found some solace in the fact that Russians also had various beliefs in spirits but these beliefs did not prevent them from being real Christians.

55 By contrast to many ordinary rural dwellers, Nerkagi adopted a vision that was purged of unclear or contradictory stances. Being an active cultural entrepreneur who could herself define the contours of what was 'ours' and what was not, the writer did not endeavour to build a bridge between Christianity and traditional practices. She dismissed any discrepancy in the coexistence of paganism with Christianity, as well as the idea of *dvoeverie* ('double faith') that is commonly attributed to Russians and pre-revolutionary natives alike, by rejecting the notion of paganism as a label for the 'native's religion' and by recasting Christianity as 'our' religion. Christianity was deployed as a cultural resource for the purpose of articulating an alternative perspective on the meaning of adherence to the Orthodox Church. The universal God at 'the top' that was neither clearly Christian nor native became a means of asserting the indigenous (pagan) tradition without naming it. The native gods under God were indispensable components of the cultural vision that Nerkagi called the 'one faith'.

56 At the turn of the millennium, the millenarian flavour and messianic character of Nerkagi's fictive native Saviour seemed in practice to be giving way to a more rationalised and familiar model. Rather than viewing her religious innovation as yet another case of religious syncretism, whereby Christian symbols, saints, and practices are seen as co-opted into the native worldview (*cf.* Balzer 1999), her design should be acknowledged for its reference to recent, Soviet experience of political order. The idea of the 'divine hierarchy' of gods appeared to be modelled on a vision of encompassing realms into which she imaginatively projected native masters and the universal God, evoking the template of Soviet 'nesting hierarchies' of power (Humphrey 1994a). The power of native gods was postulated as being as significant and powerful in their own realms (*e.g.* a mountain) as that of God. Just as almost no one was a stranger to power in the Soviet political order, because power was distributed through 'nesting hierarchies', nor were native gods in Nerkagi's imagination strangers to the potency of God. The divine 'order' was found in a conceptual construct where a part of the whole could metonymically wield power as both part and whole.

57 Whether Nerkagi's teachings gained a wide circle of followers among the tundra dwellers in her area was difficult to estimate. Her chapel in Laborovaia was reportedly busy during some

Orthodox religious holidays, with people making offerings and praying. Her primary school was eventually allowed to accept some pupils from the tundra by the Okrug's Department of Education and this may have facilitated the spread of her teachings far beyond her trading post. One thing is certain : her ideas, though 'unorthodox' from the point of view of Christian dogma, did not prevent her from gaining political support from the regional structures of power and from becoming a personality respected and valued by the Church. It was the Salekhard church authorities that granted her permission to build an Orthodox chapel in the trading post (the Church was keen on lay people in the region building chapels in order to combat the spread of 'totalitarian sects'). Since 2007, the trading post has regularly hosted children from an Orthodox Sunday school in Tobol'sk, and the Head of the Tobol'sk Eparchy has even visited her trading post himself.

## Conclusion

- 58 This paper has attempted to show that since the demise of Soviet atheist ideology and state socialism, Christianity on Yamal has been doing something more complex than merely 'filling' a post-Soviet ideological vacuum. It has established an uneasy relationship to the idea of indigenous revival, when the latter was promulgated as a return to authentic ancestral traditions, and cultural Russification was seen as 'bad' Soviet legacy. The tension between the two agendas (Christianisation and the revival of ethnic authenticity) was particularly pronounced when Christian millenarianism was brought to the fore, as in the novel 'The Silent One' by the Nenets writer, Nerkagi, or in Baptists' rejection of Nenets gods as works of the Devil and exhortations to convert urgently.
- 59 Millenarian movements are often presented as ways of resolving, or responding to, the tensions created by contact between a local society and an oppressive external power, such as a state or world religions. In societies as different as West Siberian natives and Amazonian Indians, anthropologists often emphasise the resistance potential of such movements.<sup>19</sup> While no mass millenarian movements had emerged on post-Soviet Yamal, millenarian attitudes proliferated among followers of different and mutually hostile Christian traditions. These followers, however, did not appear to subvert 'Russian'/state power as a way of revitalising indigenous communities. Their multivocal millenarianism was concomitant with the feelings, or aspirations, of belonging to larger whole(s) that drove their new religious visions and understandings more generally.
- 60 For people like Maria the Baptist, Christianity, in spite of its intentions to the contrary, became a means of re-conceptualising 'mute' indigenous spirits and images as 'gods' one could believe in in the same way as one could have faith in God. The very process of ultimately renouncing native 'gods', as demanded by the Baptist movement, could make the loss of traditional knowledge somehow 'real' for these former atheists. At the point of destruction, indigenous metaphysics could be thought of as 'ours' rather than as 'lies'. The mission, on the other hand, provided an opportunity for people to pray for order in their community and country and, in so doing, to feel involved in public life in the here and now.
- 61 Orthodox Christianity, in turn, was not clearly associated with the direct condemnation of native practices and was used as a new framework for indigenous ideas of spirituality. It transformed the status of these ideas, which had been half-forgotten and half-dismissed during the Soviet period, from marginal, indigenous people's beliefs into values shared with wider society. Anna Nerkagi's model of the 'one faith' and the 'sacred hierarchy', and other converts' discovery of similarities between Russian and native paganism, were cases in point.
- 62 Whether rural people on Yamal merely underwent baptism (as some young Nenets men had done during their military service), or embraced a particular form of Christianity, Christianisation and contestation over 'the people's soul' circumscribed a political realm where people creatively engaged with the newly available symbolic map. Both Orthodox Christian and Baptist converts simultaneously partook in imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity and both drew on semantic memory acquired during the previous epoch. In so doing they reproduced in new, religious guises conceptual power structures and ideas that were forged by the Soviet order.

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## Notes

- 1 The ethnographic data for this article was mainly collected during fieldwork on Yamal in 2000-2001 financed by the Danish Research Academy and Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
- 2 Northern Yamal peninsula, 2001.
- 3 Cf. e.g. Kan (1996) on the Alaska Tlingit in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Also, see Wiget & Balalaeva (2007) on the contemporary Khanty.
- 4 The term ‘totalitarian sects’ was first coined by the Russian Orthodox activist Aleksandr Dvorkin in 1993. See Dvorkin (2000, pp. 30-44, 58-59). The ‘totalitarian’ quality of religious organisations is attributed to their imputed goal of seizing power in Russia and/or achieving world domination, and to their links with international business, the mass media, organised crime and terrorism. For a detailed discussion of the origins of the concept of ‘spiritual security’ in Russian federal law in the early 1990s, see Elkner 2005. As Elkner has pointed out, the notion of spiritual security emphasised a radical break with the Soviet paradigm of security – a move away from Soviet atheism and towards recognition of ‘spirituality’ as a Russian cultural value. The Russian Orthodox Church then publicly joined forces with the state (and FSB) in defending Russia’s spiritual security and by the 2000s had become one of its key advocates.
- 5 See e.g. Lindquist (2000), Vakhtin (2009), to mention but a few.
- 6 According to the anonymous reviewer of this article, Vakhtin’s example comes from the field diary of Golovko.
- 7 A perception of the Soviet order as monolithic and uniform across different environments was common among my interlocutors on Yamal. In response to my request for information about Soviet life in the tundra, one of my of tundra hosts, an independent reindeer herder on northern Yamal, replied that there was nothing much to tell : ‘What do you want to know ? You know that life yourself, you were also a young pioneer, and a Comsomol member, you went to a Soviet school...’.
- 8 See Khodarkovsky (2001) for a general overview of missionary activities in the Russian North.
- 9 Šemanovskii (2005, p. 21).

10 See Walters (1993, pp. 22-26) and Paxson (2005, p. 93) on Orthodox church-goers in mainland Russia.

11 A *čum* (in Russian) is a Nenets and Khanty tee-pee like mobile dwelling made of wooden poles and reindeer hides.

12 See also Wiget & Balalaeva (2007) on the Khanty-Mansi Okrug.

13 The Church has established close cooperation with all levels of government. Chaplains were set up in prisons and military units throughout Russia.

14 Wiget & Balalaeva (2007, p. 6) make a similar observation for the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug.

15 In the village where the mission was situated, it had some twenty to thirty regular members, most of them Nenets, and there were also a few followers in the tundra.

16 ‘Workers of the world, unite!’ was written on the state emblem of the Soviet Union.

17 The term ‘small people’ is often used in Russia when referring to the indigenous minorities of the Russian North.

18 Nerkagi (1996, p. 232).

19 See *e.g.* Wright & Hill 1986, Balzer 1999.

### ***Pour citer cet article***

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### ***Droits d’auteur***

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### ***Résumés***

#### **Une bataille pour les âmes : christianisation, millénarisme et sentiments d'appartenance dans la péninsule du Yamal, en Russie**

Le renouveau religieux est une des caractéristiques des vastes changements idéologiques qu’a vécus la Russie postsoviétique. Cet article aborde la question de l’influence des nouveaux courants religieux – l’ÉGLISE orthodoxe et une dénomination évangélique que la première condamne – sur les habitants indigènes de Yamal au tournant du millénaire. Plutôt que de les considérer, comme c’est souvent le cas tant dans les médias que dans certains travaux de sciences sociales, comme de simples idéologies appelées à remplir le vide postsoviétique, nous montrerons comment les nouveaux discours religieux confrontent et ressuscitent les traditions indigènes dans des contextes nouveaux, tout en redéployant certaines images et formes sociales soviétiques. Le fait que les gens fassent appel à la mémoire sémantique dans des cadres religieux divers et opposés remet en cause la distinction entre des mouvements religieux innovants mobilisant des images évocatrices et un mode de religiosité caractérisé par une dévotion routinière et un savoir général (*cf.* Whitehouse 2000). Si les indigènes convertis

aux différentes églises partagent cette mémoire, ils sont aussi susceptibles d'entretenir des attitudes millénaristes qui coexistent simultanément avec des dispositions synchrétiques et la négation totale de la tradition indigène.

Religious revival has consistently shown itself to be a central characteristic of broader ideological shifts in post-Soviet Russia. This article discusses how new religious currents – Orthodox Christianity and a Protestant denomination condemned by the Church – affected rural indigenous dwellers on Yamal at the turn of the millennium. It contends that rather than simply filling a post-Soviet ideological vacuum, as is often suggested in mass media and social scientific literature, new religious discourses challenged and resurrected native traditions for new purposes as well as revoked certain Soviet images and social forms. People's reliance on semantic memory in diverse and mutually hostile religious frameworks overrides a distinction between innovative religious movements characterised by evocative images and a doctrinal mode of religiosity based on routinised forms of worship and 'general knowledge' (cf. Whitehouse 2000). While sharing this memory, indigenous converts of different denominations may profess millenarian attitudes that coexist with both 'syncretic' dispositions and the complete negation of native tradition.

***Entrées d'index***

***Mots-clés*** : évangélisme, orthodoxie, millénarisme, authenticité culturelle

***Keywords*** : evangelism, orthodoxy, religious revival, cultural authenticity

***Géographique*** : Arctique, Sibérie septentrionale, Yamal