

SERGEI SHTYRKOV

Orthodox Traditionalism in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania: The Ethnicization of Religion as the “Internal Mission” of the Russian Orthodox Church

Translation by Jan Surer

Sergei Shtyrkov — Professor, European University in St. Petersburg; Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (“Kunstkamera”) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg, Russia). shtyr@eu.spb.ru

An especially important concept with which religion has been linked in the public consciousness, and on which it directly depends, remains the concept of tradition. “Traditionalism” is a quality directly related to the characteristics implicitly ascribed to “real” religion: invariability, orderliness, the ability to provide a model of stability to a changing society, which is subject to rapid, painful transformations, and is thus in need of ideal paradigms of guaranteed stability and historical rootedness. The central focus of this article is the information policy of the structures of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. This ‘inculturation’ policy seeks to create an image of the Ossetian people as the natural vessel of an ancient Orthodox culture, inherited from their ancestors, the Alans, who accepted Christianity in the tenth century. This kind of “ethnicization of Orthodoxy” — that is, the effort to overcome the ironclad associative link between the concepts of “Russianness” and “Orthodoxy” in order to present the latter as the “native faith” of non-Russian ethnic groups — represents a marked tendency in some Russian Orthodox eparchies’ religious policy.

Keywords: North Ossetia, inculturation, internal mission, traditionalism, native religion, the Vladikavkaz and Alania Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church.

“We must revive the Alanian Orthodox tradition, created and preserved by our ancestors, which has been established and continues to permeate our culture.” — Fr. Igor (Kusov) (“Osetiny dolzhny pochuvstvovat” 2014: 23)

*“Does folk tradition conflict with strict Christian theology? And is there a place in the Orthodox soul for the customs of hoary antiquity?” — from the film *The Alans: A New Testament* (2014).*

TODAY few anthropologists and sociologists of religion will dispute that religion (or what we are accustomed to call religion) in the contemporary world is not doomed necessarily to surrender its claims under the pressure of ideological competitors — secular liberal humanism, positivist modern European science, and nationalism. Religion is proving capable of winning people’s minds and hearts, and, what is more, often does so through an alliance with its former opponents. But the semantic content of the concept of religion in the public consciousness has changed in these new circumstances. Under these conditions religious ideas and practices do not simply recover lost ground but change their forms and functions. In the course of the “construction of social reality,” religion, acting in concert with other “powerful” concepts of the social imaginary — the nation, the people, spirituality, faith, science, and knowledge — enters into an interdependent relationship with them. And an especially important concept with which religion has been linked in the public consciousness, and on which it directly depends, remains the concept of tradition.

“Tradition” refers not only to the longstanding formula “the traditional religions,” a formula absent from Russian legislation but present in the social imaginary of many Russians and directly indicating the special status enjoyed by four confessions in comparison with other religious movements and groups. (I remind the reader that the enumeration of “Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism” in the preamble to the federal law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” of September 26, 1997 [No. 125-F3] concludes with the phrase “and other religions, constituting an inalienable part of the historical inheritance of the peoples of Russia,” which renders this list essentially open.) “Traditionalism” is a quality directly related to the characteristics implicitly ascribed to “real” religion: invariability, orderliness, the ability to provide a model of stability to a changing society, which is subject to rapid, painful transformations, and is thus in need of ideal paradigms of guaranteed stability and historical rootedness. Indeed, for the majority of our contemporaries, re-

ligion, in order to bear that title legitimately (in contrast to, say, cults and sects), must correspond to notions of something ancient, unchanging, and conservative, in other words, to certain traditionalist orientations.

I designate as “traditionalism” an ideology that supposes that the most favorable situation for the preservation and development of this or that social group is the affirmation of the way of life that existed in the group’s history. Any external, spontaneous borrowings, unsanctioned by internal experts and, as judged by advocates of traditionalism, not in accord with the spirit of tradition, are regarded as destructive and threatening to the group’s very existence as an independent collective entity with its own interests and trajectory of historical development.

Typically, a traditionalist ideology is characterized by alarmist assertions regarding the contemporary situation of the world in general and especially of the group whose advocates are concerned about its survival. The present practices characteristic of the group appear corrupted through the carelessness of the community’s members, and/or through the ill-intentioned actions of those deemed personally interested in making fundamental change to the community, change that threatens to convulse the foundations of social identity. A less drastic interpretation of the causes of change in the positively valued way of life may be the “natural deterioration” of the mechanisms that support community life and require urgent repair and enhancement. Traditionalism, seeming to be a conservative ideology but functioning as a persuasive means of legitimizing social initiatives, in its concrete forms can become a revolutionary political program, calling for the radical revision of the established social system (even in those cases when it is proposed by or imposed on society by political elites). In the sphere of religious life, leaders of many groups — including reconstituted groups, such as new Protestant churches or congregations, which (re)establish ancient doctrinal and ritual systems — use traditionalism as a basis for social action.¹

1. I am interpreting the term “traditionalism” here somewhat more broadly than does Pavel Nosachev (Nosachev 2013), for example. Nosachev, largely following Mark Sedgwick (Sedgwick 2004), sees in traditionalism a well-defined political and/or religious ideology that can be traced back to the French thinker René Guénon and that has as its proponents Julius Evola, Corneliu Codreanu, and Alexander Dugin. To my thinking, such a complex of views is a variation of a more general strategy of the social construction of reality, based on the essentialization of tradition and the use of this concept for the legitimization of social action. The question of the influence of traditionalism in the narrow sense of this word on the contemporary traditionalist mode of thought and on social activism is exceptionally important and requires special study. Among channels already noted by Sedgwick for the dissemination of Guénon-like traditionalism among academic and near-academic circles, I note the works of Mircea Eliade, which have significantly changed the conventional understanding of the correct way to study religion. (For more detail see Allen 2001.)

The phenomenon of ethnic religious traditionalism is naturally attracting the attention of contemporary social anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of religion, and even political scientists, given the extent to which attempts to embrace ancestral religion in today's hyper-modernized society are so outwardly striking and intellectually provocative. Usually at issue in this context are projects to create or re-establish so-called ethnic religions, which serve simultaneously as the symbol and foundation of nationalist (here and subsequently I use this word in its neutral sense) protest against the hegemony of world religions — Christianity, Buddhism, Islam — and the colonial “empires” standing behind them. Representatives of the “great” institutional religions, however, confronting (or even pre-empting) criticism from religious particularists, find themselves capable of offering society their own versions of what constitutes the genuine religious traditions of this or that ethnic group and/or nation. Such projects require rather serious efforts in the production and distribution of information. And perhaps the most complicated task in this social arena is the creation of an image of a world religion as the natural ally and even guarantor of the preservation and development of ethnic cultures. The solution to this problem entails a quite complex semantic game concerning the concepts employed by ideologists of religious nationalism, understood here both as a political program that promotes the utmost convergence of the ethnic and the confessional, and as the logic of a social imaginary (or of socialization at the grassroots level²) that sees in the so-called traditional religions a salvific means of defense against the expansion of the global information society.

The central focus of the present investigation is the information policy of the official structures of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, now represented by the Vladikavkaz and Alania Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP). This policy seeks to create an image of the Ossetian people as the natural vessel of an ancient Orthodox culture, inherited from their ancestors, the Alans, who accepted Christianity in the tenth century. (About 20 years ago in North Ossetia Archpriest Boris Kaloev had already tried unsuccessfully to establish an ethnically oriented Ossetian Orthodox Church [Mitrokhin 2001].) For a more complete understanding of the current project's social context, I shall show in addition the kind of criticism the project elicits from its natural rivals in the field of ethno-religious initiatives.

2. I understand religious nationalism here as a particular approach to understanding social reality, an approach that asserts that the human being normally acquires religious identity along with ethnicity in the course of initial socialization (for more detail see Shtyrkov 2011: 234).

The Vladikavkaz and Alania Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, was established in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania on December 26, 2012, by a decision of the Holy Synod. The new eparchy arose as a result of the division of the Vladikavkaz and Makhachkala Eparchy, created in 2011. This eparchy, in turn, had been constructed from some parts of the Stavropol and Baku Eparchies that had existed before that time. Archbishop Zosima (Ostapenko) heads the eparchy; before his appointment to the Vladikavkaz see, he served more than 25 years in Kalmykia (including 15 years as bishop). At the beginning of 2013, the Vladikavkaz Eparchy encompassed 29 parishes, and the eparchal staff included 52 clergy (15 archpriests, 22 priests, seven hieromonks, two hierodeacons, one protodeacon, and five deacons) (Gagloev 2013: 31).

Amid competition with the ideology of secular ethnic nationalism and given active attempts by groups of Ossetian religious traditionalists to present to society their own understandings of the Ossetian cultural inheritance, Orthodox activists cannot take full advantage of the support shown them by republic-level, much less federal, authorities. Rather, they are disinclined to display the existence of this support openly and consistently as the chief argument justifying their right to spiritual hegemony. Should they do so, they would perforce evoke the image of the contemporary Russian “symphony” between secular and religious authority, an image dominant in the public consciousness. This picture, in turn, would inevitably arouse protest against Orthodoxy as the religion of the ethnic majority, the Russians, who, neighborly though they may be, are nonetheless outsiders. At a minimum they do not care about preserving the local ethnic culture, and at worst they seek to fully homogenize the spiritual life of the country and the world.

The supposed absence of malign intent in the assimilation process does not redeem the situation to any significant extent from the perspective of ethnic traditionalism. The patronizing tendency of the majority’s leaders to dissolve all cultures in their own, even if it is the most beautiful culture, is perceived as an attempt, fraught with the most unfortunate consequences, to suffocate the “little brothers” in a friendly embrace. That said, it is very important to stress that there are no outspoken anti-Russian sentiments in the statements of those who regard the expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church’s presence in Ossetian life cautiously or even with hostility. Moreover, I repeatedly witnessed the lively, sincere protest aroused when Church representatives attributed such views — “The traditionalists think that Christianity is an alien Russian imposition” (Zosima 2011) — to the Church’s critics.

In addition, focus on the supra- and extra-national nature of Christian teachings sometimes turns out to be inappropriate, since such a policy is perceived as covert Russification, and, moreover, it diverges from the main vector of the applied sociology of the ROC MP. This sociology builds on attention to the ethnic diversity of the flock and on ideas about the natural, enduring existence of civilizational constants. Therefore, the predominant direction in the representation of the work of Orthodox eparchal structures asserts that the main activity of the Church in the republic proceeds toward preservation of the ethnic cultural inheritance (linguistic, architectural, literary, folkloric, and so forth), and social programs directed toward all the republic's inhabitants, regardless of their religious confession. Then, too, these Church structures are portrayed as guarantors of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional peace in Ossetia.

Special attention is devoted to the Church's participation in projects aimed directly or indirectly at the conservation of the Ossetian language and the widening of its sphere of use (real and/or symbolic), also including its use in various facets of Orthodox Church life, such as sermons, saints' lives, and hymnography. Briefly characterizing this aspect of the public relations policy of the Vladikavkaz Eparchy, its secretary Fr. Savva Gagloev noted: "The eparchal leadership has in essence announced a new Church missionary strategy, at the basis of which lies the principle of inculturation, that is, the grounding of Orthodoxy in the local culture, and the overcoming of the breach between the Christian religion and the culture of the local population" (Gagloev 2013a: 92). I note, by the way, that "the grounding of Orthodoxy in the local culture" occurs to a significant extent retrospectively — the policy Christianizes not only the Ossetians of today but also their historical and cultural inheritance, that is, the "property" of their ancestors. And this means that their ancestors themselves, who receive a definite identity from their descendants, are Christianized. In other words, a paradoxically inverted process of cultural inheritance is taking place, one that is quite different from our typical understanding of the process. Furthermore, this policy reduces the contemporary "daily plebiscite," that is, the choice of religious confession, cultural identity, and political loyalty made by the residents of Ossetia, to a singular historical event — the acceptance of Christianity — and the choice is located in the distant past. This permits Archbishop Zosima to speak of "the Orthodox faith as the historical choice of the majority of the inhabitants of this ancient land" (Zosima 2013: 5). By the way, as American anthropologist Jonathan Friedman noted: "[W]e may say that history is an imprinting of the present onto the past. In this sense, all history including modern historiography is mythology" (Friedman 1992: 837).

The empirical foundation of the present investigation consists of my observations of church life over many years in the city of Vladikavkaz, which now proceeds within the institutional framework of the reestablished Vladikavkaz Eparchy, and also in two monasteries in the republic — the Alanian Monastery of the Epiphany (a women's monastery) and the Alanian Monastery of the Assumption (a men's monastery). In addition, I bring in materials from my interviews with Orthodox activists and their ideological allies and also with their opponents from the ranks of the religious traditionalists. The most important part of my material consists of the newspaper and television reports concerning events in the cultural life of North Ossetia-Alania, Church and traditional holidays, and recordings of conferences and roundtables conducted by both religious and secular authorities.

One of the most important campaigns in the “Christianization” of the Ossetian cultural heritage evoked especially heated public debate and dramatically heightened the level of religious reflection among the republic's residents regardless of their ethnic and confessional affiliation. The campaign sought to demonstrate that Ossetian village shrines (the so-called *dzuars*) were Christian holy sites (some of them really were ancient churches or chapels) that through different historical circumstances had fallen into disuse but now are being restored by the Orthodox Church. The claim that these structures were erected or reputedly used at one time as Christian churches is the subject of bitter dispute. (See, for example, the detailed refutation of the Christian origin of the famous Nuzal Chapel, one of the major picturesque symbols of Ossetian Orthodoxy [Dzhanaity 2007: 108–13; 130–31].) For the resolution of these questions I rely on the conclusions and observations made in the recent book by Denis Beletsky and Andrei Vinogradov (2011). The history of Christianity in Ossetia, known in one form or another to the main participants in this social arena, determines the specifics of the context of such campaigns.

The particularities of the Ossetian people's history, namely, the acceptance of Christianity by the ancestors of today's Ossetians no later than the tenth century — soon Ossetia will celebrate 1100 years of Alanian Christianity (for the history of Christianity in Alania, see Beletskii and Vinogradov 2011: 15–65) — followed by the “exodus” of the institutional church from Ossetia after several centuries of its presence (this event is often dated to the fifteenth century), shaped the landscape of the people's religious life in subsequent centuries. Left without its pastors, the flock found itself without nourishment for several centuries, that is, it was left to its own devices or, rather, to the care of local elite families. This deprived the Ossetians of more than just the “instructive word,” the spiritual supervision by the institu-

tional Church. In fact, for many years they ceased to be even nominal Christians, in that there was no one to baptize them or to conduct the Eucharist. The spread of Islam among some Ossetians contributed additional facets to the development of the situation.

When the Russian empire began its expansion into the Caucasus, many of its representatives regarded the Ossetians as “natural” allies in the subjugation of the “hostile” Muslim mountain peoples, for the preaching of Islam had achieved very limited success in Ossetia and, to the contrary, in Ossetian culture there were observed easily discernible traces of Eastern Christian heritage. Accordingly, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, the secular and ecclesiastical authorities strove especially to return Ossetia to the bosom of Orthodoxy, motivated by, among other things, if not mainly, ideas of a political character. The so-called Ossetian Religious Commission was established within the framework of this campaign, followed by a network of church parishes. The campaign also produced the first translations into the Ossetian language of biblical, didactic, and liturgical texts, completed first in the Georgian and then in the Cyrillic scripts, and other items. The active promulgation of Christianity and the inconsistent, but nonetheless stubborn, attempts to introduce elementary religious discipline with respect to catechization and participation in the sacraments did not change the general portrait of the religious life of the mountain Ossetians, however: even well-disposed observers saw the Ossetians as Christians “only in outward appearance,” as the beloved but foolish children of the Mother Church, inclined at any convenient opportunity to return to their ancestral, half-pagan customs. Here is the way one of the proponents of the Christian enlightenment of the Ossetians, the priest Kharlampii (Khadzyrat) Tsomaev, described the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century: “Ossetia was enlightened by Christian teaching very rapidly but not very deeply; it was insufficiently grounded in the truth of the Christian faith. Ossetian hearts and minds did not make the spirit of Christian teaching, so to speak, their own” (Slanov 1999: 10).

One can quite easily find evidence, if desired, that established Orthodox practice had not penetrated very thoroughly, to put it mildly, in segments of Orthodox religious life uncontrolled by the Church. Coverage of the celebration of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God in one of the Ossetian villages serves as a good illustration of this:

It is a joyous holiday. In North Ossetia they are celebrating the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God. In the national tradition they call this holiday *Mady Mairam baragbon*. There are shrines to Mother Mary (*Mady*

Mairam) in every valley of the republic. Hundreds of people come to them on the holiday. The traditional three pies, meat from sacrificed animals, and Ossetian beer. The republic's inhabitants pray for the health and well-being of their families (...). Every valley in both the south and the north of Ossetia has shrines to Mother Mary. Every year on September 21, the day marking the birth of the Holy Mother of God, this holiday is celebrated in all regions of the republic. People ask the saint for success and prosperity for their families. The elder offers a prayer to the Holy Mother of God. On the table there are the three traditional pies, Ossetian beer, and the meat of a sacrificed animal. Every year hundreds of people gather at the shrine in Mairamadag on this holiday. They ask for a blessing on their children.

Rozita Kh., a resident of the village of Mairamadag: "Every year we get together like this. We come here to pray for our children, for peaceful lives for them, so that on the roads they will not, will not die, so that each one that leaves home will return home safe and sound."

Residents from other villages as well come to Mairamadag to pray to the Most Holy Mother of God.

Kaspolat D., a resident of the village Gizel: "Today we came here because we have a woman who is ill. She had an operation and she got better. With the help of doctors, with the help of God. In general everything comes from God. And so we came, to pray to the gods, to pray to the Virgin Mary, so that she will always help not only this sick woman but everyone" ("Prazdnik Mady Mairam" 2013).

We can with a great degree of certainty say that the authors of this material did not try intentionally to emphasize the "non-canonical" aspects of what was going on. Both the text of the report and the video footage — men at prayer with a mug of Ossetian beer or a glass of Ossetian vodka (*arak*) in their hands, children going in a circle around a tree on which numerous votive ribbons hang, and women fastening up these ribbons — give quite a clear picture of contemporary Ossetian holiday culture, in which both the Orthodox icon and the meat from a sacrificial calf play an organic role.

Unsurprisingly, Church and secular analysts can easily point to elements in Ossetians' religious life that correspond to Eastern Christian culture and, most likely, are derived from it, but they also find practices and beliefs which it is very problematic (and for some — undesirable) to trace back to Christianity. Active proponents of the re-establishment of the Orthodox faith among the Ossetians often declare that these "unchristian" practices are external, superficial borrowings or dying vestiges of Paganism, subject to elimination.

One of the most complicated questions debated among eparchal representatives and their opponents is the problem of the confessional provenance of the above-mentioned shrines (*dzuars*), including the shrine of Mother Mary just noted. As has already been mentioned, one can define the shrines as village holy places, whose veneration is expressed through pilgrimages to them, consisting of visiting the shrines during a time set apart on the calendar to do so and/or journeys to them in fulfillment of a vow. In both cases the pilgrimage entails votive offerings and participation in a ritual feast (*kuvde*), set up in immediate proximity to the shrine in a special structure (*kuvandon*). As a variation on this practice one can find the custom of visiting the venerated site with food for a ritual meal (*kuvinag*). The special elements of this meal are three pies, three ribs of an animal brought as a sacrifice in honor of the holiday, and Ossetian beer. This food is blessed in the shrine, after which it is taken home, where the main part of the ritual feast takes place.

In contemporary conditions these pilgrimages have altered certain of their structural and functional characteristics. For example, whereas earlier a group of pilgrims setting off was mainly a family or part of a larger group of relatives, now it is often an association of neighbors who live in one city building or around one courtyard. Moreover, some shrines, previously venerated on the local level of the village or gorge, became in practice national shrines, as happened with the shrines of the Grove of Khetag (*Khetadzhi k'okh*) and of Rekom. I shall allow myself to give one more example of the modernization of these customs. On the holiday at the Dziri Shrine (*Dziri dzuar*) in June 2014 it was decided to revive the ancient tradition of the horse races. And a girl won the race. This fact, reported and celebrated by a local television company, clashes to a certain extent with the traditional delineation of gender roles in Ossetian holiday culture, not to mention that the shrine at which the holiday took place is considered a men's shrine, and women are forbidden to enter it. But in any case, both earlier and now, an important aspect of the veneration of shrines is the observance (or the establishment of the necessity of this observance) of special prohibitions and instructions (a prohibition on taking anything out of a shrine, and, for many holy sites, a ban against women visiting them), as well as a narrative "accompaniment" to the worship: tales about the origin of the holy site, about miraculous aid to those who turned to the shrine, and about the misfortunes that befell those who desecrated the shrines or who simply accidentally violated their sacred status.

The question of the shrines' origin is an important one in the context of our discussion. The fact is that some (if not many) of these are an-

cient churches and chapels, sometimes very much in ruins. Through the centuries they functioned as village holy places and, accordingly, were not under the institutional Church's care. In this context, there are at a minimum two points that provoke a clash of opinions and interests. The first concerns the reconstruction of the shrines' origins. While regarding some of the shrines it is known that in their history there was definitely a "church" period (whether this was historically prior is another question); one cannot say this about others. But neither can one rule out this possibility. This gives grounds to suspect that nearly all the Ossetian sites now revered by Ossetians were once sites of Christian worship.

In connection with this, the following problem arises: even if a shrine was at one time, say, an Orthodox chapel, to whom should it belong now? To the Orthodox Church, proclaiming its right to inherit the material memory of ancient Alanian Christianity? Or to the local residents, who have piously honored the holy place through the dark (or to some, on the contrary — the enlightened) decades and centuries of its unchurched history? Discussions along these lines have arisen concerning a whole series of shrines: the so-called Nuzal Church (*khram*), the chapels near the village of Kharisdzhin (or, if using a different naming system, the sanctuaries *Tsæzziuy Mairæm*), the shrine (*dzuar*) at Dzivgis, and others. The problem is acute, because the shrines and pilgrimage to them represent the unique quintessence of Ossetian religious life, however one defines its confessional nature. The way in which the shrines embody Ossetian piety and inscribe it on the local landscape, anchoring the people and their faith to their native land, is especially important. The ancient stone (less often, wooden) shrines, erected on the steep slopes of the gorges, are becoming the symbol of Ossetia and its ancient culture.

The words of Archbishop Zosima illustrate well the importance of incorporating the ancient holy sites into the contemporary practice of regular Orthodox life: "Praying in the Nuzal Church [*khram*], [I] feel all the more deeply the rootedness of Christianity in this land, where the Lord has blessed me to fulfill my service" (Archbishop Zosima 2013a). In these circumstances, current attempts to create a coherent image of ancient Ossetian Christian tradition seem a completely logical way not only to legitimize the institutional presence of the Orthodox Church in the republic, but also to win the exclusive right to act as the caretaker for the preservation of the authentic ethnic heritage, especially the shrines. In the opinion of Orthodox activists, one reason among others that one ought to support the idea of the rootedness of Christianity in the Ossetian land is that "historical Alania was the most ancient cradle of Christianity in all of Russia" (Besolov 2013: 40).

Special efforts are being expended on the production of a maximally convincing visual portrait of ancient Alanian Orthodoxy. In public presentations and eparchal publications, the use of images of ancient chapels and major works of folk art containing Christian symbols, especially the sculptures of independent artist Soslanbek Edziev, amid the received portrait of “mountain civilization,” that is, in a series of depictions of native towers and postcard vistas of the gorges, creates in the viewer the assurance that the Orthodox heritage is inseparable from the national (ethnic) heritage. The arguments of confessional traditionalists make wide use of a rhetorical construction built on the idea of the deep engrafting of this or that religion into an ethnic culture, to the extent that it is impossible to isolate the doctrinal elements from the fabric of the people’s life. Here is an Ossetian example: “Ossetians of all confessions assimilated many norms of Christian morality so deeply that these norms are understood as primordially national” (Dzeranov 2013: 144).

Indeed, the visual image of the church inscribed on the national landscape serves as an exceptionally convincing metaphor for the idea of the inseparability of Orthodoxy from the fabric of the people’s life. This trend of traditionalization originated when the literary and visual-arts version of the national landscape — “the little church on the river” — was established in Russian high art (see Ely 2002: 118–21). These images are meant to evoke patriotic rapture in the viewers, the dominant emotional note in their rapture being pious nostalgia. In contemporary culture this method of conveying ideas of the inseparability of religion and landscape to a large extent follows the policy of cultural heritage preservation conducted during the last three decades of the Soviet Union’s existence, and which, in the years preceding perestroika, was imbued with the bright colors of ethnic nationalism and religious revivalism (Kormina and Shtyrkov, forthcoming).

It is especially important that representatives of Vladikavkaz Eparchy, with the (albeit not always consistent) support of the republic’s major mass media organs (which are loyal to the government), produce a portrait of the Orthodox Church as the main, natural purveyor of reliable information to new generations of the republic’s inhabitants about their ancestors’ legacy. Eparchal functionaries’ supervision of the social program “The Heritage of Alania” in the republic, which works with young people, including those in orphanages, is quite illuminating in this regard. In local television programs the directors of the heritage program take on the role of those who acquaint children with their traditions, that is, as if they were actual parents, whose role in the upbringing of new generations of Ossetians receives unflinching emphasis

through praise of families as guardians of traditional religious and national values. Take what was stated in a program on the republic's television channel "Alania" in a news report (November 21, 2013) about a pilgrimage, one of whose major goals was to visit the famous shrine Mady Mairam (or, the Chapel of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God) in the village of Kharisdzhin. (Let me mention again that the shrine's "religious identity" is the subject of bitter dispute):

The Patriotic Education and International Relations Committee of the Youth Parliament of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania continues to implement the program "The Heritage of Alania." The program includes the organization of excursions for young people to sites that commemorate historical Alania. Yesterday, North Ossetian youth visited the ancient churches (*khramy*) of Kurtatin Gorge. (...) Charges of the orphanage "Khury tyn (Sun Ray)" and attendees of the "School of Ossetian Traditions," Youth Parliament deputies, representatives of the republic's media, and university students participated. Having scaled the steep, elevated slopes of Kurtatin Gorge, the excursion participants reached the first stop on their itinerary, the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God. Here they listened with rapt attention to the story told by an experienced tour-guide and researcher with the Institute of History and Archaeology, Felix Kireev, who stressed that the ancient Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God was an especially revered place for all inhabitants of Ossetia. [Pyotr Pavlov, chairman of the Youth Parliament's Patriotic Education and International Relations Committee, Orthodox activist]: "In the children's eyes (...) I don't know (...) we saw what seemed to be a reverent awe before this holy place. When the children learned that this church was basically really the same age as Russian statehood and also a contemporary of Alanian statehood — of course, none of the trip's participants could forget this." According to (...) Pyotr Pavlov, the purpose of the trip was to remind the young people of their religious roots, to socialize the children from the orphanage, and also to attract attention to religious monuments on the territory of Ossetia today, and to unite people regardless of their confession around national shrines. [A teenage girl from the orphanage]: "When we reached the top (...) and when we went into the little church (...) when we went inside, I knelt and prayed to God for health, and so that people (...) well, would not be in need and for children in orphanages — that they would find homes (...) well, families."

In the above quotations, there is much that is revealing — both the representation of a local shrine as pertaining to all Ossetia, and the

declaration of Orthodox holy sites as national ones. But the theme of children seems especially important. Excursions for young people to ancient holy places produce a colorful, evocative surge of traditionalist emotions, material that ideally combines the fundamental semantic units of religious nationalism: the ritual purity of ethnic origins and hope for a bright future for the nation. Such a representational strategy may be called a policy of “soft power,” with its harnessing of powerful images for a singular, indirect influence on the social imagination.

It must be noted that such initiatives do not receive a warm welcome from all the republic’s inhabitants. This is not a matter of the Muslim community, whose leaders seek to avoid conflict with the “dominant” confession. The more consistent critics of the Orthodox redaction of Ossetian culture and spiritual heritage are the advocates of the establishment (or re-establishment) of the particular ethnic religion of the Ossetians, sometimes known as “native faith” advocates (*rodnoveriy*), by analogy with East Slavic religious traditionalists. In the republic itself, though, they are known as “holy faith ones (*uasdinovtsy*),” from the Ossetian “*uas din* (holy faith).” I realize that this term seems artificial to a certain degree, since existing organizations of Ossetian “native faith” advocates have other names and, moreover, many proponents of the idea of Ossetian folk religion act outside defined institutions and prefer to be called simply “Ossetians,” just as many Evangelicals try to avoid terminology that links them to specific Protestant denominations and call themselves simply “Christians.” Therefore I use the term “holy faith-ers (*uasdinovtsy*)” in the absence of an alternative. (I tested its comprehensibility by using it in conversation with twenty people and was convinced that they understood me correctly.)

While on the subject, it is necessary to take into account that in the view of many activists of this project, it is not possible to speak of the creation or even the rebirth of folk religion in this context: “Even the people who participate in this movement are not ‘revivalists’; they are not ‘reviving’ anything. They are trying to preserve what has come down to our day from our forefathers: the culture, customs and morality that are based on traditional beliefs” (Makeev 2013). During our personal exchanges, “holy faith” advocates several times impressed upon me that the use of the “construction” metaphor to define their activity misrepresented their own understanding of this process: they cannot create something that objectively exists.

The native faith advocates, employing an alternative version of religious nationalism that fuses New Age ideology with the European “new right,” direct pointed criticism at Orthodox activists’ attempts to “get

their hands on” Ossetian culture. (The especially significant arguments in this regard concern the religious foundations — Christian or non-Christian — of Ossetians’ veneration of St. George (*Uastyrdzhi* or *Uasgergi*) and, of course, the problem of the rights to the shrines.) “In our day the Church (...) is trying to seize the Ossetian shrines, proclaiming them to be ancient chapels and churches. With outright falsifications they deceive their own parishioners as well as people far from Christianity” (Morgoev 2014: 223). Attempts by Orthodox activists to assert the Christian past of the Grove of Khetag, sacred to all Ossetians, are received especially bitterly:

“It is unacceptable to say in an online conference — publicly and with complete confidence — that there was a Christian chapel in the grove of the saint (...) the Ossetian (!) St. Khetag (...), [that] this is a confirmed historical fact. So they say! (...) This is absolutely not verified from anyone’s point of view — not according to the historians, nor to the archaeologists of Ossetia. So, when this is all put together, it gives a certain impression that there is a targeted campaign of sorts going on to equate with the Russian Orthodox Church something that has simply been influenced by the Christian ... that is, the Russian (...) Orthodoxy of the Ossetian religious system and has seen a gradual merging of personages and some holy places with the Russian Orthodox Church” (Professor Tamerlan Kambolov, *Pogovorim* 2010).

The same reaction arose in response to the claim by an Orthodox priest, Alexander Pikalev: “It is no secret that a chapel stood in the Grove of Khetag before the revolution” (*Pogovorim* 2010).

The native faith advocates see in Christianity in general, and in Orthodoxy in particular, a globalization project entailing the eradication of any ethnic particularities. To explain the spread of Christianity among the Ossetians, and generally among the world’s peoples, some traditionalists often employ conspiracy theories. Texts created by one of the most active leaders of the religious traditionalists, Daurbek Makeev, represent this position most consistently. Their purport in general terms is as follows: in the Bible tasks were formulated and placed before the Israelite people — to seize the lands and property of other peoples — and the methods of achieving these goals were the corruption of the peoples involved through “the discrediting and distortion” of traditional ethnic customs and beliefs. To Makeev, Christianity is the main instrument for the realization of this plan, which has already been set in motion at full power: “And they have already come to us,

to corrupt us” (Makeev 2007: 188). In a later text Makeev adds to a similar version of his understanding of world history the term “biblical project,” taken either directly or through an intermediate source from the essays of the so-called “interior predictor of the USSR” (See, for example, “*Sad*” *rastet sam?* 2009: 53). A similar view of Christianity is widely represented among proponents of the “Ariosophic” school of conspiracy theory (Bezverkhii 1998; Ivanov 1998; Istarkhov 2000); this group sees the Christian religion as a specific product of Jewish social engineering that “was exported to the Aryan world for its enslavement through the preaching of submissiveness and pacifism, and through the profane simplification of ancient knowledge” (Bagdasarian 2000: 23; for Christianity as the product of forces striving for world domination, see Shnirelman 2012: 22–24; 2002: 203).

The “native faith” version of religious traditionalism proposes the purification of everything Ossetian from the “external” veneer of Orthodoxy and the return of Ossetians to their pre-Christian past, to their “Indo-Aryan” spiritual roots, which had predetermined the greatness of contemporary civilization in opposition to Near Eastern religious teachings, with Christianity the most dangerous of the latter in the eyes of Ossetian native faith advocates. Characteristically, one of these traditionalist manifestoes, penned by Khetag Morgoev and published in 2006, has the eye-catching, aggressive title “The True Word against Christians.” Khetag is now a member of the “local religious organization of the traditional faith of the Ossetians,” *Ætsæg Din* (True Faith), an organization registered in 2009. (Morgoev’s article is available on several internet sites, including the site of the religious organization *Atsætæ*, headed by Daurbek Makeev. See Morgoev 2006.)

What eparchal activists regard as the creation of an ethnic version of Christianity, that is, as a unique “Ossetianization (Alanization)” of Orthodoxy, appears to proponents of the restoration of the primordial faith of their fathers as a reworking of ethnic tradition according to the pattern of Abrahamic globalism, bringing the people the prospective loss of the ethno-national culture’s distinctiveness and, moreover, westernization, both of which characterize the logic and rhetoric of contemporary ethno-national eschatology. But it is equally clear to both sides of the debate that one can conduct the argument about the real religion of the Ossetians only in ethno-cultural or even ethno-national terms. It was no accident that the title of the annual eparchal conference held from 2012 places on the same level the following key terms in this conceptual field: “Orthodoxy. Ethnos. Culture.” And a film made in 2013 with the blessing of Zosima, archbishop of

Vladikavkaz and Alania, *Fydæltý fændag* (*The Ancestral Way*, directed by Zita Khautova), and completely in the spirit of ethnic traditionalism, affirmed:

Deserted over the centuries, the riches and vast territories, the towns and populous villages that had vanished, did not result in the erasure of the ancestors' faith, which was preserved in the spiritual life of the people, who as far back as a millennium ago had so exquisitely and harmoniously united their ancient Indo-Iranian traditions with the teachings of Christ. This also became the foundation of our culture — a priceless treasure, passed down by generations of our ancestors, a treasure whose enjoyment is constrained by the short span of human life and the obligation of its future transmission to our descendants. Culture, the holy of holies of any nation in the world, is what with God's blessing distinguishes us from others, what makes us recognizable in this huge, multivarious, and very often hostile world. Culture is that which helps us to preserve ourselves.

The narrator speaks these words while the viewer sees on the screen pictures of the Caucasus mountains, Ossetian shrines, and the traditional holidays observed in them. (As for the film's description of the fusion of Indo-Iranian traditions with Christianity, it is interesting that here it touches on the historical debate about whether the true nature of European culture is "Indo-Aryan" or "Semitic." Arguments over this question, arising in the nineteenth century in academic circles [Olender 1992], took on a sharp political tone in the twentieth century in philippics against Christians by proponents of the idea of the rebirth of ethnic religions [Shtyrkov 2013].)

The head of the eparchy, who openly interprets traditional Ossetian practices at the great ritual feast (*kuvda*) in terms of the Christian divine service, also supports a similar representational approach. Accordingly, in the recently released film *The Alans: A New Testament*, he states: "What struck me (...) or so pleasantly surprised me, when I came to the Vladikavkaz and Makhachkala Eparchy, was the first Ossetian feast. This was not only because the spread was lavish, welcoming, and hospitable, but among all else here it had a liturgical aspect (...) as if it were a continuation of liturgical life. When the elder is seated at the table, he begins to tell not simply some jokes or funny stories there (...) but the person who is the oldest, who is respected, begins with prayer" (*The Alans* 2014. The film was made with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation).

In an interview with the republic's popular information channel *15th Region*, Archbishop Zosima drew this analogy still more decisively: "And the Ossetian feast thoroughly impressed me. Everything was not as it usually is among other peoples. I was astonished — the three pies, the cup ... You might say this was a liturgy! And the main thing is, the feast goes on not with songs and dances but it begins, continues, and ends with prayers. To be sure, because of the tragic history of this region much has been forgotten, much has been lost, but some root has remained! And regardless of who may try to wash it away, the link with Christianity is evident" (Zosima 2013). By the way, the polemical context explains the heat of his assertions. Over the course of the interview, Archbishop Zosima's interlocutors discussed, among other topics, the conflict surrounding one of the shrines, the chapel in the village of Kharisdzhin, located not far from the Alanian Monastery of the Assumption (I mentioned this above in connection with the young people's excursion to Kurtatin Gorge). This conflict turned bitter when, in August 2013, someone threw the icons out of the chapel and smashed a memorial stone. Although the perpetrators' names have not been announced publicly, everyone involved is convinced that they were traditionalists, many of whom react vehemently to the presence of icons in Ossetian shrines. The archbishop himself in the same interview called this incident a "violation of the boundaries" and an attempt "at the seizure of one religion's holy site by representatives of another religion" (Zosima 2013).

It is apparent that the argument between the two versions of religious traditionalism — that of the Orthodox and that of the "holy faith" (*uasdinovskii*) (once again I remind the reader of the complexity of using this term) — assumes that both sides understand the value of tradition and harness the same semantic potential inherent in the concept (stability, predictability, the source of protection against the excesses of headlong modernization, and the like). It seems that only its content changes depending on the person under consideration.

Parenthetically, while the situation described here is indeed unique, it is possible to find definite parallels. One can observe a similar picture to some extent in the Republic of Altai. The religious life of the Altaians has a very dramatic history. Tibetan Lamaism spread among their ancestors the Oirots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but then ties with Tibet were ruptured; and the Altaians remained without the spiritual leadership of a religious institution. There followed not unsuccessful missionaries' attempts to spread Orthodox Christianity in this region, the rise in 1904 of the traditionalist religious movement Burkhanism, and so forth (on Burkhanism see Filatov 2002; Znamenski 2005; Halemba

2006; and Arziutov 2007). Time's effect on the Buddhist heritage of the Altaians is the subject of huge debate. Some affirm that not even a trace remains and that the Altaians practice their "native" faith. Others think that Buddhist traces are quite numerous in Altaian culture and, consequently, it would be easy to revive it. Proponents of this position regard the colorful traditional piety of the Altaians as an idiosyncratic form of Buddhism, somewhat primitivized and tainted with vestiges of paganism (Halemba 2003; Filatov 2006; and Broz 2009: 24–25).

To return to the meaning of "tradition" in the Ossetian case, it seems to me, however, that the distinctive metaphysics of tradition differ essentially for the two sides in this dispute. To the extent that the metaphysics remain unexplicated, the impression is given that in principle the two views of traditionalism are mirror images of each other. But this, in my view, does not precisely reflect the actual state of the matter.

In order to understand the primary difference between the two approaches in question, I turn to the above-cited text by Khetag Morgoev. Arguing against one of those who denounced Ossetian religious "native faith," Morgoev with unconcealed irony asks: "Who then invented the Nart epic poems [*narstkie kadagi*], Ossetian religious hymns (...), who thought up these complex, beautiful acts of worship, replete with multifaceted meaning, and already largely incomprehensible to the layman?" Evidently, Morgoev thinks that answering this question is difficult, since all of this has existed essentially since the beginning of time. And with its primordial status, in its origin all but *une vérité première* (Sedgwick 2004: 23), Ossetian tradition stands in contrast to Christianity: "Who invented Christianity, however, is well known in detail. We know minutely who, when, and why someone invented the Christian holidays and dogmatics and even, moreover, what they ate and drank, who called whom what epithets, and who clashed with whom when debating whether the Son was equal to the Father or not, whether Mary was the mother of God, or whether to leave things as they were" (Morgoev 2014: 214–15). That is, Christianity appears as a historical subject, having arisen at a specific moment in the past, whereas the Ossetians' traditional faith is something extra-historical, in a certain respect eternal and unchanging. To be sure, Morgoev, a credentialed historian, is well-acquainted with academic discursive etiquette, which does not permit him to mystify the reader with universalist claims. But nevertheless, the presumed origins of Ossetian religion run more widely and deeply, in principle, than the Tradition (*traditio*) of Orthodox Christians, which is almost always "junior" in age and status to Scripture: "Our religious culture through its

roots goes out into the vast Indo-European spiritual world; and we are in fact the bearers of this culture” (Morgoev 2014: 217).

Daurbek Makeev describes Ossetian religious tradition in approximately the same words: “Upon attentive study of the Ossetians’ traditional religion one realizes that this is not a local religion; it is not the religion of a single people. The religion of the Ossetians is a little island that has been preserved, part of a global religion that bears a worldview associated with many peoples” (Makeev 2013). And again:

This is not only Ossetian (...). We have preserved something that is all-European. The whole world today has turned its eyes, ears, and heart to Ossetia to discover all of those roots, those values that once united us all. We are such an exceptional people, in that we have preserved these values (the artist Slava Dzhanayev, *Pogovorim* 2010).

And precisely both the reliance on the prehistoric image of the Indo-European spiritual heritage and the argument based on ethnolinguistics, in my view, allow Khetag Morgoev to rhetorically effect a transition to very forceful assertions about the universal nature of Ossetian religion:

Our conceptions about God (as also those about the archetype) point to the absolute universalism of God. This is not the God of the Ossetians or of someone else; this is the God of all and of everyone. The Ossetian word *Khutsau* conveys an idea of God, but this concept is specific only to this word alone. Nothing else can be called *Khutsau* (god). The lack of names attached to the idea *Khutsau* is an indication of its transcendence and of the high degree of development of abstract thought among the bearers of the given culture. The ineffability of a transcendent god in Ossetian religious tradition suggests its universalism. A god without names or material attributes (fetishes) that create, define, and link this image with a defined epoch (and consequently, add historicism to conceptions of this deity), culture, and language, and that reflect qualities characteristic of the epoch, culture, and so forth, is in the Ossetian worldview universal and all-encompassing (Morgoev 2014: 217–18).

Orthodox traditionalists imagine tradition as something historical, subject to change, and, possibly, even as something that must be changed to attain certain other aims more vital than tradition itself. Their view evokes deep suspicion among the ethnic traditionalists-fundamentalists. This suspicion finds support in familiar accusations

of “natural” duplicity directed against Orthodox missionary activity: “The Christian clergy know very well that Ossetian religion and Christianity have nothing in common. But nevertheless, you see, there is this missionary spirit (...) inherent in this religious system, in Christianity (...) it, well, it impels Christian activists to make these sorts of statements (...) that, you see, there is a direct congruence between our religion and Christianity” (Khetag Morgoev, *Pogovorim* 2010). Ethnic traditionalists understand that an instrumental approach to a nation’s cultural patrimony is potentially dangerous for the nation and its heritage. Such an approach is too rational and in this sense impervious to the charisma of genuine tradition, and even opposed to it. And here yet again the circumspect behavior and professionalism of the missionaries is contrasted with the intuition and “wisdom of the blood” of their opponents. (Perhaps the latter group’s inclination to esoteric terminology also reflects this discursive tension.)

The noteworthy Ossetian traditionalist philosopher Zaur Tsoraev in one of his papers commented with alarm upon eparchal initiatives to “inculturate” Orthodoxy in Ossetian culture, as articulated in the above-mentioned presentation by Fr. Savva Gagloev (whom he quotes as an opponent):

“The logic here is the following: ethnos, nation — they are perishing. The individual can be saved from nonexistence by communion with Christ, and therefore it is useless to care about what is doomed to destruction, that is, all other identities (...)” And right there, after reflections about the evanescence and ephemeral nature of ethnicity and nation, it says: “What has been said does not at all mean that Christianity underestimates the significance of culture in the formation and establishment of the individual and society. On the contrary, it is precisely ethnic tradition, it is precisely life in society that is the culturally formative dawn of man; it is the place where his ethos is formed, his habits, his worldview.” What then shall one accept as the primary foundation that defines the individual — communion with Christ or with the culture of the ethnos?

And later he concludes:

Everything that has been said allows one to conclude that they induce the Ossetian ethnos (...) to renounce itself, its own ancient culture (...). The authors of the new missionary policy want to unite Ossetian and Christian religion under the banner of “inculturation.” Moreover, according to Savva the priest, they “must be principled in defense of the

very essence of the faith of Christ, and show ‘economy’ (*ikonomiia*) and flexibility in less essential matters.” Recall that in Christianity the word economy signifies the principle of deciding church questions from a position of mercy, practical advantage, and convenience (Tsoraev 2013).

Paradoxically, these accusations that representatives of the Orthodox Church take a utilitarian approach to ethnic tradition (which, from the perspective of traditionalist fundamentalism, must not be used for purposes understood as more axiologically significant than the very existence of the ethnic unit) have their own inverted parallel. By this I mean the bitter bewilderment of many Orthodox believers who are beginning to understand that, for some guardians of the Orthodox faith, that faith is no more (but also no less) than a national tradition, which must be harnessed effectively for practical, mundane purposes — for example, to revitalize national greatness, or to directly attract material resources that can be put toward the accomplishment of this difficult task. This mirror image speaks volumes about the place Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church occupy in different Russian regions: in national regions the Church’s representatives must seek representational strategies that can legitimize missionary and catechetical activity among the titular majority, as it feels keenly the loss of its ethnic distinctiveness.

It is significant in this respect that Vladikavkaz Eparchy’s ongoing “inculturation” project replaced a completely different idea of the relations between Orthodoxy and Ossetian culture. While we can find similar attempts even before the start of the official campaign for the ethnicization of Orthodoxy, the general relationship of the Orthodox Church in North Ossetia to Ossetian traditional culture has represented a striking contrast to what we find in the speeches and actions of the current eparchal leaders. The statements of the priest Alexander Pikalev, who is responsible for missionary work in the republic (earlier I quoted his statement regarding the dispute over the Grove of Khetag), reflect this approach. Fr. Alexander frequently has to comment publicly, in newspapers and on radio and television, concerning almost all the above-mentioned questions.

It would be untrue to claim that Fr. Alexander consistently fought against the manifestation of Ossetian distinctiveness in the local variation of Orthodox practice. In the eyes of many people (including Orthodox Ossetians), however, he has gained a reputation as the persecutor of everything Ossetian. The reason for this impression lies in his idea of the nature of folk custom in relation to an ideal reli-

gious worldview and ideal religious behavior. With only a cursory look through Fr. Alexander's statements one can see that his discursive practices compel him to speak of folk custom, in this case, Ossetian custom, in terms that contrast it with his genuine religion. With such an approach, popular traditions seem an inevitable but deplorable obstacle to the rectification of ideas and morals that have no relation to the ultimate values of human existence. This is how he interpreted the specifics of local veneration of St. George on the radio program *From the Position of Faith (S pozitsii very)*, broadcast on November 26, 2010, when Orthodox believers of North Ossetia, with great spiritual elation, received a priceless gift presented to them through the efforts of the head of the republic — a portion of the relics of this very saint. In fact, this veneration was the subject of the program's discussion:

But on the other hand, sometimes such veneration (...) it overflows into completely pagan forms. Now what is paganism? Paganism is not really necessarily polytheism. It is not exactly necessarily faith in many, many gods. The word "paganism" [*iazychestvo*] comes from the Slavonic word "tongue" [*iazyk*]. "Tongue" means "people" [*narod*]. (...) And this is why they say that there are certain particular, some kind of national saints (...) or there is a certain special, a certain national faith — and this is the manifestation of paganism. (...)

"Their god is their stomach," said the Apostle Paul about the pagans. "Their God is their stomach." That is, they do not consider spiritual ideals, moral ideals to be of paramount importance. They value earthly well-being the most. Now, when a man worships a divinity for the sake of his own earthly prosperity, so that he will eat well, sleep well, earn more money, get an apartment, a car, a supermodel for a wife (...). Now, when a man turns to God for these things, and asks for specifically these things and only these things from God, no matter what God he is worshipping, this man is a pagan. And you see, literally (...) well, a year or two ago I happened to be traveling from Alagir to Vladikavkaz on St. George's Day [Dzhourgubu]. Everyone knows that this road runs past the Grove of Khetag. So, I was on my way to Vladikavkaz and on the road I saw three or four car accidents. On this big holiday four car crashes happened. I do not know whether anyone was hurt — we passed by quickly, but the cars, of course, were in horrible condition. What does this tell us? It tells us that people in the Grove of Khetag, celebrating St. Khetag's memory, who is also revered ... by the Ossetian people, were not so much praying as they were loading themselves up with all kinds of strong drinks.

And in this condition they took the wheel. And of course what happened, happened. Completely innocent people suffered. So this is what the veneration of the saint is like — this is paganism, even if it is the veneration of a Christian saint.

A person who regards the traditions of his people affectionately and thinks that he has the right to take into account distinctive ethnic elements when shaping local forms of Orthodox life understands statements such as that above as arrogant and even colonialist, as the stance of a Russian imperial official from the “Spiritual Department.” And the basis for this perception will be a fact Fr. Alexander does not notice — however much he wants to see Orthodoxy as a universal, supra-national phenomenon, in our country Orthodoxy has a distinctly “Russian face,” if not expressly indicated otherwise. In other words, it is Russian by default. I emphasize, Fr. Alexander did not intend to hurt the feelings of his Ossetian listeners. He tends to relate cautiously to any excessively revered traditions. Apparently having felt the necessity to soften somehow the effect of his denunciatory tone toward Ossetian customs, he quickly shifted the discussion to a level more removed from local realities:

[Christ] says: “He who does not hate his father and mother, he cannot be my disciple.” What is meant by this hatred? (...) The holy fathers interpret this excerpt in the following way (...) by “father” one must understand (...) by “father” and “mother” is meant that ethnos and those traditions in which a person finds himself. Because (...) look, picture this. A certain young man became a believer. He became a Christian. He was baptized. And his father was a former NKVD major. And he said to his son: “What are you doing? Why did you get baptized? We spent our lives shooting priests. And you do this. (...) This is not part of our family tradition. How could you betray your family?! How could you abandon your own traditions?” [The young man] said: “Look, if traditions go against Christ, then I reject them.”

But the impression of condemning the Ossetians just for being Ossetians has remained. And there are two reasons for this. Under the conditions of the dominance of Russian culture, ethnic traditions prove more important as symbols of independence for minorities than they otherwise might be. In this respect these minorities are “more ethnic” than the majority, which serves rather as a backdrop for the display of the unique characteristics of the small groups. Thus the “weight” of

folk custom for members of different social groups varies. It is simpler for Fr. Alexander to renounce some tradition in his own life if it hinders his spiritual growth, than, let us say, for his Ossetian brother in the Church, since his Russian culture is reproduced not by folklore ensembles (although it is by them as well) but through new editions of Leo Tolstoy and the concerts of Yuri Shevchuk. The second reason many listeners reject Fr. Alexander's position is that he relates to the phenomenon of ethnic tradition with neutrality at best: it exists, so be it; if it does not get in the way, let it be. But his audience is accustomed to seeing in folk custom an almost exclusively positive aspect of social life. Custom cannot lie about as a needless thing, nor hinder the realization of positive changes in society. From this perspective, folk custom always stands on the side of the good, unless specifically categorized otherwise. In the present case the authors of the inculturation strategy have grasped this mood very sensitively. They strive to demonstrate that everything truly Ossetian is the natural ally of the Orthodox mission in the republic. The best illustration of the new approach to understanding the place of Orthodoxy in Ossetia and of Ossetians in Orthodoxy is the following statement of Fr. Savva Gagloev, from a sermon he gave on the occasion of a very momentous event — the first liturgy in recent history to be conducted in the Ossetian language in the church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in Vladikavkaz on November 25, 2014. On that day resounded words that unexpectedly, but for all that persuasively, imbued the project of the ethnicization of Orthodoxy with eschatological significance. And although Fr. Savva began his discourse on the topic of native language, his words were understood in a wider context, as a call to Orthodox Ossetians to take upon themselves the responsibility for preserving the ethnic uniqueness of their nation:

One's native language is a treasure which the Lord has entrusted to us, for us to guard this treasure and to increase it. And at the Last Judgment we will answer for this — how we treated this national attainment, this language, culture, those spiritual customs that we inherited from our ancestors, those rites that make us purer and closer to God — for how we treated this treasure. Did we preserve it? Use it? Increase it? Pass it on to our future descendants, to future generations? Or did we squander it and crush it until there was nothing left? Lest we suffer from the Lord's Last Judgment (and the judgment of people), we must guard our culture, our language. Pray to God in your native language. Who knows, maybe prayers in one's native language reach the throne of God faster?

It is interesting to note that all this was spoken in Russian and had as its emotional climax an obscure quotation from the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, a transcription for the educated Russian reader of the folktale about the fisherman and the fish.

* * *

In conclusion it is perhaps worthwhile to dwell briefly on how the project of the “ethnicization” of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia corresponds to the general practices of the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the non-Russian population. Although similar initiatives are relatively new in this context, we can find parallels in the other national republics of Russia.

For example, at the other end of the country, in Yakutia, a somewhat similar situation arose. The Yakuts were baptized into the Orthodox faith around the turn of the nineteenth century, but a distinct ethnic component naturally persisted in their religious life. When at the end of the twentieth century the question arose in the republic of what traditional Yakut faith they ought to revive, a dispute flared up between advocates of the Orthodox version of this plan and those of the idea of reviving the pre-Christian ancient culture (religion). The national intellectual elite took up conflicting positions. Opponents of the Orthodox view accuse its supporters of wanting to Russify the Yakuts. The Orthodox, in turn, defend themselves from these reproaches, putting forward their version of history and their perspectives on the development of Yakut culture. This is how local Archbishop German spoke about this upon the opening of an important republic-level initiative, “Assembly of the Peoples of Yakutia” (1996):

People of different nationalities have lived for centuries on this land. But today echoes of turmoil and disorder, filling a once united state, have found their way into our peaceful region (...) but we shall not return evil (...) and I as the representative of the Orthodox Church, to which the majority of us belong through our roots, that Church which has always united and enlightened but has not Russified the peoples of this region, and in particular has preserved their distinctiveness, their language and culture, I call all of us to responsibility and tolerance” (Burdo and Filatov 2006: 2:246).

One can find yet another example of a similar policy in Khakassia, where Bishop Ionafan, appointed to the Abakan see in 1999, promptly joined actively in the restoration of Orthodoxy among the Kha-

kas. (In the nineteenth century the Minusinsk Tatars, as today's Khakas were then called, underwent a mass baptism; this did not prevent them from retaining those characteristics of their ethnic culture that can be interpreted as vestiges of shamanism.) Bishop Ionafan immediately set up a Khakas church choir, which sang some pieces in Khakas. Moreover, the bishop launched into a debate with local pagan activists who asserted that conversion to Christianity leads to the loss of the national culture; he argued that Orthodoxy will preserve all Khakas traditions, except, of course, for those that are pagan. It is quite significant that, in his view, one must not distinguish between Khakas and Russians in the matter of conversion to Christianity. Both the one and the other have alike wandered from the faith, even if they continue to call themselves Orthodox (Burdo and Filatov 2005: 1:342).

Accordingly, it is possible to consider “the ethnicization of Orthodoxy” a marked tendency in some eparchies’ religious policy — that is, the effort to overcome the ironclad associative link between the concepts of “Russianness” and “Orthodoxy” in order to present the latter as the “native faith” of other ethnic groups. In my view, this new approach follows on the policy of the *folklorization of religion*, about which some anthropologists are writing. These anthropologists analyze the side-effects of the top-down administrative control of religion in the Soviet Union and argue that it is necessary to analyze lasting associations between concepts of religion and ethnic cultural heritage as among these side-effects (Pelkmans 2007; 2009: 6).

Of course, one finds images of folk (*narodnoi*) faith as the quintessence of the people’s (national) spirit in high Russian culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; many representatives of Russian high culture saw in the religious life of peasants and Old Believers the basis for the nation’s existence. In doing so, they laid the ideological foundations of the current wave of desecularization, which consists of movements to infuse the national culture with religion, that is, to bring down the ghetto walls erected around religion by the social imaginary of European modernity (Kormina and Shtyrkov, forthcoming).

As Orthodox leaders construct their national policy, they tend to think historically, to direct their missionary calls to peoples whose ancestors had already been enlightened by holy baptism in the time of the Russian Empire. They employ a “discourse of continuity” — as do their opponents, advocates of reviving the ancestral, pre-Christian faith — as a legitimating language of interpretation of their activity (Broz 2009: 31). Their opponents, advocates of reviving the ancestral, pre-Christian faith, do likewise. In other words, representatives

of the local Orthodox elite understand their activity more as the restoration of what has fallen into ruin, rather than as the creation “of a new heaven and a new earth,” as Evangelical missionaries do. Evidently, for this reason the revitalization of ancient holy sites is regarded so naturally as a rallying cry of the internal mission of the Russian Orthodox Church not only in the “inner provinces,” but also at the borders of a huge multicultural country.

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