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Invented Religions: Some Remarks on Secularization in Siberia after Political Transformation

Abstract: The article is concentrated on phenomenon of “the return of religion” in Siberia after perestroika. The author describes different forms of “the return of religion” after the period of soviet atheization, indicates their reasons and characteristic features. It is claimed that “returning religions” can be treated as “invented religions”, whose status and significance is 1. based on the authority of political power or 2. requires constant negotiations.

Keywords: the return of religion, invented religion, secularization

Alexander D. King has written that although Siberia came to be regarded as a social relict somewhere on the peripheries of the world, it is in fact located in the very center of questions concerning the present time and the human condition in the twenty-first century. The centuries-long isolation of Siberia meant that we can still encounter here archaic forms of culture — which underwent relatively small changes over the centuries — and, at the same time, radical cultural transformations that have been associated with transformations of politics and civilization, with globalization processes and return to localness. In this context, King refers to Siberian shamanism, which is seen by some researchers “as the original religion of pre-agricultural humans (as Vitebsky). For others shamanism lies at the core of the New Age and is thus the key to the future of humanity”.¹

The image of Siberia as a site of global flows, yet maintaining somehow its local specificity, stands in stark contrast with stereotypical visions of Siberia as an isolated island of frozen time and cultural relicts. From the point of view of political transformations and their outcomes, however, King’s somewhat “post-modern” Siberian landscape clashes with grisly afterimages of the Soviet Gulag.

¹ A.D. King, ‘The Siberian Manifesto’, *Sibirica* 2006, no. 1, pp. 5–15.

When inquiring about the contemporary situation of religion, it is worthwhile to address the Soviet project of atheization and its consequences.

Regardless of whether we consider the political ideology of the Soviet state as a secularized version of Christian propheticism, or as a conception of modernization dissimilar from the Western one, the fact remains that the state was at pains to eliminate religion from social life. These attempts were made with various degrees of intensity throughout the period of almost seventy years, and they consisted in exercising both symbolical and direct physical violence. That turned out to be quite effective.

The phenomenon of “the return of religion”, which we can observe soon after the political transformation in Russia, thus deserves special attention. After having renounced religion as superstition, on the one hand, and ideology threatening to reinforce local or ethnic separatisms, on the other, at the end of the 20th century, religion emerged in Russia as an object of ideological desire. The Orthodox Church functions as a legitimizing aid to imperialist power and enjoys its full support, although in Siberia it is much less visible than in more European regions of Russia. Shamanism, as well as indigenous religions (predominantly including Lamaism, Judaism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism) can be inscribed into manifold strategies of regaining identity by particular ethnic groups. In the early nineties, these endeavors were supported by Russian “National Resurrection” — the idea of reviving ethnic cultures mostly by way of educational activities developed within ethno-pedagogy. The economic crisis that had taken place after the perestroika is still acutely experienced also in Siberia, where it stimulates individual search for religious answers at the time when existential foundations and meaning of life seem all but lost.

I do not think it necessary to seek one model of describing the complex processes hidden behind these phenomena, although they do encourage subjection of such conceptions as secularization and sacralization² to the “Siberian test”. It is worth noticing, though, that the reappearance of religion and the role it plays in Russia today seems to be connected above all with widely understood social reasons. Perhaps this state of affairs is caused mostly by the lack of continuity in the functioning of religious communities. The fact of successful realization of Soviet atheization policy only allows one to refer to “returning religions” as “invented religions” (by analogy with the notion of “invented traditions” introduced by Hobsbawm³) whose status and significance is either based on the authority of political power, or requires constant negotiations (which resembles the situation of so-called new religious movements at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century in Europe).

² *Religion in Modern Times. An Interpretive Anthology*, eds. L. Woodhead, P. Heelas, Blackwell Publishers 2000.

³ *The Inventing of Tradition*, eds. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge 1989.

So, the “return of religion” seems to encompass the cultural dimension of religious life in a much lesser degree. People’s modes of life and values by which they abide can seldom be traced back to a religious worldview. And if it does happen so, we deal more often with the “survival of religion” than with its actual return, a survival limited to the eldest living generation of an isolated religious community. This being the case, the Bug Region Olęder settlers are an interesting example. They are descendants of farmers who migrated to Siberia at the time of its colonization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their identity, which does not fit into the framework of national belonging, has Lutheran roots. The survival of religious practices within this community is truly an exceptional phenomenon, given the universal efficiency of the processes of secularization. Up until today, the Siberian Olęders have maintained the language, customs and traditions that was unique to their local culture at the turn of the 20th century, although, in Soviet times, it entailed a risk of persecution. As a result, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Olęders use the books, prayer books, and songbooks that their ancestors brought here in 1912. Their home services are conducted in a specific version of the Polish language whose vocabulary and grammar are limited to those used in prayer songbooks. Polish is for them a sacral language (similarly to Latin in the Roman Catholic Church), whose sound has the cult value. One should also note that religious practices are cultivated only by a small group of the eldest inhabitants of a village lost in the taiga, whereas a younger generation of Olęders adheres to a lay worldview, considering religion and its mores as part of their tradition.⁴

In modern Siberia, life subordinated to a religious worldview is more often led by alternative, counter-cultural communities of urban youth for whom Siberia has become a chosen place, uncontaminated by Western civilization and preserving cosmic harmony and “Slavic roots”.⁵ What I have in mind are Siberian villages that have been transformed into international religious enclaves that, in the words of the researchers from Omsk “sacral centers in Siberian taiga” or “places of experiments of new religious philosophies”. The people who visit or live in them are

⁴ I. Topp, ‘Polszczyzna jako język sakralny. „Nadbużańscy olędrzy” z okolic Irkucka w obliczu pytania o tożsamość’, [in:] eadem, *Słowa niemodne? Kultura — symbol — tradycja*, Wrocław 2014, pp. 234–247; eadem, ‘Изменения в религиозном мировоззрении и идентичности „польских деревень” в Сибири. Сравнительное исследование Вершины и Пихтинска / Transformations of religiosity in “polish villages” in Siberia. Comparison study on Vershina and Pichtynsk’, [in:] *Сибирская деревня: история, современное состояние, перспективы развития/ Siberian village: history, present state and further development*, eds. N. A. Tomilov, N. K. Chernyavskaya, T. N. Zolotova, V. V. Slabodsky, Part II, Omsk 2014, pp. 217–230.

⁵ W. I. Gutyra, ‘Сакральная деревня Окунево Муромцевского района Омской области как фактор формирования религиозной идентичности городской молодежи/ Okunevo’s sacral village of the Muromtsevsky region of the Omsk Oblast as a factor of formation of religious identity of the city youth’, [in:] *Сибирская деревня*, pp. 49–52; I. A. Selezneva, ‘Сакральный центр в сибирской тайге: образ паломника (на примере д. Окунево) / The sacral center in Siberian taiga: image of the pilgrim (on the example of Okuniewo)’, [in:] *Сибирская деревня*, pp. 180–185.

Neoslavs, Buddhists and Krishna worshippers, and they reject the comforts of the urban world for the sake of the ideal of self-perfection (as did the youth in North America and Europe half a century ago).

Now let us look closer at Buryat shamanism the revival of which seems to combine the use of religion for legitimizing a socio-political project with regarding it as a way of life concordant with certain values. From this point of view, Buryat shamanism is an example not so much of the “survival” or “return” of religion, but of “an invented religion.” At the end of the nineties, shamanism was seen as part of a forgotten and heirless past, which necessarily challenges the thesis that it has lived on as a form of cultural survival. The efficiency of the process of secularization of Buryat shamanism in the Soviet era — except for antireligious propaganda and nearly total extermination of shamans — was secured by two main factors. On one hand, it was the civilizational processes of social and economic modernization that brought about the fall of class structures and their replacement with division of labor in centrally administered companies and production cooperatives.⁶ On the other hand, secularization was enhanced by cultural processes that contributed to the waning of religious landscapes due to the profanation of sacred sites.⁷

After the structural transformation of Buryat elites that struggled for the revival of ethnic identities, there emerged an endeavor to reconstitute shamanism. Simultaneously with educational policy in the area of Western Buryatia, compulsory lessons on shamanism as part of the Buryat cultural tradition were introduced in elementary schools, alongside Buryat language classes.⁸ Outside the education sector, this “career” of shamanism encompassed also diverse museum practices. Shamanism — now considered part of Buryats’ cultural heritage — became a tourist attraction, object of theatrical practice, and a major brand of the Republic of Buryatia.

The folklorization of tradition during ever more numerous festivals of shamanism, at shamanist theaters recreating traditional rituals (one of more popular ones in Russia operates in Yakutsk⁹), in musical bands including shamanist chants in their repertoire, as well as granting shamans the status of producers of national culture by the authorities (Tuwa) are all examples of envisioning shamanism as cultural heritage in different regions of Siberia. Shamans often acquire the role of the spokesmen for the ethnic culture, in charge of writing down traditional rituals, inviting researchers and journalists to participate in them, and encouraging the filming of events.

⁶ See: M. Buyandelgeriyn, ‘Dealing with uncertainty: Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in postsocialist Mongolia’, *American Ethnologist* 34, 2007, no 1, pp. 127–147.

⁷ K. Metzo, ‘Shamans and Sacred Landscapes In Buriatia’, *Sibirica* 7, 2008, no 1.

⁸ M. Głowacka-Grajper, E. Nowicka, W. Połec, *Szamani i nauczyciele. Przemiany kultury Buriatów zachodnich*, Warszawa 2013.

⁹ M. Hoppál, *Szamani euroazjatyccy*, trans. A. Barszczewska, Warszawa 2009.

Interestingly, then, shamanism as a form of cultural heritage corresponds to the autonomization of that part of religion, which is related to the self-identification of an ethnic group and ultimately makes it into a kind of “substitute religion,” equivalent to ideology. Looking from a different angle, though, regarding shamanism as a tradition which does not directly influence the way Buryats lead their lives is an effect of a secularizing transformation that is quite difficult to compare with the models of secularization conceived of as advancing rationalization and privatization of the lifeworld, persistently popular in the West.

The renaissance of Buryat shamanism also has sources other than intentional operation of the elites concerned with the preservation of ethnic identity. They are connected with the understanding of religion as determined by the way Buryats relate to the *sacrum*. It is in these frameworks that religious expectations and acts are located, seeking to transform the contingent, unpredictable world of free markets into a cosmos pregnant with meaning. It is thus a continuous attempt to retrieve traditional symbolic practice, an attempt always susceptible to failure.

Symbolic practice is attained in memory rituals, in which the past becomes part of the present through associating Stalinist repressions against shamans with the contemporary life of the next generation of Buryats and its hardships. Between the rejection of tradition and its reinvention, comprised by the attempts by elitist milieus to utilize the past to legitimize a political project, there appears a form of shamanism’s return which makes memory part of the ritual itself. It then becomes a symbolical practice — a reconstruction of shamanist genealogies, a never-ending process of regaining contact with the spirits of ancestors and of rebuilding clannish identity.¹⁰

Presently, the religious dimension of Buryat shamanism is mostly about the search for local rootedness, but also it is an attempt to find one’s own place in a global universe. Buryat shamanism is identified as paganism defined as a belief in natural powers characteristic and universal for early humanity. The sacred space, in which the spirits of the clan ancestors dwell, undergoes then a process of universalization. It constitutes an expression of holistic worldview whereby humans take care of nature and live according to its laws, which links followers of shamanism with the representatives of the deep ecology movement. Zoomorphic imageries of particular clans and shamanist powers connected therewith are interpreted in terms of brotherhood as an idea that expresses the solidarity of humans and animals. Consequently, shamanism turns into a cross-religious ideology.

The authority of shamans is also constructed by the activities that give it a wider group sanction. Participation in international meetings — comprising not only shamanist congresses, but also the fora focused on debating universal problems, such as the annual International Conference on the solidarity of shamans in

¹⁰ I. Topp, ‘Tradycja i pamięć w czasach transformacji. O współczesnym szamanizmie na Syberii’, [in:] eadem, *Słowa niemodne*.

the struggle for world peace¹¹ — aid in turning Siberian shamanism into a global phenomenon, while at the same time supplementing the shamanist initiation with secular education for the vast majority of shamans and providing them with college diplomas (they are ethnographers, pedagogues, religion scholars, and cultural theorists). In Buryat shamanism we no longer deal with a confrontation of older clans, but with their incorporation into a broader structure — an ethnic and national one. Meanwhile, the functioning of shamanist websites or their associations (Tengeri in Ulan Ude) triggers the emergence — alongside the traditional clans — of a community of internavts interested in shamanism and united by a common fascination rather than common ancestors.

Replacing a local context with universal messages is but one form of widening the role and area of operation of contemporary Buryat shamans. Some researchers claim that shamans “mediate between many worlds”¹² — not only between different spirits, or between long-gone ancestors and living Buryats, but also between the worlds of the media, unconventional medicine and the state itself. Imagining a shaman as a healer or a “mediator between worlds” also leads to the autonomization of the technical dimension of shamanism that presents itself as a way of freeing life energy, the path to self-perfection and individual initiation. Shamanism, then, becomes a universal method of spiritual development which can be employed in different circumstances; therefore it breaks away from its religious roots, and thus shares the fate of Hindu Yoga.

Is depriving shamanism of its sacral dimension the real price of such universalization, or can it maintain its religious character by transforming the structures of traditional shamanism? Perhaps we deal here with a process of metaphorization, intellectualization, and spiritualization of religious contents, which transforms shamanism into a modality of belief (as Daniele Hervieu-Leger¹³ puts it). It seems to correspond to the category of spirituality often used in this context as referring to the sphere of individual experience (and as such, it is characteristic of neo-religion).

The example of Buryat shamanism, which I chose to illustrate some of the different trajectories of the “return of religion” after political transformation in Siberia, obviously has serious limitations. Even taking into account the presence of shamanism in cities (mostly in Buryatian capital, Ulan Ude¹⁴), or the deterritorialization of religious communities induced by the development of new technologies, the examples above do not include the specificity of industrialized areas. Hence, I repeat here the error of the ethnographically oriented researchers, who were basing their observations on the processes taking place in traditional

¹¹ See: M. Hoppál, op. cit., p. 257.

¹² K. Metzo, ‘Shamanic Transformations. Buriat Shamans as Mediators of Multiple Worlds’, [in:] *Religion, Morality and Community in post-Soviet Societies*, eds. M.D. Steinberg, C. Wanner, Washington 2001.

¹³ D. Hervieu-Léger, *Religia jako pamięć*, trans. M. Bielawska, Kraków 1999.

¹⁴ B. Jastrzębski, *Współcześni szamani buriaccy w przestrzeni miejskiej Ulan Ude*, Wrocław 2014.

rural communities. [I do not understand the logic here! You are saying that you are not discussing non-industrialized areas, but is it not synonymous with “rural communities”?] Can you clarify this?] I do believe, however, that shamanism offers possibilities to consider the nature of “invented religions”, at the same time allowing us to describe the phenomena taking place in the cities. One can, for instance, connect the search for ethnic identity and treating religion as tradition with the revival of urban religious communities. The research conducted recently in Tomsk seems to confirm this thesis with regard to Jewish and Armenian minorities. Yet the results of the research also make us aware of the limitations connected with ignoring the entire scope of the phenomenon. Before the revolution, there were three synagogues in Tomsk, which had the population of seventy thousand. Today, when the number of inhabitants reaches half a million, there is only one. The Jews themselves estimate that there are five thousand of them living in Tomsk, but there are only 200–300 people practicing religion, with even fewer gathering except for high holidays. Tomsk Jews do not observe the Sabbath, Saturday being a working day, and the way the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) is celebrated resembles a Polish country wedding party, with a dance leader, or DJ, and chants with musical playback from the repertoire of Shakira, a once-popular starlet.

Even in the case of exclusive communities, religion becomes just a commodity at the market of ideas which compete with each other in post-transformation Siberia and thus influence and modify the shape of religious traditions. The statistical data may provide a counter-argument for the thesis on post-transformation revival or revitalization of religion, given that the number of believers normally does not exceed 5% in Siberian cities, and in Tomsk it is even lower. But religion is somehow present there. The space of Orthodox Churches, brought back and renovated not so long ago, can be easily distinguished in Siberian towns. In the graveyards, religious symbolism appears beside secular attributes. But in order to comprehend the nature of this religious presence, we need to investigate the meanings that people actually give to it. The processes occurring in Siberia after the political transformation have a multifaceted character, and their consequences seem clearer than the mechanisms that brought them about. Certainly, that also concerns religion — its “returns” and its transformations.

Religie wynalezione. O sekularyzacji na Syberii po politycznej transformacji

Abstrakt

Artykuł skupia się na fenomenie „powrotu religii” na Syberii po pierestrojce. Autorka opisuje różne formy owego powrotu po okresie radzieckiej przymusowej ateizacji, wskazując tego powody oraz cechy charakterystyczne. Stawia tezę, że „powracające religie” mogą być traktowane jako „re-

ligie wynalezione”, których status i znaczenie jest oparte na autorytecie władzy politycznej i wymaga ciągłych negocjacji.

Słowa-klucze: powrót religii, religia wynaleziona, sekularyzacja

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