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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

Orthodoxy in Karelia

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The national autonomous republic of Karelia, with its capital in Petrozavodsk, is situated north of St Petersburg, around the huge navigable lakes of Ladoga and Onega. As well as Russians, who today comprise the majority of the population, Karelians, Finnish Ingermans and Veps, related peoples of the Finno-Ugrian group, live in Karelia.

Karelia is a border territory which in the course of history has gone now to the Swedes, now to the Finns, now to the Russians. This history has shaped the religious situation in Karelia today. In order correctly to understand the interaction of religious currents and predict their possible development, we need to look at the variety of confessions in the Petrozavodsk diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is headed by Bishop Manuil (Pavlov).

Father Manuil is considered one of the most liberal bishops in the Russian Church, one of the 'Nikodim' school. He began his church career in Leningrad in the 1970s when Metropolitan Nikodim, the author of a book about Pope John XXIII, headed the Leningrad diocese. Bishop Manuil spent the year 1977-78 at the ecumenical institute in Geneva, defended a thesis, and lectured in the Leningrad Theological Academy, where he was rector from 1984 to 1986.

Consecrated as bishop of Petrozavodsk diocese in 1990, Manuil received five parishes for an area of 170,000 square kilometres. By 1994 he had increased the number of parishes to 28, which is not very many if we recall that the average Russian Orthodox diocese has up to 100 parishes. A lagging pace in the religious development of Karelia is characteristic not only for Orthodoxy but also for all the other confessions. In Karelia religious affairs proceed with a time-lag of a year to a year and a half in comparison with Russia. This time-lag is explained by the fact that after the establishment of Soviet power Karelia, as well as Belorussia, was declared an experimental zone for the eradication of religion from the national consciousness. The last Orthodox church in Karelia was closed in the summer of 1941, at the height of the war against Hitler's Germany. One might think that no other problems existed in Karelia then. In the course of the 11 years from 1940 to 1951 Yuri Andropov, the future head of the KGB, held prominent party posts in Karelia. To this very day one of the central streets of Petrozavodsk bears his name, and the former communists are holding power in the republic. An atheistic vacuum is one of the characteristic circumstances for the life of Karelian religious organisations.

Since the disbanding of the Council for Religious Affairs relations between Bishop Manuil and the state authorities have taken the form of direct contacts. The bishop makes active use of the mass media, exercises his authority and compels the higher

republican bureaucrats, who help to restore ruined churches by apportioning money from the state budget, to reckon with him. Manuil does not himself try to influence republican politics but preserves his neutrality. Moreover, having been elected a deputy of the Karelian Supreme Soviet in 1990, two years later he voluntarily laid aside his deputy's mandate, declaring that he had become convinced it was impossible to combine pastoral duties with political activity. This event occurred long before Patriarch Aleksii's well-known decree forbidding the clergy to stand as candidates for state posts requiring professional full-time work. This step added to Manuil's authority in the republic.

The position of the Petrozavodsk diocese is complicated, as it is in other national autonomous republics where there is a national awakening of local peoples who are at a crossroads as far as their religious orientation is concerned. Whereas the Finnish Ingermans are traditionally Lutherans, looking after their own flock and with no pretensions to expanding their religious activity, matters are much more complicated for the Karelians and Veps. Although traditionally considered Orthodox, these peoples are in fact atheists, like the population as a whole, and are subject to two basic influences: Orthodoxy and Lutheranism. Leaders of national parties and socio-cultural organisations are seeking an essential religious framework for future national self-definition. The leaders of Veps organisations incline towards traditional Orthodoxy. They are moderate in their political demands and are planning to live in close cooperation with the Russians and Russia. But the leaders of the Karelian Congress, one of the most influential organisations, have a more radical turn of mind and aspire to unification with Finland, where a large number of Karelians live. Taking their cue from those politicians in Finland who are propagandising the idea of expansion of pan-Finnish influence, the leaders of the Karelian Congress are not averse to supporting Lutheranism, and it may be supposed that they will promote its dissemination among Karelians. Thus the first translation of the New Testament into the Karelian language in the history of that people is being undertaken by the Lutheran Helsinki Institute for Bible Translation, with the Lutherans retaining all rights to the translation. Sooner or later this could lead to conflict with the Orthodox diocese, which is confronted by the question of the partial introduction of the Karelian language into the Orthodox services.

The dissemination of Lutheranism among the Karelians, the largest of the local populaces, nevertheless faces two obstacles. The first takes the form of remnants of local pagan beliefs which are preserved in the villages as traditions and superstitions. One cannot speak today of the existence of a Karelian paganism, but the experience of research carried out in republics with a highly-developed paganism (for example Mari El) shows that a pagan movement could arise within the next year or two and become intertwined with a national movement. The fact that a national team of academics has been completing a huge work on the study of popular beliefs lends weight to this prediction. These beliefs have been systematised, described and studied – that is, partially reconstructed. Moreover Yugo Surkhasko, one of the foremost Karelian ethnographers, who has written several books on Karelian paganism, has worked out a whole philosophical concept arguing that the restoration of a nation is impossible without the reestablishment of the family on the basis of the religious reverence and worship of ancestors. I have no doubt at all that Karelian paganism will reappear. The theoretical work has been completed and the only question is when it will be called into service.

The second factor hindering the dissemination of Lutheranism among the Karelians comes in the form of the Finnish Orthodox Church, which is canonically

subordinate not to the Moscow Patriarchate but to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. This church arose on the basis of parishes located on the territory of Finland after it became independent. A characteristic feature is the fact that the Finnish Orthodox Church comprises not Finns but Karelians, who have adopted the Finnish language but preserved their national identity. The primate of the Finnish Orthodox Church, Archbishop Ioann (Rinne), bears the title 'of Karelia and all Finland'. This is why Bishop Manuil, heading the Karelian diocese in Russia, is called not bishop 'of Karelia' but 'of Petrozavodsk and Olonets'. The Finnish Orthodox Church considers that its legal sphere of influence is over all Karelians and all Karelia, and it conducts its own preaching activity there on an equal footing with Protestant missionaries. This is a unique case of 'proselytism' by an Orthodox church in an Orthodox diocese, and it threatens to lead to serious conflict. Finnified Orthodox Karelians travel from Finland into Karelia and baptise russified Soviet Karelians; and these baptisms and other services are conducted in Finnish with simultaneous translation into modern Russian. While the Moscow Patriarchate is deliberating over translating services from Slavonic into Russian, the Finnish Orthodox missionaries are already doing it in practice.

One must give Bishop Manuil's wisdom its due. Although he did not study under the Jesuits, he has performed an imaginative and abstruse canonical pirouette. Having requested and obtained Patriarch Aleksii's blessing, he departed for Finland on a friendly visit to Archbishop Ioann and presented him with an antimens inscribed with his signature, asking that from then on all Finnish Orthodox priests coming to Karelia should serve exclusively on this antimens. In this way they are automatically 'seconded' to the Petrozavodsk diocese, and serve without violating canonical directives. In addition, Bishop Manuil asked them to issue certificates of baptism in the Russian language. Thus if the bishop of Petrozavodsk has not entirely solved the problem of competition with the Finnish Orthodox Church, he has at least put it under his own control.

In early 1996 a crisis erupted in Estonia. Some of the Orthodox parishes there placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople, and they were supported by the Finnish Orthodox Church. The Moscow Patriarchate objected strongly. In July 1996 the Holy Synod decided to change Bishop Manuil's title to 'bishop of Petrozavodsk and Karelia'. We can assume that these two developments are connected.

Karelia today stands at a religious crossroads and the spiritual choice of the peoples who live there will depend to a great extent on the national and political aspirations of the local intellectual elite.

(Translated from the Russian by Jane Ellis)