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## Religion in Tuva: Restoration or Innovation?<sup>1</sup>

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You approach Tuva by road across southern Krasnoyarsk *krai*. You cross the Sayan mountains, where snow still lies by the roadside in June, and descend to where a wooden hut marks the border crossing. At this very point the landscape changes: you are now on the steppes, wide grassy plains with distant mountain ranges which stretch on into Mongolia. Nobody passes through Tuva on their way to somewhere else: it is a remote corner of the Russian Federation. There are no railways and only two or three flights a week from Krasnoyarsk to Kyzyl, the capital. Tuva was one of the last republics to be taken into the Soviet Union, in 1944. It is a poor region and even more so since *perestroika*. Factories stand empty and rusting around Kyzyl and many of the collective farms have ceased to function. Many Russians are leaving; two thirds of the population of some 300,000 are Tuvinians and the local language is what is spoken on the streets. Only 17 per cent of the population of Kyzyl are Russians.

The remoteness of Tuva and the fact of its late incorporation into the Soviet Union have had their effect on the religious situation there. In Tuva today one of the central conflicts in the development of religiosity in the postcommunist Russian Federation is revealed perhaps more sharply than anywhere else. This is the conflict between 'restoration' and 'innovation', between those who want to restore what they see as the traditional religious structures of the country and those who welcome the range of alternatives now on offer. Since Tuva came so late into the Soviet Union and anti-religious measures were muted at first, the population's memory of how things used to be is livelier than in most other parts of the Russian Federation. At the same time, society has remained markedly patriarchal and traditional, a fact which is reflected in the mentality of the people and the programmes of the current political and social elite. Meanwhile the mass appeal and rapid growth of a whole range of non-traditional Protestant churches in Tuva is just as remarkable as in most parts of the Russian Federation and even more evident to the visitor. On the one hand the old traditions are relatively easy to regenerate; on the other hand, these same traditions are widely perceived as belonging to the past and providing no answers to contemporary challenges.

### The Historical Background

The Tuvinians belong to Turkic Central Asia. In the thirteenth century their territory became part of the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan; the Tuvinians were sub-

sequently mongolised as far as race and culture were concerned, but kept their Turkic language.

The original religion of the Tuvinians was shamanism. The second major religion of Tuva, Buddhism, was a later (thirteenth-century) arrival; it never supplanted shamanism, but alongside shamanism was declared one of the two state religions in the eighteenth century. Tuvinian historians argue that it was the acceptance of Buddhism on the eve of the Manchurian-Chinese invasion of Tuva in 1757 which played a key role in preserving the ethnic identity of the Tuvinians and in helping them to resist assimilation. Until 1911 Tuva was under Manchurian control, but the latter were unable to consolidate their direct rule. The Tuvinians were thus able to continue to develop their own historical and cultural identity.

The first Buddhist temple (*khuree* or *datsan*) in Tuva was built in 1772 and there were 22 by the end of the period of Manchurian rule. A Buddhist clergy was formed. The Tuvinians gradually strengthened their links with the Buddhist spiritual centres of Mongolia and Tibet, which were also parts of the extensive Chinese state. The higher Tuvinian clergy were almost all Tibetan and Mongolian lamas; the spiritual head of the Tuvinian Buddhists was a Mongolian hierarch who lived in today's Ulan Bator. In 1911 there were some 4000 lamas in Tuva – some 10 per cent of the male population.

After the overthrow of the Manchurian dynasty in China in 1911–13 Tuva became a protectorate of the Russian Empire. The Russian authorities did not interfere in the religious life of the region or challenge the authority of the religious leaders, and during the time of the Russian protectorate new Buddhist monastic centres were established.

In 1918–21 Tuva was the arena for clashes between various forces in the course of the Civil War. One of these forces was a movement for unification with Mongolia or for the creation of an independent state that would be based ideologically on Buddhism. However, these aspirations came to nothing and Tuva again became essentially a Russian protectorate.

In 1921 the People's Republic of Tannu–Tuva Ulus was proclaimed, in a union with Soviet Russia. (In 1927 it was renamed the Tuvinian People's Republic.) Its constitution guaranteed the right of citizens to profess any religion of their choice. Soviet influence was gradually extended in the republic; but in the early years it took a mild form, partly because of the powerful influence of China in the region.

From 1921 to 1928 the Tuvinian government actually took Buddhism under its protection. Prime Minister Tonduk was a former lama; he organised the Tuvinian Buddhist Congress of April 1928. A few weeks after its conclusion the government passed a law which made antireligious propaganda a criminal offence. The authorities in Moscow were alarmed: they were keen to avert the possibility that Tuva might become a theocracy on Tibetan lines. Young Tuvinians were taken to Moscow for special education and on their return they took over control of the Party and the government in Tuva. Moscow installed a dependable communist, Solchak Toka, as Prime Minister.

In 1929 an antireligious policy was put in place. However, religious adherence was strong. There were at least 28 khuree, and out of a total population of 60,000, 4800 were lamas. The 1931 census revealed that there were 725 shamans in Tuva. Antireligious excesses on the part of the government threatened to lead to the alienation of the population and by 1933 the authorities were adopting a more moderate approach: religious beliefs were, for example, proclaimed to be no longer an obstacle to party membership. Systematic antireligious persecution, with the aim

of eradicating all religion in the republic, nevertheless began in earnest in 1936. The property of religious organisations was nationalised and clergy were deprived of all political and property rights. By 1937 there were only 5 khuree and 67 lamas left in Tuva.

In October 1944 Tuva was finally annexed to the Soviet Union as an autonomous *oblast'* of the Russian Federation. (In 1961 it became the Tuvian Autonomous Republic.) It is a sign of the resilience of religious belief in Tuva that members of the Tuvian People's Revolutionary Party were not allowed automatically into the Soviet Communist Party: they had to prove their ideological credentials first.

At the time of collectivisation, which took place much later in Tuva than elsewhere in the USSR, from 1949 to 1954, lamas were still offering resistance, and were even attempting to regenerate Buddhist life. Some surviving lamas met to conduct services of prayer. These unofficial gatherings became known as 'praying yurts'. They were led by the most authoritative and educated lama Kenden Tsyurin Khomushku. In the early 1950s he moved to the Ivolginsk datsan in Buryatia and from there continued to lead the Tuvian Buddhists.

Lamas and shamans alike suffered harsh treatment as enemies of the people. Nevertheless, both religions refused to die out completely, and perhaps even reinforced each other's survival. A Soviet ethnographic expedition to Tuva in 1956 paid much more attention to shamanism than to Buddhism: it may be that persecution of the lamas had to a recrudescence of the pre-Buddhist religion of the country.

About 100 lamas were still surviving in 1960. In that year the Tuvian authorities organised a gathering of lamas at which they were forced to adopt a resolution to put a stop to all religious activity. Kenden Tsyurin was forbidden to enter Tuva. Nevertheless some lamas continued their religious activity underground and Kenden Tsyurin sometimes visited the country illegally.

### Religion in the 1990s

The traditional religions thus survived communism in Tuva better than most religions elsewhere in the Soviet Union and religious traditions remained a living element in Tuvian national consciousness. The national movement in Tuva, which took shape in the late 1980s, naturally included an explicitly religious component. Nationalist parties and the intelligentsia began actively promoting the spiritual and cultural values of Buddhism and working for its revival. In the early 1990s a leading role was played by the nationalist party *Khostug Tyva* (Free Tuva) and its leader Vladimir Soyanovich Orus-ool. This movement had a radical ideology and was widely seen as an antichristian and even anti-Russian party. However, the authorities gave the party no support and it gradually lost impetus.

The government of the Republic of Tuva today officially recognises three religions: Buddhism and shamanism for the Tuvians and Orthodoxy for the Russians. When President Sherig-ool Dizizhigovich Oorzhak was installed in 1992 representatives of these three religions were invited to the ceremony, although no religious rites were performed.

In 1995 Tuva was one of the first regions of the Russian Federation to adopt its own law on religion, drawn up in consultation with representatives of the Buddhists, shamans and Orthodox. The law confirmed recognition of these three faiths. It made no provision for any kind of mechanism for state support, but concern for the future of the three faiths prompted the government to adopt a plan for the 'development of the traditional religions of the peoples of the Republic of Tuva' in 2000.

The execution of the religious policy of the government of Tuva is in the hands of the head of the Department for Cooperation with Social Movements, Political Parties and Religious Organisations, Viktor Chotpun-oolovich Mongush and his advisers: for Christianity, Ol'ga Matpayevna Khomushku of Kyzyl University; for shamanism, Tat'yana Alekseyevna Ondar of Kyzyl University; and for Buddhism, Marina Vasil'yevna Mongush of the Institute of Humanitarian Research. These advisers were formerly official consultants in the administration, but have ceased to be government officials and are now functioning in their capacity as lay experts.

Amongst the Tuvinian political elite there is a widespread idea that it is Buddhism that needs to be restored as the ideological basis of Tuvinian statehood. Government funding has been forthcoming for the construction of Buddhist temples. The level of influence of Buddhist clergy and their readiness to cooperate with the secular authorities are evident, for example, in the agreement signed in January 2000 between the State Committee for the Protection of the Environment and the Directorate of the Kamby Lama of the Republic of Tuva on nature conservation measures. Meanwhile the president himself is known to invite shamans as well as lamas to perform rituals on his behalf; and Orthodoxy is not neglected: the president and other government representatives send greetings to the Orthodox on their festivals and the Orthodox church in Turan was built with funds from the republican budget.

Kadyr-ool Alekseyevich Bichel'dei is a Buddhist and a deputy from Tuva to the Russian State Duma, on the list of the *Yedinstvo* Party. In an interview on 19 July 2000 he gave his view on religious pluralism in Tuva:

I do not reject shamanism, and I am tolerant towards the religious confessions which exist in Tuva, including the Christian churches, because our fellow-citizens are members of them. They have the right to freedom of conscience. ... President Oorzhak places no obstacles in the way of the development of the traditional religions of our people.

None of the religious minorities in Tuva suffers from discrimination. Protestants say that even when Buddhists have made strong protests about their activities, government officials have tried to reach a peaceful compromise solution and have not given their support exclusively to the Buddhists. Even the most active Protestant denominations have the right to rent property and do missionary work throughout the republic. It can be said, then, that there is religious freedom in Tuva.

### **Buddhism, Shamanism and 'Restoration'**

In January 1990 the first Buddhist society was registered in Tuva, and in 1991 temples began to be rebuilt. Today there are nine temples in Tuva and five or six prayer houses. There are no monasteries, but some 20 monks live in the various temples. The systematic revival of Buddhism was given a boost in 1992 after the first visit of the dalai lama to Tuva. At that time an agreement was signed between the government of Tuva and the government of Tibet in exile. In 1995 the spiritual representative of the dalai lama in Russia and Mongolia, Geshe Losang Tenlei, visited Tuva. The organisational renewal of Buddhism in Tuva was completed in 1997 when *Khostug Tyva* convened a Constituent Assembly of the Buddhists of Tuva. The assembly elected Tenzin Gyatso, who is also called Agankkh Kkhertek (White Partridge), as kamby lama or spiritual head of the Buddhists of Tuva. He was in his twenties and had been educated in India. The Buddhist administrative centre and

Directorate of the kamby lama ceremonially opened in Kyzyl in October 1999; the kamby lama lives there, as do several Tibetan monks and their pupils.

At the start of *perestroika* the revival of Buddhist activity was in the hands of a few aged lamas who had hitherto been operating illegally. They had all died by the mid-1990s, but they have been succeeded by a new generation of young lamas who have received their training since 1991 in Buryatia, Mongolia, India and Thailand. Buddhism as taught and practised in Tuva, in contrast to Buddhism in Buryatia and Kalmykia, nevertheless remains traditional: its distinctive feature is its faithfulness to the Tibetan Gelug school and its recognition of the undisputed authority of the dalai lama. Contacts are practically exclusively with Tibetan Buddhists. Buryatian Buddhists, who are active in other parts of Russia, have not so far made any inroads in Tuva. Representatives of other Buddhist traditions, including Øle Nydahl, teachers of Theravada and followers of Asakhara, have visited Tuva, but none of them has won any following. There are no contacts with Western Buddhism. The kamby lama speaks positively of pluralism within Buddhism – ‘it is good that there are many schools in Russia; this enriches the basic doctrine’ – but in practice it is only the Gelug school which prevails. Duma deputy Bichel’dei expresses some concern for the future but hopes that when lamas training abroad come home they will continue serving within the framework of traditional Buddhism.

Another distinctive feature of Tuvian Buddhism is the result of its centuries-long coexistence with shamanism. It has adopted some shamanistic traditions: the cults of *ovaa* (spirit-guardians of a place) and of *eeren* (protectors of the family), for example. In earlier centuries shamans would often take part in Buddhist ceremonies alongside the lamas and in the khuree there used to be a special category of spiritual individuals – the *burkhan-boo* (lama-shamans). The kamby lama says that today 90 per cent of the Tuvian population consider themselves Buddhists, but that they will naturally and regularly turn to shamans for assistance. He believes there is no fundamental doctrinal opposition between Buddhism and shamanism. Some aspects of Bon (the ancient Tibetan pagan religion which amalgamated with Buddhism) are compatible with shamanism: Buddhism does not reject shamanistic teachings about the existence of various different worlds, for example. The main point on which Buddhism departs from shamanism, in the view of the kamby lama, is that shamanism does not in principle renounce the doing of evil. When asked whether someone can be a follower of shamanism and of Buddhism at the same time, the kamby lama’s deputy Tenzin Chinba replies that Buddhism is not in fact an ‘-ism’: it teaches that all limitations are illusions, the product of a faulty understanding of reality. In the view of Duma deputy Bichel’dei, the most distinctive feature of Tuvian religiosity is syncretism. Buddhism in Tuva has adopted shamanistic rituals, and vice versa. In the 1920s and 1930s, he says, Tuvian Buddhism took unto itself shamanistic traditions and gave them a Buddhist interpretation; and now the reverse is happening: the shamans are taking Buddhist rituals and are interpreting them in a shamanistic way.

There is a widespread feeling in Tuva that Buddhism should be confirmed in its role as the basis for social and political life, as the consolidating factor in the development of society. Buddhist clergy aspire to influence all spheres of life: cultural, political and economic. They hope to succeed in imbuing politicians with high moral qualities and the Buddhist values of tolerance, charity and openness. The kamby lama declares his commitment to the principles of democracy. He believes that ‘Buddhism is under an obligation to promote the democratisation of society’ because the roots of Buddhism are to be found ‘in a democratic milieu’.

The main instrument for propagating Buddhist concepts is the republican society *Mandzhushri*, founded in 1993. Its president is the kamby lama's deputy Tenzin Chinba. The society has about 300 members – government functionaries, parliamentary deputies, university staff and representatives of the intelligentsia and of business circles. It holds meetings three times a week for hymns, prayers, analysis, discussion and meditation. It publishes books and the newspaper *Svetly put'* as a supplement to the newspaper *Respublikanskaya Tyva*, and helps to produce a weekly television programme '*V poiskakh very*' ('In Search of Faith'). It organises lectures on the study of Buddhism, charitable work, and agriculture and handicrafts on Buddhist principles. It maintains links with the Moscow society *Lamy tsankapy*, and also with Buddhist communities in Omsk and Elista, where *Mandzhushri* societies are active.

Members of the Tuvinian intelligentsia are involved in various ways in the dissemination of Buddhism. Works on Buddhism and the history of Tuva by Marina Vasil'yevna Mongush and Ol'ga Matpayevna Khomushku are popular in Buddhist circles. In Kyzyl a number of secular organisations promote Buddhist values, such as the *Obshchestvo druzei Tibeta* (Society of the Friends of Tibet), which supports the efforts of the dalai lama and the cause of Tibetan independence. It was members of the intelligentsia who instigated the building of the new Buddhist administrative centre in Kyzyl.

The claim by Buddhism to have a leading role in social and political life finds a degree of support in government circles. Despite the sharp fall in influence of the *Khostug Tyva* party, whose programme announced support for Buddhism as the ideological basis of Tuvinian society, the present Tuvinian political elite seems to be becoming continually more orientated towards Buddhism. President Oorzhak has regular meetings with Buddhist teachers, takes part in Buddhist festivals, and supports the use of government funds to help build Buddhist temples. He and the leader of the *Yedinstvo* party, the native Tuvinian S.K. Shoigu, donated their own money for the construction of the Buddhist centre in Kyzyl. Meanwhile the president's main political opponent, president of the Supreme Khural of Tuva Salban Karaul, who is considered the president's most likely competitor at the next elections, criticises Oorzhak for not paying enough attention to the development of Buddhism in Tuva.

The kamby lama believes that Buddhism is the natural religion for the Tuvinians. When asked whether he wants all Tuvinians to become Buddhists, he replies that what he wants is for every individual to realise his value. Nevertheless in his view the strong development of Buddhism is essential for a healthy future for Tuva, even as far as population growth is concerned: the Khakassians, he points out, converted to Christianity and their number is declining.

Deputy Bichel'dei says that while there is much of value in shamanism, he believes that Buddhism is closest to the Tuvinians and holds out most prospects for the republic. The Tuvinian people have been broken by revolution, civil war and Soviet power; through its understanding of man and of nature Buddhism will be effective in reconciling Tuvinians with themselves. The fact that few Tuvinians know much about the essence of their traditional faith does not free them from the responsibility of identifying themselves as Buddhists, which is the most important first step. Fuller religious understanding will come with time, either to today's Tuvinians or to their children.

Meanwhile, shamanism is flourishing as vigorously as Buddhism in today's Tuva – perhaps more so, since its roots proved harder to eradicate in communist times.

Traditional paganism among the Tuvinians had no organised form; it was preserved and passed on as part of folk culture. Formal pagan organisations are a new phenomenon since *perestroika*. There is now a centralised shamanistic organisation in Kyzyl and local branches in various parts of Tuva. They are registered separately, but are all part of the same phenomenon: coordinating centres for what is a growing mass movement.

In the 1960s and 1970s, under the guise of collecting folkloric traditions, the academic and writer Mongush Borakhovich Kenin-Lopsan (whose father was a narrator of folk tales and whose mother was a female shaman) travelled in the regions and sought out shamans. For his part in preserving the traditions of Tuvinian shamanism he has been awarded the title '*Zhivoye sokrovishche mira*' ('Living Treasury of the World'). In 1991 Lopsan founded the shamanistic society *Dungur* (The Drum). The *Dungur* society in Kyzyl is now part of the nationwide shamanistic organisation *Tos Deer Respubliki Tuvy*, which also has southern and western regional sections.

During the 1990s shamanism in Tuva has benefited from international interest, both from academics who prize this well-preserved ancient faith as an object of study and from enthusiasts seeking a new source of mystical contact with nature in the context of postmodernist western culture. In 1993 the first Tuvinian–American conference of shamans and professional students of shamanism took place, with participants from the USA, Canada, Austria and Finland as well as Tuvinian academics and members of the *Dungur* society. A result of the seminar was a resolution by the government of Tuva, signed by President Oorzhak, setting up a research centre for the study of Tuvinian shamanism, under Kenin-Lopsan, at the Tuva republican local history museum *Aldan-Maadyr*. Kenin-Lopsan himself receives visitors in a small wooden building in the grounds of the museum.

Shamanism today is recognised as one of the three traditional religions of Tuva and has a certain amount of support from the state, although not as much as Buddhism. The president takes part in traditional shamanistic festivals. On the 25th day of every lunar month he invites a shaman to his office to perform rituals. The government has made land and buildings available for the shamanistic organisations, including a small building in the centre of Kyzyl. Five or six shamans work there for a month at a time before being replaced by other shamans from the regions. The building includes a centre attached to the *Dungur* society for teaching children about shamanism. This is organised by Sailik-ool Ivanovich Kanchyyr-ool, 'a heavenly shaman, who can invoke rain'. He comes from a line of shamans, and has the title '*Zasluzhenny rabotnik kul'tury Tyvy*' ('Honoured Cultural Worker of Tuva').

Today there are over 300 shamans in Tuva, including those in training, of whom 60 are studying in shamanistic centres in Austria and the USA. Thirty of the shamans are in Kyzyl. There are five ranks of shamans; there is also a distinction between 'good' shamans and 'evil' shamans and each type has a particular role to play. Anyone can train to be a shaman: this may be a consequence of the influence of Buddhism and contrasts with the situation in Yakutia, where the shamans regard themselves as an elite. Women can become shamans just as easily as men, although there are in fact fewer female shamans. Like representatives of other religious denominations, shamans are regularly invited into schools and universities to give lectures.

Tuvinian shamanism descends from Tengrianism, the most ancient mythological system of the peoples of Central Asia. The word '*Tengri*' is translated by the Tuvinian word '*Deer*'. The concept of Tengri grew up on the basis of animistic



beliefs about a heavenly Master-Spirit; the Heavens were believed to be at once a direct manifestation of him and also the place where he lived. As an unpersonified male divine principle, deciding the fates of human beings, the nation and the state, Deer is understood to be the whole class of gods, who are divided hierarchically into nine heavenly ranks, with a dichotomy between light and dark, benevolent and demonic, in connection with the different spheres they rule. The multiple nature of Tengri for the Tuvinians is expressed in the significance of various numerals, the most important being nine and its derivatives. 'Tos Deer' is the Nine Heavens, to which Tuvinians have prayed since ancient times and on which depend human happiness and fortune.

According to the most widespread shamanistic concept (and there are several of these) the Universe consists of three worlds: the heavenly world, the earthly world and the lower world. The lord of the heavenly world is Kurbustu-khan, and the lord of the lower world is Erlik Lovun-khan. When a person dies, his body is buried, but his soul is reincarnated. Three things, however, are hateful to the lord of the lower world and cannot be cleansed: suicide, killing one's parents and polluting nature. The lower world is inhabited by evil spirits. The earthly world is under the aegis of Father-Moon and Mother-Sun, the source of heat, energy and wind, who are especially venerated.

Before the Revolution, the cult of mountains, reflecting ancestral ownership of some piece of territory, was regularly expressed in acts of public prayer to the mountains and the dedication of domestic animals (*ydyk*) who were the mountains' direct protectors. (The earthly world is populated by tutelary spirits (*dukhi-khozyayeva*.) These practices are now seeing something of a revival in the form of rituals near mountains and 'ovaa', piles of stones placed on mountain paths and passes. Rituals are performed to honour special natural sites and rivers of special significance. Every shaman has a natural site of unique significance to himself.

The cult of ancestors is an important part of shamanism, expressed in ritual funeral ceremonies and in the sacrifice of animals. Shamanists venerate their parents as divine spirits and the birthplace of one's parents is especially sacred. Shamanists also take great care of their children; they avoid punishing them and teach them by example.

Shamanists believe that cattle and useful plants and animals were created by Deer. They venerate them as protectors, capable of ensuring a happy and fortunate life. Many shepherds are shamans.

Kenin-Lopsan holds that the Tuvinians have preserved shamanistic traditions in their most complete form, because Tuva is a remote place cut off from the outside world. He contrasts the Yakuts, who were taken into the Russian Empire over three centuries ago and who as a consequence have lost significant parts of their shamanistic heritage. As we have seen, however, it is clear that Tuvinian folklore has adopted certain pre-Buddhist and Buddhist concepts. One element derived from the pagan Bon religion, which came with Buddhism from Tibet, is for example the veneration of Geser, a chosen leader and the first man to descend from heaven to earth. Shamanism and Buddhism exist in a kind of symbiosis. Most Tuvinians are shamanists and Buddhists simultaneously, and will resort from time to time to the services of shamans for curing various illnesses and averting the vicissitudes of fortune. As far as the shamans are concerned the question is merely how far a particular individual inclines to one or the other doctrine.

Kanchyyr-ool says that foreigners have come to Tuva to learn about local shamanism, and in his view shamanism is not the preserve of Tuvinians, but

accessible to anyone who is attracted to it. Many rites, he says, are common to shamanists all over Russia. He says that shamanists naturally have good relations with people of all other faiths: 'we're all children of nature'.

Kenin-Lopsan, however, seems to be the champion of a pure shamanism as a constituent part of the Tuvian national identity. He says that the Tuvians are unique in having preserved a 'shamanist civilisation'. He aims to cleanse shamanism of Buddhist accretions and resents the ostentation of Buddhist lamas who drive foreign cars and benefit from foreign sponsors. He is suspicious of Russians, although he speaks favourably of Boris Yel'tsin, 'because he helped the Tuvian people to restore shamanism', and generally 'established democracy in Russia'. In Tuva, says Kenin-Lopsan, 'We have a mythological culture: the forces of nature are a soul.' Shamanism is best preserved in Tuva, he says; it is the original religion of the whole world and all other religions arose out of it. He lays great stress on need for a shaman to be an actor, who will incorporate and focus the energies of the nation. Rising from his desk in the hut where he receives visitors, he explains in a dramatic presentation how the Tuvian people were born out of the mouth of a wolf and descended from the Ninth Heaven in the form of a bear. Kenin-Lopsan continues the tradition of composing verses in the ancient genre called '*algysh*' that encapsulate elements of Tuvian folklore and shamanistic belief.

Buddhism and shamanism in Tuva today, then, are both experiencing a genuine popular revival. As in the past, they exist symbiotically and have the power to reinforce each other. The leaders of both religions are proud of the distinctiveness of the Tuvian form of their respective faiths and while maintaining that the truths these faiths embody are, in principle, accessible to all, are also inclined to stress the fact that they are uniquely essential for the future health of the Tuvian nation. These views are evidently shared by large sections of the Tuvian political and creative intelligentsia.

### **'Traditional' Christianity in Tuva**

Russian Orthodox and Old Believers are present in Tuva. Their numbers are small. In contrast with the situation in most of the rest of the Russian Federation, the Orthodox and the Old Believers in Tuva stand to one side of the conflict between the 'restorationists' and the 'innovationists' in the spiritual sphere.

The first Orthodox mission in Tuva was organised in 1868. This was not an official initiative by the church, however: the Russian Orthodox hierarchy saw no prospect of converting the Tuvians. It was the work of a certain Nikolai Putilov, who was in Tuva as a merchant, then was ordained and became the first Orthodox priest in Tuva. The first Orthodox church in Kyzyl was built in 1911. It was subsequently destroyed, but in 1929, at a time when such a thing would have been impossible in Soviet Russia, it was replaced by a new church, which continued to function throughout the Soviet period. Institutional Christianity was preserved under communism more effectively in Tuva than in most other places in the USSR. In 1958 Kyzyl received its first visit from an Orthodox hierarch: the metropolitan of Novosibirsk and Barnaul, the diocese to which Tuva then belonged.

Nevertheless, Orthodoxy has always remained of minor significance in Tuva, which is practically the only region of the Russian Federation where Orthodoxy has experienced no revival in the 1980s and 1990s. The Orthodox in Tuva are confined to two parishes, in Kyzyl and Turan, and five communities which do not have buildings or priests. These two parishes comprise the Tuvian deanery of the Russian

Orthodox diocese of Abakan and Kyzyl. The dean of Tuva is Archimandrite Aleksii Kostrikov, the priest of Holy Trinity Church in Kyzyl, who has been in Tuva since 1988. In practice, Orthodox life centres on this parish in Kyzyl, which has several hundred members who attend the regular services on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings, and up to 1000 who attend services at festivals. The bishop pays regular visits. Services are apparently rather traditional: unusually in the Russian Orthodox Church today, men stand on the right and women on the left, and men go up first to kiss the icon.

A high proportion of the congregation are young people. Typically, says Fr Aleksii, parents who cannot bring themselves to believe in God are nevertheless conscious that there is a gap in their lives and send their children to church so that they might have the chance to fill it. The church runs a Sunday School which is attended by 27 children and 30 adults. Before services Fr Aleksii organises lectures on the history of the church and the content of the Bible. There is an adult choir of eight and a children's choir of seven. There is a Church Brotherhood for adults, male and female: each member of the Brotherhood is given a spiritual task and is expected to confess the faith at every opportunity.

The church runs no monastic communities or organised charitable activity. In the early 1990s the parish published its own newspaper, but financial difficulties forced its closure. Parishes are maintained by donations from the faithful. Sometimes the local government will support specific projects, for example the rebuilding of the church in Turan.

The aim of the Orthodox parish is clearly to serve the needs of the Russian minority in Tuva. As far as Fr Aleksii is concerned the church's main task is to 'convince people to be genuine Christians' (*'Ubedit' cheloveka byt' instinnym khristianinom'*). People need to be persuaded to abandon their superstitions and to overcome intellectual arrogance: people with just a little knowledge too often think that they are qualified to teach rather than to learn.

Tuvinians make up ten per cent of the congregation, but Fr Aleksii maintains that they are people who previously had no faith rather than converts from Buddhism or shamanism. Fr Aleksii says that the church does not do missionary work among the Tuvinians. There is a children's Bible in Tuvinian and a translation of the Gospel of St John; but there is no sign of any prospective Tuvinian priest yet: this is in the hands of God, says Fr Aleksii.

Fr Aleksii is careful to maintain constant contact with the Buddhist lamas. He is vigilant in anticipating any possibly contentious topics and does not permit conflict between the Orthodox and the Buddhists or the authorities. At the time of the nationalist disturbances in 1991, he says, all the local religions acted together to make sure that the disturbances did not take on a religious coloration. Fr Aleksii has no problem with sects. Although there are over a dozen in Tuva, he says, they fail to attract the Orthodox, who are sure of their own faith. All in all, he describes the position of his church as 'firm and stable' (*'prochnoye, stabil'noye'*).

Old Believers started coming to Tuva at the end of the nineteenth century and more intensively after the Russo-Japanese War, escaping from persecution at the hands of the Russian authorities.

Aleksandra Nesterovna Balabanova is a member of the Old Believer Belokrinitsa Concord. The community in Kyzyl was organised in the 1930s by her father, Nestor Petrovich Golubtsov, and was registered in 1960. It now has about 20 members, with another five in Saryg-Sep. They are all elderly. The community has set up a domestic chapel, with ikons and ancient service books, in a wooden one-storey house adjacent

to Aleksandra Nesterovna's home in the suburbs of Kyzyl. The community does not have its own priest, but maintains close contact with the parish in Minusinsk, in Krasnoyarsk *krai*, whose priest visits once a month. Otherwise the community meets on Saturday evenings, Sundays and festivals to read the Bible, sing psalms and pray. The services are led by men.

Aleksandra Nesterovna would like to see a permanent priest in Kyzyl. There are those who argue that the community would not be able to provide for him; but she thinks that a priest would nourish the church rather than the other way round and the church would grow. She regrets the fact that no young people come to services.

Aleksandra Nesterovna receives Jehovah's Witnesses in her home and sometimes disputes with them as they explain the Bible to each other. She has been to one of their gatherings on their invitation. She is afraid that they will be the first to be condemned at the Second Coming, however, because 'they make so many mistakes' in their interpretation of the Bible.

The community has good relations with the Orthodox and with the local authorities. It is also in contact with Old Believers of other concords, for example, with the priestless Chasovenyye in distant villages.

The Chasovenyye began founding their settlements in the most isolated corners of the republic, particularly on the upper reaches of the Yenisei, at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are still some areas along the Yenisei where there are villages entirely populated by Chasovenyye; others are mixed. During collectivisation in the 1930s most of the villages that offered resistance were depopulated and destroyed.

With the exception of a few *nastavniki* (elders), the Chasovenyye who stayed in the villages in Soviet times have to a great extent lost their theological knowledge and adhere to rituals and practices that lack a coherent context.

In the village of Syzym, Praskov'ya Grigor'yevna calls her religion simply 'The Faith of Christ' ('*Vera Khristova*'). She and her fellow-believers in the village have no church, nor does she feel the need for one. They hold services on Sundays in various houses. The service starts at 1.00 a.m. with vespers (*vechernya*) and moves on to matins (*zautrenya*), finishing at 5.00 a.m. About a dozen people comprise the congregation; there are no young people. The Chasovenyye do not have priests. Spiritual authority lies with the *nastavniki*, who are chosen by being blessed by other *nastavniki*. At a wedding, it is the parents who bless the union, while the *nastavnik* leads the prayers.

Much of Praskov'ya Grigor'yevna's religion revolves around keeping the contemporary world at a distance. Like her fellow-believers, she refuses to hold a passport, and in consequence none of them receives a state pension. 'That's not for us. It's Antichrist tempting us.' ('*Ne polozheno nam. Antikhristova prelest*'). She holds the secular powers to be evil, on the grounds that they used to persecute believers. The communists were more sinful than the tsarist authorities. Are the current authorities also sinful, given that they are tolerant towards religion? She knows nothing about today's authorities: they neither help nor hinder the followers of '*Vera Khristova*'; they do not meddle in their affairs at all. Nevertheless it is always best to be careful. '*Tak i idet u nas*' – that's how we regard the powers. However, young people must serve in the army, of course. Why? Because the state requires it.

There is no Sunday School: parents bring up their own children in the faith. The local school is secular, but it is no longer harmful, says Praskov'ya Grigor'yevna, because the teachers no longer confiscate the pupils' crosses or teach antichristian notions. No new ikons are being painted. She and her fellow-believers will not use

the same eating vessels as unbelievers. They will have nothing to do with the Nikonians (the Russian Orthodox Church), although she is not clear as to exactly what the Nikonians do wrong. As for the Old Believers who have priests, the 'popovtsy' such as the members of the Belokrinita Concord, she believes that they have an 'incorrect faith' (*'nepravil'naya vera'*). How should a Christian live? 'Pray, observe the fasts.' She has no view on whether any Tuvinians might convert to the *Vera Khristova*: it is enough that she and her fellow-believers preserve the faith.

In the village of Erzhei on the opposite bank of the Yenisei, Sosoi Filippovich Dolgikh rejects the state, passports and pensions, but says that of course young people should serve in the army. This has nothing to do with the state: a person has a duty to defend his motherland. Sosoi Filippovich also pays taxes. It is natural to do so, he says: we are ordered to obey the powers that be. When asked why, then, he and his fellow-believers refuse passports and pensions, he replies that this is so that they will be ready for the last days without any debts and papers. When asked what he calls his faith, he reflects for a moment before replying 'The Christian Orthodox Catholic Nikon-Rejecting Faith' (*'Khristianskaya pravoslavnaya kafolicheskaya ot Nikona bezhavshaya vera'*). He does not accept the name 'Chasovennyye'. He does not know how many others of his faith live in the world beyond the three local villages, although they are sometimes visited by some fellow-believers from America. They have a prayer-house in their village, but he believes that the priesthood will never be restored. It will be destroyed, as will the Faith itself. The end is nigh. The number 666 has started appearing on goods in the shops and sectarians (the followers of Vissarion) have started moving into neighbouring Kuragino *raion* in their thousands. Anyone who sincerely believes in God, Christ and Holy Spirit will avoid Hell, but only those of the True Faith will be saved. He drinks water and kvas. Wine and beer are all right in moderation. But tobacco and spirits are anathema, tea is three times anathema and coffee is ten times anathema.

At the time of collectivisation and communist persecution many Old Believer families went into hiding in inaccessible places, while others, men and women, withdrew into the forests to live alone as hermits. There are still significant numbers of these 'pustynnozhiteli' today, and they enjoy great spiritual authority amongst the local Old Believers, who often turn to them for advice.

### **Protestantism, New Religious Movements and 'Innovation'**

In contrast to the Orthodox and Old Believers, the Protestants see missionary work as a high priority. Baptists and Evangelicals have been in Tuva since the beginning of the twentieth century, but it is only in the period since the early 1990s that they have been able to revive their evangelistic activity. Over that same period they have been joined by a wide variety of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, as well as by a number of non-Christian organisations new to Tuva.

Let us look at a few examples of active Protestant churches in Tuva.

An Autonomous Church of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians/Baptists (RSYeKhB) is led by pastor Zinaida Konstantinovna Kazantseva. Her grandfather came to Tuva with other Baptists before the Revolution. They organised settlements in the villages of Berezovka and Uspenka. These were destroyed by the Bolsheviks, after which a community appeared in Kyzyl. It existed illegally until the mid-1950s. In the 1960s the authorities invited the congregation to register, but the members had varying views on the conditions the authorities were seeking to impose and the church split into three sections. One group entered the RSYeKHB, another group

joined the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists (STsYeKhB) and the third remained an autonomous unregistered group led by Kazantseva's father.

On his death in 1992 Kazantseva became the leader. There were no men in the church and the members of the community decided to remain as they were and not to join any other group, which upset all the Baptist pastors in Kyzyl. In 1995 the community bought a prayer house with money from Swedish Christians. Services are attended by some two dozen Russians and Tuvinians; most members of the church are women. Kazantseva herself celebrates the breaking of the bread, but there is a former prisoner who also plays an important part in the services. He was converted by members of the congregation and now they are preparing him as their pastor.

Members of the community have been working on translations of books of the Bible into Tuvinian: the first published was the Book of Jonah in 1990 and then the Book of Proverbs, for which Kazantseva says she had to sell her dacha. She is of the opinion that in declaring Buddhism a traditional religion the authorities are discriminating against Christians.

Another church in Kyzyl which calls itself 'Evangelical' is the *Svet Yevangeliya* (Light of the Gospel) church led by pastor Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Degtyarev. He works with the *Nadezhda-lyudyam* (Hope to the People) mission which is linked to the Light of the Gospel Mission based in Rovno. The church has a lot of support from Baptists in Krasnoyarsk and maintains close contacts with Baptists in Kazan' and with the church of Dmitri Romanov in Zelenodol'sk. Degtyarev's church has three more congregations in other parts of Tuva.

The community has its own small building in Kyzyl. Degtyarev calls it the *Khristiansky tseñtr* (Christian Centre): in his view the traditional term '*dom molitvy*' ('prayer house') is associated with the passive Sunday Christianity of old-fashioned Baptists, while Degtyarev is promoting an active Christianity and wants the church to take up a position on all issues of social life and to pay more attention to the problems of young people and families. He has plans for a library and a video library in the Christian Centre, and a sports ground next to it. Meanwhile each week the community hires a sports hall for the young people of the church. Members of the congregation run bible classes for children and every year they organise a children's camp.

The church has about 80 registered members, 70 per cent of whom are Tuvinians. Twice a week Tuvinian house-groups meet. Degtyarev says that there are three basic reasons why Tuvinians have joined the church: Tuvinian Christians have shown a good moral example to others, particularly their relatives; preaching is in the Tuvinian language; and Tuvinians have themselves realised that shamanism is merely association with evil spirits since they have neither obtained healing nor found faith in God.

One of the sharpest confrontations between Protestantism and Buddhism in Tuva involved the congregation of Degtyarev's church in Karakhak. According to Degtyarev, the lamas were saying that people in the village were dying because of the presence of Christians; threats of physical reprisals started arriving at the church, and many Tuvinians brought their Bibles back.

The 'Christian' missionary society is a member of the Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith Pentecostals (SKhVYeP). Its founder and leader until 2000 was Aleksandr Mikhailovich Mironenko, who then went off as a missionary to another town in Tuva in order to found a new church. The society rents its premises in Kyzyl. It organises sporting activities for young people at school No. 15. In July 1999 the society held a 'Small Olympic Games' in which young people from the USA took

part. They had come to Tuva with the Assembly of God organisation which is supporting the 'Christian' society by preaching, setting up new churches in Tuva, conducting Bible classes in the *Sun Bok Ym* church and organising expeditions round Tuva. The church in Kyzyl is attended by about 250 Tuvinians and about a dozen Russians. The church is of a traditional Pentecostal kind. It is opposed to women pastors but has no objection to innovative forms of worship and music during services. It believes there is no salvation in the Orthodox Church.

There are about 20 associated churches and groups in various places in Tuva and the congregations of all of them are almost entirely Tuvinian. About ten per cent have higher education. Mironenko says that for the first two years or so the Tuvinians watched the church growing, but that then there was a breakthrough, with people being healed in their dozens, until he decided to put an end to the practice of healing in order to avoid temptation in the church. Mironenko thinks the church has succeeded in breaking down the stereotype whereby Christianity is seen as the Russian religion. The congregations have started supporting people who know the Tuvinian language and traditions well, and services are being conducted in Tuvinian. Mironenko stresses the traditions of hospitality and tea-drinking. A praise group in the church wears national dress. Mironenko thinks that the Tuvinians have simply discovered Christianity for themselves as a new faith that has proved its effectiveness in saving them from vice while not turning them into Russians.

On one occasion there was trouble with the authorities, when a converted female shaman started destroying sacred sites, upsetting the local people.

Another SKhVYeP member-church is based in the southern village of Naryn, on the border with Mongolia, where missionaries initially met determined resistance from lamas who worked to set the local authorities and the people against the Christians. Lamas from Kyzyl set up a discotheque at their own expense for the local young people in order to attract them away from the church.

The Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith *Sun Bok Ym* (Good News) was founded in 1995 by Korean missionaries and in 1999 there were over 20 preachers in Tuva. The pastor, Li Chul Sun, is a native Korean, born in Seoul, from the church of pastor Iongi Cho. The deaconess of the church is Galina Anandyevna Sagachayeva. The church is now renting premises in a cinema.

The congregation of some 400 is mostly Tuvinian, including over 100 young people and over 100 with higher education. Four preachers in the church have studied in Tashkent and Chimkent. Services in Kyzyl are held in Russian, since congregations include some Russian young people. However, church members sing songs in Tuvinian translated from Russian, and church member and former prisoner Aleksandr Sarzhat-ool composes songs in Tuvinian. Church member Raisa Tarzyn leads a Tuvinian national dance group for children. The church is active in charitable work, distributes humanitarian aid from Seoul and assists childrens' homes through a special fund.

Church members pray for the Russian and Tuvinian authorities and consider themselves patriots. The church sets great store by wealth and health, forbids smoking and alcohol, and has a strict approach to morality. The pastor explains in his sermons that like the Tuvinians, the Korean people were also Buddhists once, and lived in poverty, but that now they have accepted Christianity they are starting to flourish. Church members are travelling around Tuva opening churches in the regions; in these churches services are conducted in Tuvinian only. The church's missionaries see one of their basic tasks as working with young people and the relatives of believers. Church members are convinced that a Tuvinian will eventually become the leader of

the church.

Deaconess Sagachayeva thinks that it is easy for Tuvinians to come to God because their hearts are open: many who think they are Buddhists in fact have no faith. She thinks that Christianity is the faith of the future for Tuva: the Tuvinians will realise that neither Buddhism nor shamanism leads to salvation. Christianity has shown in practical ways how drug addicts and drunkards can be cured of their vices. There are people in the Good News church, she says, who have come from shamanism and have been permanently cured of their illnesses and hence thinking people are no longer interested in shamans and lamas, although it is necessary to know about them as part of Tuvinian history. The pastor believes that there is no salvation in the Orthodox Church. He too believes that there will be a Christian awakening in Tuva and that the whole population will turn to Christianity since many missionaries – the disciples of Iongi Cho throughout the world – are praying for this to happen.

Soon after the church was set up some problems with the authorities arose because many church members took too literally their pastor's calls to do battle with the 'evil spirits' of shamanism and the 'idol-worship' of lamaism. Several new converts destroyed stone-built sacred sites where shamanistic rituals were conducted and when many Tuvinian Buddhists started venerating the portrait of the dalai lama the Christians tore down his pictures.

The Charismatic *Proslavleniye* (Glorification) church, based in Abakan in Khakassia, has a church in Tuva. Services have been conducted by pastor Dmitri from Novosibirsk ever since the former pastor Dmitri Kruglikov caused a split in the church and was arrested for theft. The church is proposing to start classes for university students on the subjects of abortion and the family. The *Put' k Istine* (Way to the Truth) church led by pastor Al'bert Mikhailovich Shin is a charismatic church in Kyzyl which also has links with the Glorification church in Abakan.

The *Khristova Blagodat'* (Christ's Grace) church was set up only in the late 1990s by a Norwegian missionary and his wife. It has relatively few members but they have already become an influential elite in Protestant circles. As a result of the church's active missionary work the families of several high-ranking Tuvinian officials and teachers have become members. The director of the Tuvinian printing committee is a church member, and the church thus holds its services in the printing house. The church publishes articles about its work in the local press and organises charitable activity in the republic.

Meanwhile, as elsewhere in the Russian Federation, a wide variety of non-Christian confessions are active in Tuva. The Jehovah's Witnesses are conducting energetic missionary work. The Unification Church functions under the auspices of a social movement registered as the federation *Sem'i za yedinstvo i mir vo vsem mire* (Families for Unity and Peace throughout the World). The *Tsentr Vedicheskoi kul'tury* (Centre of Vedic Culture), propagating the teachings of the founder of Transcendental Meditation, the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, functions under the auspices of the Danish company *Universitet Makharishi* (University of the Maharishi), an investor in Tuvinian goldmines. The Maharishi teaches that meditation promotes unification with the Universal, while 'improving one's standard of living, lowering criminality, improving one's economic position, raising the Dow Jones index ...'. Most of the practitioners are intellectuals, doctors, teachers and other professionals.



## **Conclusion**

Relations between the various confessions in Tuva are generally good. Lamas and shamans, as well as members of Tuvinian nationalist organisations, are however alarmed by the rapid proliferation of Protestant churches and 'sectarians'. The kamby lama speaks of cases of suicide among new converts and deploras incidents such as the burning of portraits of the dalai lama. He believes that the activities of the more aggressive denominations should be limited by legislation. Tenzin Chinba notes the dalai lama's teaching that there are many routes to the truth and points out that pluralism is a necessary concomitant of democracy, which is in itself to be welcomed; but he agrees that many of the new sects are harmful and aggressive. Deputy Bichel'dei is particularly critical of American missionaries, who he says often recruit followers not by preaching but by offering material goods.

As we have seen, the government of Tuva follows a policy of religious toleration, and there have been very few instances where the secular authorities have intervened to curb the activities of religious enthusiasts. Nevertheless, there are clearly tensions between those who have differing visions and programmes for the nation's future spiritual and material prosperity.

## **Note**

- <sup>1</sup> This article is based on material gathered in interviews with representatives of a range of religious confessions, politicians and public figures in Tuva in June 2000. The interviews were conducted by Philip Walters and three other members of the Keston team which is compiling information on religion in all the regions of the Russian Federation: Sergei Filatov, Roman Lunkin and Lyudmila Vorontsova.