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## **'Tserkov' – Sem'ya Detei Bozhiikh: an Indigenous Russian Neoreligious Phenomenon**

YANA AFANASENKO & MATVEI PISMANIK

A church operating in the city of Perm', *Tserkov' – Sem'ya Detei Bozhiikh* (the Church of the Family of the Children of God, hereafter the Family), which we have been studying for several years, is one of the indigenous Russian confessions to have emerged on the wave of a religious 'Renaissance' which within just a few years has gripped all sectors of postsoviet society. In socialist society, where freedom of conscience was energetically suppressed, only a dozen or so traditional religions used to be in operation. The 1990s extended the range of confessions in postsoviet Russia with several dozen nontraditional religions<sup>1</sup> – in other words, religions which had not historically been followed by the Russian people and were not rooted in Russian life and culture, and which became widespread as a result either of foreign missionary activity or of the indigenous activity of various types of native prophet who appeared on the scene.

The recent unprecedented upsurge of religiosity was directly preceded in the late 1980s and early 1990s by critical developments in all sectors of Soviet society, and subsequently by the wholesale collapse of the socialist empire. It was facilitated by a spiritual ferment which affected practically every section of the population and which was a natural reaction to all these tragic events. Above all, it was a response to the failure of the communist faith, for which the populace was now substituting religion, which had been almost completely ousted from their lives. The illusion of an earthly paradise had hypnotised the everyday consciousness and infused the expectations, hopes and ideals of tens of millions of citizens for more than half a century. The loss of the illusion gave an appalling jolt to their emotions. In this state of shock the 'intellectual ferment' was more of an irrational phenomenon than a rational one. The reaction of the average citizen to the obvious failure of former ideals involved a reaction to the failure of the rational and logical foundation for those ideals: the materialist understanding of the world, which was shattered along with those ideals. At the base of the new world understanding lay mythological thinking with the sacral archetypes which fed it, crowding out rationality. In particular, myth creation coloured the mystical frame of mind among the populace and gave its own colour to the changes in the new religious realities developing in postsoviet society.

At the outset of the democratic transformations new laws on religion in the USSR (1 October 1990) and in the RSFSR (25 October 1990) removed restrictions on

freedom of conscience and opened up the possibility of innovations in the sphere of religion. Foreign missionaries introduced over two dozen neo-Christian, neo-oriental and scientific religions into the country. Indigenous pagan cults were revived, and in some places even officially established. A number of 'religious virtuosi' (a term coined by Max Weber), working on Slavic and Vedic mythology, established some half dozen pseudo-pagan societies: *Drevlerusskaya inglisticheskaya tserkov'* (Omsk); *Tropa Troyanova* (Ivanovo); *Istoki* (Samara); *Svyatogor* (Moscow region), and the society of followers of the *Velesovaya kniga* (Moscow region, Nizhni Novgorod). Dozens of nontraditional pseudoreligious mystical, esoteric and occult movements appeared. Finally, several native charismatics founded genuinely indigenous religions. Among these were the prophets Yuri Krivonogov and Marina Tsvigun (*Beloye bratstvo*, or YUSMALOS (the White Brotherhood)), Ioann Bereslavsky ('Archbishop Ioann') (*Bogorodichny tseñtr* (the Mother of God Centre)), Sergei Torop ('Vissarion') (*Tserkov' poslednego zaveta* (the Church of the Last Testament)), and the founder of the Family church in Perm' which we describe here, Vladimir Beloded.

All these new religions can be divided into two basic kinds: traditional and innovative. Both are based on a process of popular myth creation, but they differ from each other in the different roles they play in society. Thus nontraditional religions, with their charismatic components and innovative potential, are usually orientated towards change. Traditional religions, on the other hand, depend on a traditional type of authority and are a conservative and stabilising factor (if they are not dominated by clerical or fundamentalist tendencies). Thus religiosity in contemporary Russian society is simultaneously a stabilising factor and a source of change, reflecting two different tendencies in the spiritual self-determination of Russians. These opposing tendencies in religious observance once again illustrate Nikolai Berdyayev's widely-accepted idea about the polarities and contradictions in the Russian national character and its predisposition to extremes.

Another feature of the contemporary religious revival in Russia is that it reflects the particular Russian attachment to common (national, '*soborny*', collectivist) values. Born of the crisis of the Fatherland and the search for a new 'national idea', and not yet entailing an orientation towards personal values, the call for a spiritual revival of society could not avoid taking on a religious nature. In this sense, the postsoviet 'Renaissance' is essentially different from the humanist European Renaissance, which was orientated towards the secular paradigm and the promotion of the individual.

This alienation from personal values has resulted in a reduction in the secular component of Russia's developing civil society. Religiosity in Russia today is qualitatively different both from the almost universal religiosity of tsarist times and from the practically hidden religiosity of Soviet times, which was mainly confined to the personal sphere among members of the older generation. Religion in Russia today has become much younger and has entered right into the rapids of social developments. Religiosity has become open, public, prestigious and self-sufficient. And therefore it has become more conventional and more distanced from the individual. This is particularly true of the dominant traditional type of religious observance.

Directly or indirectly, the new forms of religiosity are also being infused by new postsoviet realities, and this is producing completely novel tendencies in religion such as commercialism, political involvement and rivalry between confessions. The vast majority of those involved in the new religiosity are neophytes, motivated not so

much by faith or conviction as by the mood of the times. The new religiosity is usually not something which an individual has personally interiorised, and it combines in a contradictory manner a natural loyalty to native confessions and a particular susceptibility to nontraditional religions and even occult innovations.

Proportionately, the new confessions have not had a significant influence on religiosity, but they have provided it with a radical catalyst. Their emphasis on the individual is much more intensive than in the traditional confessions. They are therefore more attractive to young people. The potential they offer the individual has uniquely actualised a set of problems to do with the human being which is characteristic of Russia, with its orientation towards the abstract person rather than the concrete individual. This potential has focused attention on the perpetual dialectic of self-determination which is typical of the Russian, the dialectic which according to Dostoyevsky leads people either to self-deification (to the Man-God (*cheloveko-bozhiye*)) or to God.

In our view, the contemporary religious situation in Russia is revealing a new vector in the resolution of this set of problems: the vector of choice between charisma and tradition. Charismatic religiosity is virtually unknown among the traditional confessions of our country. It sometimes manifested itself only in the unorthodox religious movements of the past. Now the current time of crisis has called it up again. It appears above all in the new cults themselves, answering the needs of those who have been particularly disorientated by the crisis, who have lost faith in themselves and are looking for help from heaven and from saviour-prophets. It is in this socio-psychological dimension that the phenomenon of nontraditional religions is especially important.

There is ambiguity about the new attitudes to religion which have taken shape in postsoviet society, and clarification has not been helped by the fact that the new religious movements, which appeared so unexpectedly, have not been sufficiently studied. This applies both to new religious movements of foreign origin and to those which originate within Russia itself. The absence of adequate objective information about the new religions has led to serious omissions by the legislature and other state agencies. The lack of reliable information has also given rise to an extreme range of opinion about the new religions, from xenophobia among Orthodox, Old Believer and Islamic clerics, many of whom unjustly regard all the new confessions as 'totalitarian sects'), to apologetics by partisan publicists.

In studying the new religions we have used the methodological approach of native religious researchers like Tat'yana Bazhan, Lyudmila Grigor'yeva, Mikhail Mcheldov, N.A. Trofimchuk, Sergei Filatov, Marat Shterin and Aleksandr Shchipkov, based on the principle of a thoroughgoing objective and differentiated study of religious phenomena. The most important condition for true objectivity on the part of religious researchers is a worldview which is tolerant and respectful of the democratic principles of freedom of conscience and equality of religions. We have been deeply impressed by the humanist and truly democratic attitude towards new religions demonstrated by Eileen Barker.<sup>2</sup>

New religious movements have appeared in Ukraine, Belarus', Moldova, the Baltic States and other states of the CIS, but the phenomenon started in the leading countries of the West as early as the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> where it is still under way today, and no less intensively than in Russia. We agree with Lyudmila Grigor'yeva in identifying the social sources of this phenomenon. She suggests that the new cults are a specific religio-mystical reflection of the social realities and problems of the second half of the last century such as the scientific-technical revolution, the obvious crisis of the

traditional system of values, and ecological, military and other modern global problems.<sup>4</sup> In our view, the expansion of new cults is also related to the globalisation process which has affected the whole world in recent decades; it represents a uniquely mystical variant on the dialogue between civilisations.

Grigor'yeva correctly identifies as a product of the global process of integration the concept of a single God for all religions. In one form or another this concept infuses the doctrines of almost all the new confessions. In Russia's indigenous religions the concept is coloured by the influence of ancient native faiths. Thus a range of today's indigenous faiths rest on an interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity which emphasises either the maternal nature of the Holy Spirit or the Mother of God as a central point of reference. In a similar way the new religions frequently express their opposition to official Orthodoxy in terms of a contrast between 'living' faith and 'dead' faith.

A distinctive feature of the concept of One God in the new religions is the fact that it is organically bound up with the phenomenon of 'charisma', perhaps the most important feature of religiosity in the West today, where the charismatic movement has attracted tens of millions of followers over recent decades. The salience of the charismatic idea in public consciousness and the rapid growth of charismatic movements are in our view symptoms of a continuing shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric paradigm, which has been caused by the crisis in traditional religious values.

Anthropocentrism in itself prompts an orientation towards secularism and humanism. The new religions move the anthropological problem into the sphere of the sacred, and thus it is dehumanised in two ways. First, by virtue of their own charismatic potential the new religions subject the problem to a process of mystification, ignoring its real social nature and thus removing the possibility of genuinely solving it. Second, as the product of western technocratic and consumerist society, where the category of the 'individual' has been made part of mass culture, the new religions foist western society's unifying standards onto their followers. These standards are not concerned with how an individual 'creates himself', with his formation as an individual. The self-realisation of a person as an individual becomes superfluous.

It would appear that the very possibility of making a free choice of world view, acquired by Russian citizens at the beginning of the 1990s, is itself stimulating a secular, realist and humanist interpretation of the anthropocentric paradigm. This is certainly true of the materialistically orientated Russian elite. Something rather different is at work among the Russian public at large, however. We have already noted their proclivity towards myth-creation and the sacred. We also need to take into account the unique 'preoccupation with technology' which even today exerts a powerful influence on Russians, and which abstracts the very understanding of the 'individual' and turns it into an ephemeral phenomenon of earthly existence.

In this displacement of paradigms the very concept of 'charisma' and its bearer is invested with a new meaning which differs from its traditional meaning. Society today is a mass phenomenon, and charisma is also assuming the traits of popular culture. In other words, charisma loses the exclusive quality described by Max Weber and is becoming a more widespread reality. Indeed, the charismatic individual himself now demonstrates the traits of a 'man of the people', such as separation from tradition and culture and an uncritical and intolerant frame of mind. All this is leading to a certain reduction in the radical and innovative potential of charisma. Although the charismatic leaders of contemporary Russia as a rule present them-

selves as innovators in doctrine and cult, orientated towards reform, a number of them, as far as we can see, are orientated only towards authority and self-aggrandisement, and gravitate towards dull routine and eclecticism.

The elevation of an actual person as sacred, which is a particular characteristic of charismatic movements in the West, is a feature of the new indigenous religions of Russia as well. However, on Russian soil charisma is taking on a character of its own, conditioned by the legacy of unorthodox native movements which have been emerging since the eighteenth century (all historians of Russian sects note the charismatic root of these movements). On the one hand, this root reflected an aspiration, typical in Russian spirituality, towards messianism, which was embodied in mystical movements such as, for example, the *Khlysty*, the *Skoptsy* and the *Dukhobory*. On the other hand, Russian charismatic movements reflect the dominance in Russian history, right up to Soviet times, of authoritarian forms of government, the cult of the individual and the voluntary submission of the public to authority. These authoritarian tendencies, and corresponding submissiveness, have not only not disappeared with the collapse of Soviet power, but have become even stronger in the bleak, unstable period since *perestroika*, which has lacked clear-cut values and philosophical orientations.

These tendencies have placed an additional 'nationalist' stamp on the psychology of indigenous faiths, which is particularly connected with the legacy of the Soviet period of our history. The totalitarian regime levelled out any appearance of individualism, cultivated conformity and conditioned the herd mentality of Soviet society, which submissively and unnaturally combined in itself the charismatic cult of its 'leaders' with the elevated ideals and values of collectivism. This duality was inherited more or less unchanged in the mass psychology of the postsoviet period. It is impossible to ignore it in a logical analysis of indigenous faiths which are infused with the charismatic element. As part of this analysis we need to identify two levels of social interaction: that between a leader and his followers and that amongst the followers themselves.

On the first level, the legacy of a totalitarian psychology is expressed, as a rule, in the personal dictatorship of the charismatic founder-leader of an indigenous confession. On the second level, the consequences of totalitarianism are revealed in the remarkable conformity of its followers, who are *voluntarily* and completely subordinate to their charismatic leader, devotedly deifying him. Our observations clearly pinpoint a negation of the personal (particularly volitional) qualities of a charismatic leader's followers and the almost complete absence in them of any need for self-assertion. Indeed, if any need for self-assertion remains, then it is realised within the system of spiritual coordinates which have already been established by the charismatic leader.

We have already noted that one feature common to all new faiths, including the indigenous confessions, is myth creation. In such indigenous confessions as the Church of the Last Testament and the Family the mythologies are coloured particularly by the collectivist orientations of the Soviet past; but they are directed only towards fellow-believers, supporting a feeling of warmth and brotherhood, and also a feeling of being uniquely chosen. To a certain extent there is an element of mutual help in these confessions and even material support for those who are particularly needy. These humanitarian manifestations appear to arise from the fact that the dogmas of these churches are not of an apocalyptic nature and recognise the intrinsic value of existence on this earth. We should note that the themes of warmth and brotherhood also feature in other new religions, though less intensively.

We have been finding that in all the new religions there is a clear realisation of their psychotherapeutic potential. This therapeutic function is especially salient in the indigenous religions, where communication amongst the adherents is particularly intensive. A clear example here is provided by the Family. Its adherents are mainly middle-aged and elderly people who have been indifferent to religion until recently. They have usually come into the Family as a result of the harsh realities of everyday life in crisis-ridden Russia, their feelings of solitude and abandonment, and their need for psychological support, which they have generally found in the Family. Their introduction to a charismatic movement and a change in their hitherto amorphous philosophical outlook have thus taken place gradually and painlessly. What is also noteworthy is that the new values have a nationalist character, rather than internationalist, as in Soviet times. These confessions are thus orientated towards national spiritual culture; they should therefore be viewed not just as a socio-psychological but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

As with the traditional mystical movements of Russia, the dogmatic basis of the new indigenous confessions arises from the Orthodox dogmatic context. There is often a personification of God, linked in one way or another with one of the members of the Trinity. For example, there is a 'Living God' in such indigenous confessions as the White Brotherhood (Marina Tsvigun – *Mariya Devi Khristos*, or *Deva Mariya*) and the Church of the Last Testament (Sergei Torop – *Syn Bozhi* (Son of God)). There is also one in the Family, which we have been studying. Its head Vladimir Beloded is now called *Otets Nebesny* (Heavenly Father).

We can see that the distinguishing feature uniting the indigenous religions of Russia is their mystico-messianic tendency. The theme of the Messiah dominates their preaching and infuses their publications. An analysis of these sermons and publications shows that unlike most of the new confessions which have come from the West the indigenous religions ignore the fashionable idea of synthesising religion and science. At the same time these religions do tend to deal with the ecological problem. The Church of the Last Testament is a typical ecological movement; it is located in Siberia with the aim of living in harmony with nature. The national feature of the predominant ecological element in this movement is that it is linked with the Utopian idea of building the Kingdom of God on Earth with its optimistic, communist perspective.

There is an analogous Utopian idea in the preaching of the Family. The movement encourages unselfish mutual support amongst its followers and communal work on a plot of land on the city outskirts. Potatoes and vegetables are distributed according to need, particularly to the poorer members of the church. The whole idea of building the Kingdom of God is here infused more than anything by the values of an earthly family. These values have become even more relevant in Russia in view of the crisis of the Soviet system of abstract collectivist values. The understanding of the family in the Family is original and many-faceted: its overall model is the Holy Trinity and the secular patriarchal family. The social ideal of the Family is a society with high moral standards, based on collective ownership, social equality and justice. The basis and foundation stone of society is a strong and happy family. Members of this church believe that society should live like a single family, relying on the teaching of God, on feelings of mutual affection, brotherhood and love, and on a universal concern for the common good. Then it will indeed be 'God's Family'.

It is worth noting that the very idea of the family, like other values of the secular world order, is interpreted by other indigenous religions in a completely different way. In the Mother of God Centre, and particularly in the White Brotherhood, a

mystico-ascetic and apocalyptic orientation and segregation and alienation from the outside world lead to severance of relations with family and friends. This tendency also reveals a certain continuity with the spiritual tradition of native heretical movements: exclusivity and flight from the world and the family.

The new indigenous religions in Russia, then, tend to be of a messianic character; they actualise the idea of a 'Living God' in their various ways and absorb the archetypes of native spiritual tradition. At the same time, their ethnocultural status is rather paradoxical. They are indeed indigenous, and not 'imported'. They are the progeny of the manifest Russian realities of the past decade. They are made up of Russian citizens who are following their native prophets. Nevertheless they tend to be permeated by principles which are in no way rooted in ethnic tradition and are therefore completely estranged from that tradition. Their compatriots see their doctrines, as well as their charismatic leaders, as foreign, 'alien', even 'false'. 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own country ...'

This kind of paradox within the indigenous confessions is particularly apparent in the Family. In order to understand its origin we need first of all to look at the personality of the charismatic leader of the Family, V.K. Beloded. It is rather hard to establish exactly how the movement came into being. The early versions of his life story, as told by Beloded to his followers, differ markedly from later versions which were by then being modelled on typical Orthodox hagiographies. According to Beloded, the sign of the Charisma of Grace (*Blagodat'*-*Kharizma*) had been a feature of his earthly life right from childhood.

He was born in Ukraine in 1927 and raised as an orphan. He was religious and pious from early childhood. He had only an elementary school education. As a youth he received mystical proof of heavenly protection. During the fascist occupation he was sentenced to be shot along with other peaceful inhabitants of the village, but he was saved by a miracle: an elderly fellow-villager screened him from the bullets with his own body.

One day after the war, when he was in church, a woman he did not know suddenly approached him and told him that he had appeared to her in a vision. On his chest he had had a sign saying 'Apostle'. This was an undoubted call from heaven, evidence of the Charisma of Grace. He set about his apostolic service. However, shortly afterwards he was arrested by the Soviet authorities. He took his imprisonment as a natural test posed by Heaven. In prison he met some Baptists who were well versed in the Bible. They had a strong influence on his future spiritual development and prompted him to start preaching again. The atheist authorities renewed their persecution of him, but throughout these harsh sufferings his faith grew, together with the gifts of prophecy and miraculous healing. He predicted people's futures, healed many incurably sick and saved people dying in accidents. He sought neither rewards nor renown, and modestly avoided acclaim.

His long wanderings finally brought him to Perm'. Information about his activities is now more reliable. In 1992 he was ordained into the Catacomb Church. The sacrament formally legitimised his state of grace. He did not start serving in this church, however, nor did he have any links with it in the future. Several years earlier he had already set about creating his own church based on the secular *Obshchestvo dukhovnogo prosveshcheniya* (Society for Spiritual Enlightenment), one of many associations founded in the early 1990s by people seeking God. It consisted of two dozen psychologists and teachers troubled by the general disorientation and loss of ideals. These distraught Godseekers (mostly women) were in need of authoritative leadership.



Committed to his faith and already formally confirmed as a charismatic, Beloded found in this emotional environment a particularly fertile soil for his message. His followers are attracted by his unusual life story, venerable age, assured speech, kind gaze, smooth voice, erudition in Biblical texts, unhurried good sense, energy and respect for Godseekers. His self-assurance and clearly manifest masculine attractions (despite his advanced years) are also an advantage. Initial caution and criticism gradually vanish. The Godseekers now have no doubt of his gift of prophecy. People do not argue with him, they just listen to him. They summarise the words of this wise elder and discuss them animatedly. The Society publishes his prophetic works, which are a mixture of elements of Orthodox doctrine and pantheistic concepts.

There have been several stages in the development of the Family. The period between 1989 and 1993 was one of unhurried and successful missionary work by Beloded in the Society for Spiritual Enlightenment. In 1994 the Society registered itself as a religion under the name '*Tserkov' – Sem'ya Bozhiya*'. Its activity assumed an institutional, more sacramental and more ritualistic character. The cult of the prophet moved towards an apotheosis and he assumed the title *Otets Sem'i* (Father of the Family). His followers (particularly the single women) competed with each other in seeking his particular favour. He chose a wife from their ranks, twenty years younger than himself.

By 1996 the Family had around 200 members. A community of this size could hardly grow stronger purely on the basis of love for the Father of the Family. What was now needed was to strengthen interaction within the cult so that its members would be bound more strongly together and identify with each other. The device of ritual repetition began to be systematically used, stimulating and strengthening the patterns of institutional life which had already been developed within the community.<sup>5</sup>

Integration is promoted above all by worshipping together; this ensures that the teachings of the Family are well absorbed. The cult is gradually systematising its worship. Each week members gather together with their children to hear prophetic sermons by the Father of the Family. In form and length the speeches are more like lectures than anything else. The basic doctrines are repeated in various forms. The service culminates in communal prayer. There are also weekly group readings and discussions of the extensive range of Family literature, in which important themes are mystical unity, heavenly birth and the chosen status of all members of the Family.

The Family combines in itself the attributes of both traditional and nontraditional religion. In its teachings and worship it retains a range of traditional elements including the Christian idea of heavenly birth, and the sacraments of baptism and marriage. Although Orthodox elements predominate, the Family does not reject the Eastern idea of the transmigration of souls. The charismatic innovations in the Family constrain the traditional rituals and give primary importance to personal mystical experience. This is particularly affected by the feeling of being in permanent contact with the Mother of God. Members of the Family believe that the Mother of God once publicly gave a heavenly sign of her presence in the form of a bright star, followed by a train of smaller stars, and that since that time she has periodically directed the life of the Family through her Messages (*Poslaniya*). The Father of the Family himself receives these messages most often; occasionally, however, they are received by the most devout members of the Family. In the latter case the messages are edited before being made public. The Father of the Family comments on them in his speeches-cum-lectures and publishes them as pamphlets.

Between 1997 and 2000 the Family extensively supplemented its religious

activities with its own form of educational activities. Cult members go on trips to the theatre and on excursions to cultural and historical sites. Special interest societies and art exhibitions are organised. Publishing activity has been stepped up. There are now over 150 Family brochures and books, including *Poslaniya Bozhiyei Materi, Bog yest' Slovo, polnoye blagodati i istiny, I sotvoril Bog cheloveka po obrazu svojemu*, allegorical narratives, stories and fables. Over time the literary genres have become noticeably more numerous, reflecting the increasing interest within Russian society not only in spiritual rebirth but also in Russian history, culture and education. Family publications often refer to the works of Russian religious philosophers, and to Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol' and other giants of the national literature, ascribing some of their writings to a mystical, 'heavenly' source. The Family also organises festivals of Russian culture: on Pushkin's 200th anniversary, on the Russian folk-tale, and similar themes.

Educational elements are also included in Family services of worship. As well as the usual sacramental rituals, these now include 'family' festivals – The Father's Birthday and The Birthday of the Family. The process of integration also embraces the smaller families, which are transformed into house churches, holding meetings of fellow-believers and organising discussions on religious themes. The cult's activities also include 'fraternal circles' (*bratskiye kruzhki*) and 'instruction groups for parents' (*roditel'skiye gostinnye*) and presentations by the house groups for Family members on various cultural and philosophical themes.

These educational innovations are largely the result of the activity of the leader's wife, Tamara Beloded, who adopted the title *Mat' Sem'i* (Mother of the Family). She has a higher philological education and is trying to reinforce the prophetic teaching of the Family with a philosophical framework. She used to be a professional psychologist, and has taken on the organisation of cult rituals and educational events, putting psychotherapeutic methods into practice. The 'fraternal circles' include psychotherapy sessions which she leads with the help of several psychologists who belong to the cult. At services, Father and Mother would sit side by side on a raised platform, symbolically dressed in 'tsarist' clothing.

After the end of the year 2000 there was a turning-point in the life of the church, with the ending of the 'dual leadership'. Beloded left his wife and publicly deprived her of her sacred title, although he did not expel her from the Family. The reasons were probably both personal and ideological. Beloded is now the sole leader of the Family, wielding control over all aspects of its life. Cultural and educational activity has been sharply reduced and the religious and mystical elements significantly reinforced. The sacralisation of the person of Beloded has reached a climax. He has achieved the apotheosis of a charismatic leader in adopting the title *Otets Nebesny* (Heavenly Father).

On a psychological level it is interesting that the deification was an initiative both of Beloded and of his followers. This is logical: his followers identify the charisma with him personally. The Heavenly Father uniquely embodies the mystical substance of the Family and uniquely directs its life.

The Family now has around 300 members, mostly aged between 40 and 60. The great majority of them are married couples with two or more children, comprising dozens of normal families, mostly of the patriarchal type. Most Family members belong to the technical professions. Most have a higher education, and there are more than a dozen students. Several members are entrepreneurs and support the church financially. Missionary work is not a priority. The Family is growing by virtue of natural replenishment.

The periodical Messages of the Mother of God provide the theoretical foundation for the main aim of the work of the Family – the tireless creation of a Holy Family on Earth in the image of the Heavenly Family, or the Holy Trinity. Linked with this original piece of dogma is the idea that a man may become God. This is possible both for the charismatic leader and for his followers. It has already happened in the case of the leader of the Family; in the case of his followers, however, it is a long-term prospect and will be achieved collectively. The teachings of the Family thus include an explanation of what it means to be God, and of how to achieve this. The teachings do not include an ascetic element, and they allow for the decorous enjoyment of a secular existence, particularly in connection with family life. The defence of the family is an additional psychologically attractive feature of this religion. The promotion of the concept of the family as the fundamental ‘building-block’ of society also has an important social aspect, engendered in the crisis-ridden instability of Russian society.

In such a situation an autocratic charismatic leader is welcomed by many people (by nonbelievers as well as believers) as the desired Father of the nation, able to unite it into one solid family. According to Moskovichi<sup>6</sup> the stabilising potential of a charismatic leader in any social group must depend on the concept of equality: his saving power is equally necessary to every individual. This appeals in particular to the myth-orientated consciousness of the Russian public, which is accepting of both authority and conformity. In the public consciousness a preexistent democratic and humane concept of equality conflicts with a disregard for the equal worth of each individual, and the acceptance of the superior worth of just one exceptional individual. At the same time, those individuals who have become most completely a part of the ‘mass’ are afraid of striving independently through self-determination and self-realisation to realise their choice of philosophical outlook. They will seek to place the burden of choice on someone else. This fear of responsibility reveals the existential position whereby an individual *voluntarily* rejects freedom and transfers the burden of responsibility for ‘building oneself up’ onto the shoulders of others.

This socio-psychological situation can be seen at its greatest contrast within the specially narrow confines of a religion whose stability is organically linked with this existential factor. The Family is a perfect example. We have already noted the remarkable conformity of Family members, and their reduced volition. The reasons for this phenomenon become more understandable in the existential context: the charismatic leader takes upon himself the burden of choice equally on behalf of every one of his followers. In this way he makes them spiritually equal; and does so by levelling their significance as individuals. The equality of his followers, endowed with mystical significance, in fact manifests itself in their complete dependence on the leader. This dependence manifests itself not only in the sacramental sphere, but also in the sphere of everyday life. The Father of the Family extends his influence even into the more intimate areas of their lives. He assumes responsibility for selecting couples who should marry from the members of the Family, and gives them advice on the key issues of everyday life. These pieces of advice seem tactical in nature, but they are obeyed as if they were orders: the followers are completely subordinate to his will, which is the main stabilising factor in this religious group. The Family has turned out to be a viable organism: over a period of almost seven years practically no one has left it.

The Father of the Family tries to suppress rational criticism and to stimulate the emotional level of understanding among his followers, urging them from a world of reason into a world of illusion, with the aim of more successfully instilling in them a

certain view of the world and certain models of behaviour. These efforts occur on two levels: the 'charismatic' and the 'family'.

The former relates to the assertion of the authority of the charismatic leader. Even at the initial phase of the founding of the Family every follower had to acknowledge unequivocally the authority of Beloded, or else leave the community. Those who remained were eager for philosophical certainty, and were fully prepared to subordinate themselves. The further strengthening of the authority of the charismatic leader was helped by his deep personal conviction about his own Calling and the communication of this conviction to those around him by means of the suggestion and repetition of a specific concept.

In the Family this concept was to turn out to be the concept of Heavenly Birth (*Rozhdeniye Svyshe*), the idea that an individual can become God. Moskovichi notes that for propaganda to be successful it is sufficient to have one or two concepts which must then be repeated in various versions and on the most varied range of pretexts. The preaching and ritual practices of the Family – the rites of baptism, marriage and communion – are completely subordinate to this concept. Above all, there is the rite of 'adoption' (*usynovleniye*): the ritual consecration of an individual as a member of the Family, when the Father accepts him with great emotion as one sent from Heaven.

The protection of the Mother of God herself, which we have already remarked on, is also helpful here. In one of her Messages she started calling members of the Society for Spiritual Enlightenment 'Children of God' (*Deti Bozhiye*), acknowledging their spiritual standing and endowing the outlook of each member with mystical substance. This development had a mobilising influence on the charismatic leader's followers and served as a new stimulus for Family activity. The 'adoption' ritual now reinforces the status of a new identity and signifies an acceptance of the individual into the Family. With the same aim, the Family has organised 'psychological unburdening' sessions, accompanied by Bible studies, and other group meetings. The result of such activities has been not only that each individual has come to identify with the new community and its leader, but also that earthly authority has been transformed into heavenly authority, as Beloded, who was at first taken simply to be a 'wise elder', has become in the course of time the Heavenly Father.

Let us now turn to the 'family' level of activity in the Family. Once the stage of asserting the authority of the charismatic leader had been passed, the need arose to create the enduring and close social links in the Family which have given it the stability which we have already remarked on and which have provided it with prospects for development. Organised activities in a legally confirmed context, in which in one way or another all its members are involved, also aim to achieve the acceptance of the spiritual 'family' as one of the chief values of life. New structural subunits have been created: a Council of Elders (*Sovet starshikh*), groups on education and economics, treasurers, a church secretary, a librarian, a person responsible for correspondence and so on. The charismatic leader picks out his most trusted helpers and assigns them special and permanent responsibilities. The sense of mystical unity with the leader, his closest helpers and the other fellow-believers which is felt by every one of the 'Children of God' shapes an image of the Family as 'you' and 'we' which is inseparable from their self-awareness.

In conclusion, we should note that the conformity of behaviour and thought among the followers of this charismatic cult, which has developed as a result of collective identification, is a criterion for its successful operation and one of the conditions for its continued existence. The role of charisma, in connection with stress on Family

values, will certainly not grow any less important. On the contrary, all the activity and relations between its members on a social level are pursued with the aim of confirming its links with the divine sphere, in particular with a charismatic personality. Thus all the developments within the Family reflect the conditioning and submission of its various structural components to a single will – the will of the founder of this religion.

We remarked earlier that the Family belongs to the Christian tradition. However, it is essentially disturbing that tradition, without aspiring to true innovation. This may be explained by the fact that traditional Christian ideas are becoming surrounded here by new interpretations of the ‘family’; they are thereby being transforming and thus assuming the quality of originality. The concept of Heavenly Birth, which lies at the heart of Family teaching, is based in a typically Baptist interpretation, but is close in content to the old concept, typical of the *Khlysty*, of the incarnation of God, when an individual himself becomes a living God. A particular feature of the discussion of this concept in the Family is that it goes beyond strictly religious tradition, and that it is underpinned by certain concepts from Russian religious philosophers (for example, those of Solov’yev on Sofia and of Berdyayev on the ‘Russian Idea’). Eclectically introduced into the doctrines of the Family, including the doctrine of Heavenly Birth, these concepts have however lost their philosophical quality and have been vulgarised. Solov’yev’s concept of Godmanhood (*Bogochelovechestvo*) is here turned into the opposite idea of the ‘Man-God’ (*Chelovekobozhiye*), which the same philosopher rejected, and the ‘Russian Idea’ of Berdyayev is turned into a ‘family’ concept which is foreign to his thinking, being messianic and nationalist in nature.

At the same time, the Family’s attempt to join a national religious tradition, which is associated in doctrine with ‘true living Orthodoxy’, has also turned out to be invalid. For example, the various definitions of ‘Holy Rus’ given in Family literature amalgamate its extra-historical and abstract meanings. Other excursions into the history of national culture are also infused with mythologies and idealisation of the past. In general, any attempt to place the Family in a national religious tradition results in this kind of mythologisation and idealisation of the past.

In response to the example of the Family it is appropriate to refer to the phenomenon of ‘religious postmodernism’. The teachings of the Family are a combination of various types of Christian and religio-philosophical ideas, particularly ideas of Eastern extraction (such as the idea of the transmigration of souls), and they are thus basically innovative. This means that the Family essentially belongs to no one established tradition and is an example of original religious eclecticism.

It is hard to predict its future development. Its durability has been tested over a comparatively short period and is conditioned above all by the role of its charismatic leader. This septuagenarian is already preparing his heir. He plans to pronounce a married couple, chosen from among his closest helpers, parents of the Family, and has already told his followers about this plan. However, he has no intention of giving up his leadership. The Heavenly Father is still full of energy, and while he is at the helm of the Family this indigenous religion will continue to be a vivid and at the same time quite typical phenomenon of postsoviet spiritual culture.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> The dictionary *Novyye religioznyye kul’ty, dvizheniya i organizatsii v Rossii* (RAGS, Moscow, 1998, p. 45) states that at that time there were around 350 new religious movements registered in the country. We believe that most of these are minor variants on about

50 relatively independent confessions. We estimate that there are fewer than half a million followers of new religions in Russia. They make up less than one per cent of the overall number of religiously orientated Russians.

- <sup>2</sup> Ailin Barker, *Novyye religioznyye dvizheniya: prakticheskoye vvedeniye* (St Petersburg, 1997), a translation of Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: a Practical Introduction*.
- <sup>3</sup> Marat Shterin (K. Kaariainen and D. Furman (eds)), *Novyye religioznyye dvizheniya v Rossii 1990-kh godov. Staryye tserkvi, novyye veruyushchiye. Religiya v massovom soznanii postsovetskoi Rossii* (Moscow-St Petersburg, 2000), p. 151.
- <sup>4</sup> L.I. Grigor'yeva, *Svoboda sovesti i aktual'nyye problemy gosudarstvennogo-pravovogo regulirovaniya deyatel'nosti noveishikh netraditsionnykh religioznykh ob'yedinenii* (Krasnoyarsk, 1999), pp. 124–25.
- <sup>5</sup> On the significance of this procedure in the process of social identification, see for example S. Moskovichi, *Mashina, tvoryashchaya bogov* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 53–110.
- <sup>6</sup> See note 5.

(Translated from the Russian by Helen Farrell)