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Recycling Cultural Construction: Desecularisation in Postsoviet Mari El¹

SONJA LUEHRMANN

*Na dalekikh prostorakh Vselennoi,
Gde, kak zhemchug, sozvezd'ya goryat,
Put' prolozhen trudom vdokhnovennym –
nashi chudo-rakety letyat!*

In the far reaches of the Universe,
Where constellations are shining like pearls,
Inspired labour built a path –
Our miracle rockets are flying!

This is the first verse of the song '*V kosmos my prorubili okno*' ('We opened a window into the cosmos') by Dobronravov and Grebennikov, which was part of the programme with which the Atheists' Club of Mari State Pedagogical Institute toured villages of the Mari Republic in 1963 (Nekhoroshkov, 1964, p. 31). If any former members of this club still live in Yoshkar-Ola, the republic's capital, they may be reminded of this song when they walk past the Gagarin monument on the main boulevard connecting the city centre and the railway station. A long iron rod shoots upward from a fountain, spiralling in the middle of its trajectory to form the revolving course of atoms, then rising in a gentle curve to hold up a small space capsule. Anchored to the iron spiral with one foot is a man with arms outstretched, as if he is flying upwards towards the capsule. The naked male figure has no physical resemblance to Gagarin, so it might be humanity as a whole that is shown lifted up by 'inspired labour', through the discoveries of science towards the unlimited reaches of the universe.

Yuri Gagarin's flight to the cosmos in 1961 was a great inspiration not only for national pride in the Soviet Union, but also for atheist propaganda: three poems and songs in the programme of the Atheists' Club refer to the human conquest of the cosmos – 'the heavens wrested away from the Bible' (Nekhoroshkov, 1964, p. 49) – and two of their recommended lecture topics deal with the significance of Soviet cosmonautics for the atheist world view.² When members of Yoshkar-Ola's Lutheran congregation asked me to talk about the results of my two months of fieldwork on religious organisations in their city, I started by showing them a picture of the Gagarin monument, explaining that I thought it exemplified the optimism of scientific atheism – that human beings can, without reliance on divine powers, create a world in which

all will live peacefully and happily. My audience seemed to understand what I was trying to say, and one parishioner, a metal worker whose boss, it turned out, designed the monument, said, with an ironic smirk, 'Yes, it shows the happy communist future'.

The rust covering the monument now, and the bare concrete showing through holes in the thin marble covering of the fountain's edge, seem to be one of the many ironic smirks on the face of the city, saying that the dreams of progress it proclaims came to nothing and were perhaps not worth dreaming at all.³ Yoshkar-Ola, capital of one of the national republics in Russia's Middle Volga region, grew from under 2000 people to 270,000 between 1917 and 1989. Unlike Kazan' and Ufa, the capitals of neighbouring republics, it has not been enriched by oil revenues in the postsoviet period. The city still has little else to boast of than the achievements of socialist cultural construction, rendered less impressive by paint peeling off the facades of neoclassical theatres, worn concrete floors in culture palaces, unheated reading rooms in libraries and untended flowerbeds in front of government buildings.

If the former members of the Atheists' Club might smirk at the rusty monument, there is a chance that some of them, students in the 1960s and 1970s, are today engaged in another form of cultural construction, the building of churches and religious organisations. The government of Mari El now recognises three 'traditional religions' (Russian Orthodoxy, Mari Paganism and Islam)⁴ in the republic, and various other religious organisations are registered with the Ministry of Justice. During my fieldwork in six different religious communities⁵ in Yoshkar-Ola in the summer of 2003 I encountered many people who received an education in what might be called the Soviet 'cultural professions'⁶ and were now active members of religious communities. Former child care workers were teaching at Sunday school, journalists were writing hymns, graduates of an art college were painting icons, and singers and actors were providing the cultural programme following a Mari sacrificial ceremony. What is more, I also saw buildings that had been built as culture houses and cinemas used for religious services. The irony of all this was that 'culture' had been consciously constructed as an antithesis, and substitute, to religion after the October Revolution, and cultural workers and pedagogues were the only part of the Soviet population that was officially required to be atheist.

Scholarship on the Soviet government's efforts to promote atheism in the 1920s and 1930s has emphasised the substitutive character of Soviet atheism: socialist festivals were created to replace religious ones, state rituals used symbolism that paralleled religious symbolism, portraits of Bolshevik leaders replaced icons and the Communist Party replaced God as a source of absolute truth (Peris, 1998, p. 97). It would be easy then to claim that postsoviet transformations simply reverse this substitution, or reveal the religious substance under the thin socialist veneer. This makes light of the difficulty that people active in religious communities today encounter when they think back to times in their lives when they believed that religion was harmful superstition. Placing religion and atheist culture into a relation of substitution also makes it hard to account for the way in which the socialist period itself has shaped people's understanding of religion, and has provided them with skills and resources which they are now bringing into their work for religious organisations.

While substitution of atheist culture for religion is a useful term for talking about Bolshevik strategy, it does little to conceptualise how people dealt with the shifting social significance of religion or atheism. What were the skills, habits of thinking and urban landscapes created in the name of atheist cultural construction, and how are people using them now, when what is commonly referred to as 'postsocialist transition' is threatening to make them obsolete? In this paper, I will use the term

'recycling' to refer to the laborious process by which people transform these skills, habits and buildings, and make them usable in a context for which they were not intended.

'Recycling' is used in historical and cultural studies of landscape to talk about the way postindustrial wastelands, such as former strip mines or industrial parks, are transformed for new uses (see Goin and Raymond, 1999). Terms like 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 26) and 'recuperation' (Stoler, 1995, p. 89) also describe the process by which people combine bits and pieces of various origins and fashion them into new meaning and livelihood, but none of these terms quite matches the combination of temporality and materiality implied in 'recycling'. In order for something to be recycled, it must first be declared to be trash, and then reworked into something else that is regarded as useful. The process is always constrained by the material available (you can make paper clips from an empty can, but not from a broken bottle), and the finished product might bear traces of the recycled material (if a run-down cinema is turned into a church, some people may still find that the layout of the sanctuary reminds them too much of a cinema). Recycling, then, offers a metaphor for what people do with ways of thinking and acting that no longer quite work, and with the remains of an infrastructure that is no longer maintained. Finally, the ability to recycle, or to create necessities from unsuitable material under unfavourable conditions, may itself be a skill which people bring with them from the Soviet economy of shortage, as studies of postsoviet entrepreneurs suggest (Kotkin, 1991, pp. 1–38; Yurchak, 2002).

Focusing more narrowly on the transformation of resources created by Soviet cultural construction into *religious* contexts, I will investigate three kinds of recycling in this paper: of spaces created for Soviet secular culture; of skills people obtained in the Soviet period; and of the concept of ethnicity as articulated in festivals. First I have to clarify the twin concepts of culture and religion as I will use them in this article.

Religion and Culture

Scholarship on secularisation has pointed out that 'culture' and 'religion' as concepts emerged from a process of differentiation during which religion came to be seen as a bounded set of beliefs and practices that were relegated to a 'sacred' domain, distinct from politics and only partially overlapping with culture (Asad, 1993). Some scholars argue that such a differentiation of cultural and religious spheres had not occurred in prerevolutionary Russia (Epshtein, 1994, p. 15). While others might take issue with this claim (cf. Freeze, 1977), Bolshevik activists in the 1920s seem to have held a similar view. For them secularity and culture-building were interconnected projects, necessary to free peasants from the hold of religious superstition and enable them to enter modern life (Trotsky, 1973 [1923]; Young, 1997). In the Volga region the Bolsheviks also encountered a situation in which religion had long been intertwined with other forms of difference to classify populations and assign them privileges and obligations.

In the sixteenth century the Mari homeland of swamps and forests on both sides of the Volga served as a buffer zone between Muscovy and the Khanate of Kazan'. Russian observers noted that the Cheremis, as they called the people now known as Mari, practiced neither Islam nor Orthodox Christianity, but worshipped a variety of gods through sacrifices in sacred groves and at sacred mountains. Mari chieftains became subjects of the tsar in the course of Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan',

which was completed in 1552. One of the ways in which Moscow sought to secure its new possessions was through land grants to monasteries, which were established throughout the Mari and Tatar countryside.

Christianising local populations was not always a government priority, but there were three intense missionary campaigns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, using a combination of coercion (destruction of sacred groves, intimidation) and enticements (freedom from military service for newly baptised men, freedom from taxation for a certain period). In the eighteenth century, some Mari sought to escape christianisation and taxation by moving east to the Bashkir lands; those remaining on the Middle Volga were all baptised by the beginning of the nineteenth century (Kappeler, 1982; Werth, 2002). On the right bank of the Volga – known as *gornaya storona*, or ‘highland’ side – whose population had fought on the Muscovite side in the conquest of Kazan’, Christianity seems to have become relatively well established by then. On the northern, ‘meadow’ side (*lugovaya storona*), however, many villages continued to hold sacrificial ceremonies in sacred groves, articulating beliefs that the world would end if Mari stopped praying to their gods and lived according to the ‘Russian faith’ instead (Popov, 1996). Throughout the nineteenth century waves of Pagan revival and apostasy (some of it in the form of conversion from Orthodoxy to Islam – see Werth, 1998) were interpreted as forms of rebellion by the Russian authorities.

In the 1930s Mari ‘*karty*’ (priests, russianised plural) were arrested in the purges along with Orthodox priests and mullahs, and Soviet antireligious propagandists targeted the economic exploitation and waste they saw in the sacrifice of horses and sheep. In the late 1940s, however, Mari were permitted to hold a ceremony to offer thanks for the Soviet victory in the Second World War (Sanukov, 2000, p. 129; Krasnov, 1959; Shchipkov, 1998).

For the imperial Russian government it was relatively unproblematic to use a mix of criteria, including faith, language and occupation, to categorise the populations of the Volga region, and assign to them different tax and service responsibilities. For the Soviet government religion was not acceptable as a criterion for difference, but Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders had made a commitment to preserving and fostering ethnic difference in the name of liberating nationalities that had been oppressed by the Russian Empire (Martin, 2001, p. 8). This is where the category of ‘culture’ receives its special salience in the multiethnic Volga region.

The understanding of ‘culture’ put forward by the Bolsheviks was very broad: a book entitled *Kul’turnoye stroitel’stvo v Mariiskoi ASSR (Cultural Construction in the Mari ASSR)*, Shomina and Fedorov, 1983), covering the period between 1917 and the Second World War, talks about cinemas, theatres and schools, but also about the opening of hospitals and the construction of railways. ‘Culture’ here seems to be anything that can be seen as an opposite of ‘backwardness’, but it also allowed for certain distinctive traditions of each ethnic group to be ‘developed’ and adapted to the modern world through the development of native-language musical theatre and folkloric performances at festivals. Moreover, culture is presented as public, located in state-sponsored institutions rather than domestic practices or knowledge passed on in the family.

That cultural construction was seen by activists and government officials as a secularising project is best documented by the demonstrative rhetoric of substitution employed by the promoters of Soviet culture. Propaganda texts and images presented clubs, cinemas and culture houses as superior alternatives to churches as places of learning and sociality; socialist festivals and life-cycle rituals were created to enable

people to rest and enjoy themselves without the drunkenness and mindless waste of time and resources that was said to accompany religious festivals (Peris, 1998, pp. 86–93; Trotsky, 1973, p. 39; Petrone, 2000). In the Volga region, festivals for each of the non-Russian nationalities were created in the early 1920s, banned in the 1930s and revived in the 1960s, and promoted explicitly as alternatives to religious festivals observed by these nationalities at the same time of the year. The Mari socialist festival was *Peledysh pairem*, the Festival of Flowers (Solov'ev, 1966), whose history I will come back to in the final section of this essay.

Socialist activists struggled to separate religious content from social, educational or identity-building aspects of folk practices, and to provide new, socialist settings for these desirable aspects (Sadomskaya, 1990). In this respect they were doing more than substituting new forms for old: they were creating new distinctions between folk culture, which was worth preserving, and religion, which needed to be overcome. As the Soviet period progressed scholars of scientific atheism became increasingly aware of the difficulties inherent in making such a distinction (Novikov, 1989), and in postsoviet Mari El religion is presented as an integral part of ethnic culture.

The fact that scientific atheism struggled continuously to understand the resilience of what it considered to be religion shows that the atheist world view never became completely predominant in the Soviet Union. Efforts to create a secular Soviet culture made it risky or impossible to carry out religious practices in public spaces, causing what Tamara Dragadze calls the 'domestication' of religion, its transformation from public and communal to personalised or household-centred practice (Dragadze, 1993). This, Dragadze argues, made people rely less on religious specialists, but depend on their own memory and improvisation for re-enacting and creating meaningful rituals.

The domestication of religion is a salient concept for the Mari Republic, because it offered fewer opportunities for public religious expression than other areas of the Soviet Union. By the 1970s only about half a dozen Orthodox churches were open on the territory of the Republic, none of them in the capital – according to Shchipkov (1998, p. 122) this made Yoshkar-Ola the only capital of a national autonomy within the RSFSR that had no active Orthodox church. Mari sacrificial ceremonies were illegal by definition, because they were held outdoors, and Soviet laws prohibited worship outside designated cult buildings (Popov, 2002, p. 96). Atheist theorists recognised the potential of domestic settings to hide and reproduce religion and claimed that the best antidote to religiosity was to involve believers more actively in Soviet public life (Sofronov, 1973, p. 8).

Many of the adults I interviewed in Mari El did indeed have childhood memories of parents or grandparents who prayed before icons at home or took them on long walks to attend holiday services. People I met at a Pagan⁷ prayer ceremony told me that during Soviet times no ceremonies were held in the sacred groves, but that children were still warned not to play there out of respect for the spirits. A woman in her thirties who moved to Yoshkar-Ola from a village told me, on the way to the same ceremony, how her parents taught her to be respectful of all living beings, to apologise to the forest for taking anything out of it and to clear forest paths of any leaves or sticks when walking through the woods. Her parents never explained these actions to her, but since becoming involved with the postsoviet revival of Pagan ceremonies (Popov, 2002), she had come to understand these practices in the light of what she was hearing and reading about Mari Paganism.

In some ways, then, religious life in Mari El after socialism can be understood as people making public what had been relegated to a domestic sphere and recovering

and revaluing childhood memories. However, I will argue that the public, atheist culture in which most people who are now adults in Mari El were educated is at least as significant to the social lives of congregations today as the religious practices, or memories of them, that were passed down in some families. Sometimes in my fieldwork I heard people comment directly on the problems of using skills learned during the Soviet period in postsoviet religious contexts. Members of one Protestant congregation complained that their deacon, a graduate of the Pedagogical Institute and retired journalist, spoke and acted 'like a Soviet bureaucrat' in his sermons and in church council. When I asked former cultural workers who are now active in churches whether their Soviet training was useful to them in their present work, I received detailed and thoughtful answers that seemed to indicate that people had considered this question before. When it came to the ways in which buildings were transformed from secular to religious uses, my questions met less interest – no one except myself seemed to find it ironic that the Lenin Culture Palace had been the major meeting place of Protestant groups in Yoshkar-Ola in the early 1990s.

I will come back to this lack of interest, but I still want to consider skills and buildings together, as resources which were created by Soviet cultural construction with the aim of building a secular society in which religion would have no place, and which are now being recycled and put to use for the purposes of religious organisations. Following Tatiana Barchunova, who has spoken of the 'desecularisation of medicine' in postsoviet Russia (Barchunova, 2003), I will argue that there is a (partial) desecularisation of culture in Mari El, keeping in mind that both secularisation and desecularisation are partial projects that are interesting in their failures as much as in their successes. What interests me is the process by which this desecularisation is achieved: not simply by reverse substitution, but by recycling secular into religious forms retaining the traces of the secular material that is reworked in them.

Spaces: The Affinity of Church and Cinema

The cinema competes not only with the tavern, but also with the church. And this rivalry may become fatal for the church if we make up for the separation of the church from the socialist state by the fusion of the socialist state and the cinema.

Leon Trotsky, 'Vodka, the church, and the cinema' (Trotsky, 1973), p. 39

This type of recycling takes its most tangible form in the reallocation of space between religious and secular functions. After the October Revolution, church buildings and grounds were put to secular use or destroyed. In the postsoviet period, disputes over worship space engage the members of various religious organisations, the city administration and residents of the city in debates over the role of religion in public life.

A map of Yoshkar-Ola showing buildings used for religious worship in in the 1970s would have shown the Orthodox church in the village of Semenovka just east of the city limits, a house used by the Seventh Day Adventists on the southwestern edge of town, and a group of unregistered Baptists meeting in someone's home.⁸ Drawing a similar map for 2003 we would see two Russian Orthodox churches in the centre of the city, on Karl Marx Street. One of them, the Cathedral of the Ascension, is an eighteenth-century church that was returned to church ownership in 1992 and restored after having served as a beer brewery. The other church, Trinity Cathedral, is still

under construction on the site of a church that was destroyed in the 1930s, but services are already being held in the lower sanctuary. The offices of the Orthodox diocese and a nursery school/centre for adult education are located on the same street. A third church, also centrally located, lies on the territory of the city park, a cemetery before the revolution. About halfway between the two cathedrals on Karl Marx Street stands a cross commemorating the site of the Church of the Resurrection, which was closed in 1928, served as a cinema between 1931 and 1941, and then again as a church, before being torn down in 1961 (Starikov and Levenshtein, 2001).

All other religious organisations are further from the centre and none of them had confiscated property to claim after *perestroika*. A mosque opened in one of the southern districts (*mikroraiony*) in 1988, constructed as a result of the efforts of a group of local Tatars (Devlet, 1991, p. 111). A number of Protestant churches are either renting auditorium space in culture houses for their services, or have purchased plots of land with or without buildings on them. Several of them started out using the auditorium of the Lenin Culture Palace, but the new director who took over the Palace in 2000 is refusing to rent to Protestant groups. Since then a registered Baptist group has been meeting weekly in the Culture House of the All-Russian Society of the Blind. The Neoapostolic Church meets in the Culture House of the Society of the Deaf.⁹

An Evangelical Protestant mission funded by a church in Beauford, Texas, has purchased a former cinema and renamed it Yoshkar-Ola Christian Center. In contrast to these groups, who are claiming former Soviet public spaces for religious purposes, the Lutherans, the Seventh Day Adventists and a group of unregistered Baptists have bought houses and their surrounding plots of land in the so-called 'private sector' of individual wooden houses which surrounds the planned apartment blocks of the city. Both Lutherans and Adventists conducted services in the wooden house while constructing a church building on the garden plot. The Lutherans received funds and volunteer labour from Finland to build their church, which was consecrated in 1996; the Adventists raised money in the United States and recruited Adventists from other Russian cities to build their prayer house, completed in 2003.

Pagan worship spaces lie outside the city and in general not in the vicinity of Yoshkar-Ola.¹⁰ In recent years, the organisation *Mari ushem* has begun to sponsor celebrations of *Agavairem* (a ritual held after spring sowing) in a park at the edge of the city where an old oak tree is venerated by both Mari and Russian Pagans.¹¹ Parks are an important example of Soviet public spaces created in acts of demonstrative substitution for sacred sites. Yoshkar-Ola's central park was founded on the site of the town's cemetery and people remember using the building of the cemetery church as a public toilet. Atheist writings from the 1960s proudly note that former sacred groves in the countryside are now parks where collective farmers spend their free time, and recount instances of socialist festivals and exhibitions being held in these groves (Solov'ev, 1966, p. 13; *Mariiskaya pravda*, 19 June 1965, p. 1).

Forcing people to violate the rules for respectful behaviour in sacred spaces was a common pedagogical strategy of atheist propaganda (Dragadze, 1993, p. 152; Peris, 1998, pp. 90–92), designed both to humiliate believers and to show them that nothing terrible would happen if they defecated on consecrated ground, stepped on roads paved with gravestones, danced on graves, or entered sacred grounds without knowledge of the proper prayers. Public parks and buildings were constructed as places of openness, accessibility and visibility, as opposed to the taboos, hierarchical restrictions and secrecy associated with sacred spaces.

This strategy was successful in so far as people do have fond memories of dances in the park, even those who, in the same breath, expressed to me their horror of the idea

of having danced on graves.¹² However, I was told many stories about sudden deaths of people who participated in the destruction and closure of churches, and heard that children growing up in Mari villages were warned not to play in those parts of the woods that had been ceremonial sites (see also Dragadze, 1993, p. 152). Today, the boundaries of Orthodox Christian as well as Pagan places of worship are strongly marked through rules for dress and behaviour. This markedness might actually have increased during the Soviet period, when worship could take place only in designated cult buildings or at secret, secluded spots, and when secular norms of proper dress changed to diverge more strongly from the norms of religious practice. Orthodox churches are surrounded by a fence or a wall and at the moment of entering the gate, women pull a scarf over their heads, while men take off any cap or hat they may be wearing. Women who enter a church in trousers or with uncovered heads can be severely reprimanded and asked to leave, typically by older women. Likewise, before attending a Mari sacrificial ceremony I was told that women should be in skirts and headscarf, but received advice from other women that I should wear trousers for the long bus ride and hike to the site and only change once I reached it. When we reached the foot of the sacred mountain, people went off behind trees and bushes in family groups and changed from their street clothing, many of them into elaborately embroidered national costume. In both Orthodox and Pagan settings, the difference between everyday clothing and clothing worn for worship is most marked for younger, urban women, who started dressing in miniskirts or trousers during the Soviet period, while older women tend to wear skirts and kerchiefs on a daily basis.

The significance of performed distinctions between sacred and secular spaces is heightened by an opposition between public spectacle and proper religious ceremony that seemed salient to many people I spoke to. Olga Kalinina, an ethnographer who works on Mari festivals, expressed to me her dissatisfaction with the way *Agavairem* was celebrated in the park near Yoshkar-Ola. With beer drinking, singing and dancing right at the sacrificial site, she could see that the younger generation was not taking the festival seriously. Holding a ceremony under such conditions meant educating people about the past rather than carrying on a tradition: 'After all [in a festival] there should be feelings, if there is no more festival, then it is gone'.¹³

What Kalinina expressed seems to be a sentiment of regret over the losses that occur when public spaces are recycled back into religious use, but retain their aesthetic of pedagogical spectacle. For her and other residents of Mari El, sacred spaces are marked by norms of behaviour and dress that set them apart from secular places of gathering, entertainment and learning. This may help us understand the scandal caused by forms of religious worship that unabashedly appropriate forms of public spectacle, while still claiming for themselves the aura of the sacred.

The most controversial religious institution in Yoshkar-Ola is the Christian Center, which everyone except its members insists on calling 'the American Center', in the former cinema *Mir*. Constructed in the 1970s at the endpoint of the main thoroughfare of one of the youngest parts of the city, the cinema had stood empty for a few years after closing in the early 1990s. It was bought in 1996 by a congregation founded by Evangelical missionaries from Texas, whose members were already infamous among city officials for the tent missions and concerts they kept asking permission to organise. In 2001 the Center sued the city when it was denied permission to pitch a big festival tent for Christian music and revivalist preaching in one of the city's parks during the Russian Independence Day festivities on 12 June. From the mid-1990s onwards the national holidays created for each ethnicity during the Soviet period have been celebrated on this day, so that the two most centrally

located parks are occupied by the Mari *Peledysh pairem* and Tatar *Sabantui*, while the Russian *Berezka* is celebrated on the wide steps of the Russian Theatre. The presidential advisor on religious affairs told me about this case with visible exasperation: 'All sites in the city are already distributed (*raspisany*) on this day. Who do these people think they are, that they can come here a week ago yesterday and tell us, give us a place for our tent?'¹⁴ She also expressed sympathy for the neighbours of the Center, who were exposed to the loud, rock-style music that is played during services.

That the neighbours actually hear this music is unlikely, because, like any self-respecting Soviet cinema, *Mir* was designed to be surrounded by a generous open space. The traffic on Peace Street veers off to the right a few hundred yards before reaching the cinema, and trees surround the stretch of cracked asphalt leading up to the steps in front of the building. The grassy areas in the middle of the asphalt were once flowerbeds and are one of those ironic smirks remembering the grand hopes of the city, but the former cinema itself is newly painted and surrounded by a brand new, bright-blue wrought-iron fence, topped with gilded crosses. This fence, constructed after the Center's lawsuit was rejected, is the latest cause of scandal surrounding the Evangelicals. In July 2003 a hostile newspaper article accused the mission of targeting military personnel in order to extract secret information from them and speculated about the origins of the 365,000 roubles allegedly spent on the fence (Batanov, 2003, p. 13).

Whether or not it really cost over US \$10,000, anyone who has been inside the former cinema would know that the fence was surely not the most expensive part of the yet unfinished renovation project – the kitchen, complete with fireplace, and the fully tiled bathrooms with shining, imported fixtures are far more striking displays of luxury, seeming to come out of advertisements for *yevroremont* (eurorenovations) and contrasting sharply with the paint coming off the walls in the auditorium-turned-sanctuary, where the worn red velvet covers must remind many members of the congregation of the films they watched sitting on these squeaking seats.

Most people in Yoshkar-Ola, however, have never seen the inside of the building since the cinema *Mir* closed down. To them, the fence is an outside sign of transformations going on inside. It reorganises and redefines the space surrounding the building that is still known throughout the city as 'the former cinema *Mir*' and as such is the Center's first visible claim to an irreversible transformation of the cinema into a church. In a city where squares and boulevards lead up to the steps of public buildings, for an important street to end at a fence is a palpable breach of aesthetics. For a former cinema to surround itself with a fence and gate is also a claim to the same respect that would be due an Orthodox Church, while challenging the idea – expressed by Trotsky in this section's epigraph – of the opposition between church and cinema. The idea of a stage from which messages and experiences are communicated to an audience is shared by socialist cinema and evangelical Protestantism, while Orthodox and Mari Pagan worship have a different spatial organisation: instead of speaker/preacher and audience facing each other, priests and lay believers together face the altar, standing before the sacred being(s) they are worshipping. This means that for Orthodox believers, turning a cinema into a church is not a sign of the triumph of Christianity over secular modernity, the way that turning a church into a cinema was a sign of triumph for Bolshevik culture. Rather it shows a surrender of proper religious observances to secularised sensibilities.

Such different ideas about the proper spatial organisation of worship may lie behind disagreements over the legitimacy of the desecularisation of spaces in Yoshkar-Ola.

The renovation and reconsecration of a brewery or public toilet into a church can be seen as a return to an original state (a removal of the substitutive layer of secularisation) – although the skills necessary for such a restoration are not easy to come by, as we shall see in the next section of this essay. The construction of a new church building in a part of the city where churches never existed, by a denomination that is perceived as foreign to Russia, and with financial support from abroad, as was done by the Lutherans and Adventists, can be seen as a dangerous attempt to take root in the republic¹⁵ and lay claim to the respectability of the ‘traditional’ religions. I never heard anyone doubt that these buildings were churches, although some of my Orthodox interlocutors insisted that they would never set foot in them.

The cases of services being held in culture houses are more complicated. They bring to the fore the problematic consequences of recycling, when materials are used for something they were not intended for, potentially creating an inferior product, polluted by traces of inappropriate materials. Orthodox and Lutheran friends, many of whom had never been in an Evangelical service, usually found it hard to imagine how anybody could be serious about worshipping God in an auditorium. ‘So it’s just a concert?’ asked the 19-year-old daughter of the woman in whose apartment I was staying when I told her about the testimonials and offerings of poetry and song for which people came on stage in the Baptist service. Among Evangelical Protestants themselves I heard some jokes about the blind and the deaf hosting the Baptists and Neoapostolics, but in general people seemed to find it quite normal to worship in spaces designed for concerts or film projection.

When I came to the Christian Center to talk to the assistant minister (one of the former army officers who arouse the suspicions of the local press) and told him that I was curious to learn more about the transformation of the cinema into a church, he seemed surprised: ‘What shall I tell you? It was a cinema, now it is a church’.¹⁶ When the mission bought it, he explained, the building had not been used for several years and was in a terrible state, but the members of the congregation renovated it with their own labour. Although renovation work (and painting of the fence) was still going on, he was clearly more interested in discussing his own missionary activity visiting army units, prisons and hospitals and in asking me about the religious situation in Germany. Part of the reason may be that buildings are downplayed in Evangelical Protestantism – at the ceremony of dedication (not consecration!) of the Adventist church (on 5 July 2003) almost every speaker repeated the admonition not to see the building as sacred in itself, but to ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify the community gathered in it (cf. Coleman, 2000, pp. 153–54). Besides, the style and spatial orientation of Evangelical worship is well suited to theatre-like halls, and Evangelical churches in the West tend to be constructed according to this principle.¹⁷

If the architecture of culture houses and cinemas presents no obstacle to Evangelical worship, the Soviet-era memories associated with these buildings might be expected to be more problematic. What surprised me was that, although I heard several accounts of the Bible schools and worship meetings that started in 1991 in the Lenin Culture Palace, no one who had attended them seemed to see anything ironic in the use of a facility of that name for the purpose of religious instruction. Soviet culture houses, grown out of a tradition of European working-class efforts to create their own public spaces (Hain, 1996), had been portrayed as the antithesis of churches from the 1920s on (Peris, 1998, p. 218; Solov’ev, 1966, p. 7; Nekhoroshkov, 1964, pp. 46–47). Lenin, ‘our unextinguishable beacon’, was invoked in the first song of the programme of the Atheists’ Club (Nekhoroshkov, 1964, p. 29). It might be seen as a sign of the failure of Soviet secularisation that by the early 1990s people who had grown up in the Soviet

Union did not read the name of Lenin, or the idea of culture, as antithetical to religious practices. However, if people considered the auditoriums of the culture houses as proper spaces to gather and learn about religion – and if congregations without their own building still insist on their right to use these spaces in the face of what they see as combined state and Orthodox opposition – this also attests to the success of the Soviet project of creating urban communities with certain habits of collective entertainment and learning. It is to a discussion of these habits and the skills developed through them that I now turn.

People: ‘When You Are With God, Everything Is Possible’

Once a week Aunt Valya,¹⁸ as she is respectfully called in her congregation, leads a Baptist prayer group in her two-room apartment in a five-storey block from the 1960s in the northern part of the city. Born in a village in Kirov *oblast’* in 1949, Aunt Valya is a retired child care worker who now devotes her energy to conducting Bible studies with adults in the Baptist congregation and administering a distant learning programme which takes people through a series of Bible study booklets from a German distributor. After the dozen or so people who had gathered in her apartment for Bible study and prayer had left, she pulled out her photo albums to tell me about her life, from childhood photos of herself and her twin sister, through pictures of children sitting in neat rows under a portrait of Lenin or dancing around the New Year’s Tree, to snapshots of baptisms and group photos of her congregation with visiting preachers from abroad. She had never expected to have so many photographs, she explained, and now the second big album was already overflowing.

Before showing me the pictures, Aunt Valya had told me that she had been part of that first Bible school that started in the Lenin Culture Palace in 1991 and had been baptised in the first baptism conducted by the Baptist minister in 1993. While we were looking at pictures from her years in various nursery schools, she told me that she had been the propagandist for her work collective. ‘Lord, forgive me for this disgrace!’, she would mutter when commenting on pictures of herself surrounded by colleagues under Leninist banners. She also said that, unbeknown to herself, God was already preparing her for her future mission even before she ‘knew him’. Many pictures from Soviet years showed her travelling to various Soviet republics and to Bulgaria – ‘Lord, I did not know you yet, and you were already leading me.’ After the collapse of the Soviet Union and her retirement, she had expected that her time of travel would be over, but since getting involved with the Baptist congregation, she had travelled to Nizhni Novgorod and Tatarstan, opportunities which, along with the fact that she never suffered want despite her small pension and her husband’s unreliable income, she ascribed to God’s miraculous way of making all things easy.

This trope of ‘everything is easy with God’, as well as the idea that God was preparing people for future duties even as some of them were actively engaged in making propaganda against religious beliefs, was repeated by several of my Protestant interview partners. Marina Kudryavtseva was a younger Mari woman (born 1968) who graduated from the Pedagogical Institute just as the Soviet Union was collapsing, when the state was not paying salaries and becoming a teacher of English and German must have looked like a terrible prospect. She received a fellowship from the Kastren Society to study in Finland in 1993,¹⁹ and became a translator and Sunday school teacher in the Lutheran congregation, travelling with Finnish missionaries to various parts of Russia. She also claimed that for a Christian, everything was provided by God – if you did not have enough money to get something you needed, someone

would give it to you, or provide access to it at a cheaper rate (see also Wanner, 2003, pp. 282–83).²⁰ When I asked Aunt Valya to talk about her work as a propagandist, she stressed how difficult it had been to talk about the successes of Leninist policy or the dangerous machinations of sectarians ('God forgive me') to people who just wanted to go home after a long day of work.²¹ When talking about her current work in the church, by contrast, she portrayed it as very easy to relay the gospel message to her audience, thanks to the autonomous agency of the word of God, but also because of her prior preparation: her pedagogical training and experience enabled her to present the gospel to her audience in simple and engaging examples and her propaganda work took away the fear of public speaking.

When I asked Marina and another pedagogue, Zoya Utkina, who had taught art at the Pioneer Palace for 15 years before starting to work with children in the Lutheran church, whether their Soviet training had been useful to them, both readily acknowledged that it had. Marina stressed that Soviet pedagogy had many good sides, but that it was wrong in talking only about a person's obligations to society ('work, work, give up everything'), instead of people's obligations to themselves and each other. Interestingly, her description of the effects of Christian education in the family on society sounded very much like the idea that the 'family is the stem cell of society', which she had denounced earlier as a socialist platitude: 'Parents have to pass on this spirit of love, cooperation, mutual respect to their children, between sisters, between brothers. If all this exists in the family, then it will also be there on the streets, in society, in the whole country.'²² The difference, for her, lay in the way that a Christian education would build up a spiritual individual first, which would then benefit society, whereas socialist education taught the individual to sacrifice him or herself to society. Toward the end of the interview, she returned to the similarities between Soviet (or, more specifically, *perestroika*) pedagogy and missionary work by quoting a concept from her pedagogical education when asked about methods for spreading the gospel: 'Everywhere we need an "individual, differentiated approach"', so to speak, just as in pedagogy [laughs] – it's like that here, too.²³

Zoya claimed that she had always taught in ways that were contrary to Soviet standards, showing the children more love than teachers ordinarily would and treating them as equals.²⁴ Asked about differences between Soviet and religious pedagogy, she told a story of taking a class in the Lutheran seminary in Koltushi near St Petersburg, where she was surprised to learn that the Finnish instructors did not agree with the Soviet dictum that a child should never be punished, but taught that, according to the Bible, corporal punishment could be beneficial to a child's spiritual development.

Zoya did not tell me if she applied that new strictness in her Sunday school teaching. When I observed interactions between these teachers and their students, I did think that they brought with them many habits familiar to me from secular postsoviet classrooms.²⁵ There were little exclamations such as '*Nu ka, vspomnim!*' ('Come on, let's remember!' – an imperative form used when addressing children and social subordinates) with which Aunt Valya nudged her adult audience to provide her the answers she thought they should be prepared to give. There was also the pride and care with which instructors gathered children's drawings and photographs into elaborate wall displays and the emphasis on presenting what was learned in the form of skits and songs. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the fact that both learners and teachers have dwindling possibilities for such classroom experiences outside the churches. Out-of-school activities for children that are free, but held in a well-heated room with a sufficient supply of crayons, paper and other necessities are hard to find

in contemporary Yoshkar-Ola, as is a job that pays a living wage for someone with a pedagogical education. While Zoya claimed that she made about as much in her job at the Pioneer Palace as she is paid by the Lutheran congregation now, Marina said that she had had little desire to become a teacher in the early 1990s, when salaries plummeted through inflation and were sometimes not paid for months. Aunt Valya volunteers her time as a Bible study leader, but clearly receives a sense of purpose and connectedness from her work that seemed lacking in her account of her last years of employment, moving between nursery schools that kept getting closed and restructured.

Another interview partner, the writer and journalist Nikolai Ivanov, was the third, and last, Mari to graduate from the Higher Party School in Moscow. He found after returning to Yoshkar-Ola in 1990 that the leading positions on editorial boards that his training had prepared him for were being eliminated. His last position, editor-in-chief of a journal for teachers, ended when Nikolai, then in his early forties, suffered a heart attack. In our interview he talked about the attack in connection with confrontations with laid-off staff members and lawsuits over the distribution of apartments in a cooperative house for journalists. He also traced his conversion to Lutheranism to his stay in the hospital, where he received a Gideon Bible (New Testament and Psalms) from another patient. Talking about his current work writing hymns and liturgical texts in the Mari language, he referred to it as a way of doing the kind of work for the good of his people that he had been preparing for.²⁶

Many of these Protestant intellectuals said that they were drawn to Protestant churches by the opportunities for studying and understanding the Bible they offered, which they contrasted with the ritualism of Orthodoxy and Paganism. There certainly are differences between religious groups in Mari El when it comes to modes of knowing and acting in worship. However, Protestant churches are not the only religious institutions in which graduates of Soviet cultural and educational institutions can recycle their skills. Many are active in Orthodox and Pagan organisations as well, but these people talk about their lives in a more seamless fashion, with less emphasis on a conversion experience that made them re-evaluate their previous behaviour.

At the Pagan prayer ceremony I attended, the creative intelligentsia of the republic was well represented,²⁷ and the concert of Mari songs that followed in the evening – at a respectful distance from the ceremonial site – featured many patriotic songs from the Soviet era, praising the beauty of the Mari country and the diligence of its workers. The icon painters who are preparing the iconostasis for the new Trinity Cathedral are all graduates of the local art academy who are experimenting with old recipes for tempera and studying from books in order to revive an art form that was not taught at their school.

The example of icon painting illustrates that each religious community enforces its own standards on what material is acceptable for recycling into religious contexts. The icon painters need the blessing of the bishop in order to do their work, which he bestows on them when he is convinced that they are following the canons prescribing the motifs and colours as well as the succession of tasks in which an icon is painted. The church thus guards against the emphasis on individual creativity that these painters may be bringing from art school. In another move of distancing from secular art, the style that the painters are trying to revive is not the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century one in which most iconostases in the Volga region were created, and which was heavily influenced by western painting. Rather, like icon painters elsewhere in postsoviet Russia, the workshop in Yoshkar-Ola is trying to

rediscover the secrets of the classical period of Russian icons, exemplified by the work of Andrei Rublev from the fourteenth century.²⁸ This specific form of historicism is apparent in the restoration of Orthodox churches more generally – little attempt is made to restore churches either to their appearance prior to desecration, or to a posited original state, which, in the Mari region, could be no earlier than the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Rather restorations aim at a style of decoration which is associated with the period in Russian church history when a maximum independence from Byzantium had been reached, but Western European influence had not yet become strong. The painters I spoke to all said that they first became interested in religious art, and in religion in general, through books with reproductions of such classical icons. Striving to recreate a style which is thought to exemplify a notion of the image as a window to another world, opposed to secular notions of art as representation, these painters recycle habits from their Soviet-era art school training: learning from books, sending out members of a work collective for practice with distant specialists and creative mixing of available materials in the search for the right kind of paint.

All religious communities in Yoshkar-Ola draw on the skills available in the population and provide ways of using skills that are threatened with becoming obsolete in the life of the city. In the memories of my interview partners, their Soviet education and professional careers had a far greater place than any secret, or domesticated, religiosity. My Protestant interlocutors in particular had highly ambivalent childhood memories of religion. Nikolai remembered his fear when he was baptised at the age of five by a priest – ‘bearded, clothed in black’ – who would come through the villages once in a while to take the children to a room with a big kettle of water. He interpreted his fear as Mari historical memory of forced baptisms, but if rumours about terrifying priests plunging children into water circulated in the villages, while parents still had their children baptised, this also suggests that Christianity in the Mari countryside represented a (potentially threatening) authority rivalling the Soviet state, rather than a carefully guarded part of peasant domestic life. Aunt Valya had an equally uncanny memory of taking off her red Pioneer’s scarf (a symbol of participation in Soviet state institutions) every time she walked past the church on her way between school and home, adding that she could not explain now why she did it, except out of a vague sense of fear.

I have not heard such ambivalent memories from people who are now active in the Orthodox Church, so it may be that Protestants have more ‘conflicted’ (emotionally ambivalent) attitudes to the kinds of church authority they encountered during the Soviet period. They also frequently accuse the Orthodox Church and the Pagan movement of being too entangled with current political interests, while seeing themselves as persecuted by state agents for the sake of the truth. However, the ambivalence toward the potentially threatening qualities of religion expressed in such memories resonates with wider debates concerning the role of religion in public life in Mari El. In interesting ways, it is a recycling of motifs of atheist propaganda, in which everything dark and fearful was linked to religion and everything bright and promising to the atheist science that enabled humans to fly to the shining stars. In the final section of this essay, I will explore the history of *Peledysh pairem*, the Mari national festival created during the Soviet period as a substitute for religious rituals, as an example of the difficulties that result when people try to recycle the optimism of Soviet festivals into a new kind of public sphere from which religion is no longer excluded.

Festivals

But all these festivals – the ‘pagan’ ones as well as the orthodox – were of no benefit to anyone, except for *karty* and priests. The working people remained in poverty. Neither *Kugu yumo* with his helpers, nor the numerous hosts of ‘saints’ were of any help to them. Religion undermined people’s belief in their own strength, suppressed living, creative thought, and placed their hopes and expectations in nonexistent gods and spirits.

(Solov’ev, 1966, p. 5)

Religious festivals were one of the main targets of the substitutive strategies of Soviet atheism. Across the Soviet Union religious rituals were branded as a waste of time and resources and as times of senseless drunkenness detrimental to workers’ health and discipline. From the early 1920s on Soviet secular holidays were promoted to replace the religious ones. In line with the Bolshevik commitment to liberating the ethnic groups of the Russian Empire and helping them develop national cultures ‘socialist in content’, national minorities were encouraged to develop their own festivals (Martin, 2001, p. 12). In the Mari ASSR the festival was named *Peledysh pairem* (Festival of Flowers) and first organised in 1920 by students of the teachers’ college in the village of Sernur. It was timed to coincide with *Semyk*, a Mari spring festival commemorating the dead. Throughout the 1920s village councils and collective farms were encouraged to pledge not to celebrate *Semyk*, Easter and Pentecost, but to wait for the end of spring sowing to celebrate *Peledysh pairem* and recognise exemplary workers. In some villages, the festival was held in the sacred grove, as an additional gesture of substitution (Solov’ev, 1966, pp. 9–13).

That the substitution of the secular, folkloric festival for religious ones was never complete is shown by the recurrence of resolutions throughout the 1920s pledging not to celebrate the religious festivals, but to prepare ‘gifts of labour’ for *Peledysh pairem*. *Peledysh pairem* fell into disgrace in 1931, at the beginning of the Stalinist crackdown on ‘bourgeois nationalism’ (Sanukov, 2000, p. 36). In 1965, when the festival was revived after a hiatus of over 30 years, the same kinds of pledges were still being collected (Solov’ev, 1966, pp. 17–18). This fits with Peris’ observation that Soviet atheist campaigns, because of their bureaucratic organisation, concentrated on short-term actions that produced countable results that could be quantified for final reports (Peris, 1998, p. 103): so many collective farms pledged to forego Easter and *Semyk*, so many over-fulfilments of work norms were achieved in preparation for *Peledysh pairem*.

However, the epigraph of this section, from a book by a local scholar of atheism about the revival of *Peledysh pairem*, indicates that festivals were thought to produce more than just quantifiable results. By turning around Solov’ev’s negative images of religious festivals, we can extrapolate that he thought Soviet festivals were supposed to be beneficial to people in giving them strength and creativity, and directing their hopes and expectations towards a realistic, this-worldly future. In her study of Stalinist celebrations Karen Petrone has noted that they ‘articulated a temporal definition of what it meant to be Soviet’ and ‘provided a glimpse of future prosperity in the present’ (Petrone, 2000, p. 11). The Soviet state expended considerable resources on celebrations and the appearance of otherwise scarce goods just before official holidays associated these days with abundance and prosperity even for people who might not personally have felt much enthusiasm for the Soviet project (Petrone, 2000, p. 17). The aim of atheist propaganda was to reorient people toward optimistic labour

for a brighter future. Religion, by contrast, was portrayed as 'pessimistic in its foundation' (Sofronov, 1973, p. 29), preaching the necessity of suffering in this world for the sake of happiness in an illusory afterlife.

Teachers and students preparing to be teachers contributed to the reorientation toward a happy communist future in important ways. Sergei Chavain, the Mari national poet later killed in the Stalinist purges, 'set off every religious festival with a mass event' in the village school where he was teaching (Solov'ev, 1966, p. 13). A retired teacher who had been among the students from the village of Sernur who travelled out into the hamlets in order to persuade people to celebrate the new holiday in 1920 was asked to reminisce about the experience in 1965, when *Peledysh pairem* was being revived. He remembered combining his agitation for the new holiday with talks on 'cleanliness in the house, against the *shymak*, for rotation of crops'.²⁹ A female retiree remembered her work as a teacher in 1926, when she worked with 75 girls to create modern Mari costumes in preparation for the holiday. 'Thus V.S. Stepanova in 1926 brought 75 illiterate girls into the new culture', the article concludes. 'One of the them, A.V. Smirnova, went on to become an agitator during the war.'³⁰ Solov'ev credits Stepanova with creating the modern Mari costume, which features large floral designs in bright colours instead of the highly stylised, cross-stitched red-and-black ornaments that were thought to protect the wearer from evil spirits (Solov'ev, 1966, p. 12).

While Soviet festival culture changed after Stalin's death, the enthusiasm for the cosmos of 1960s atheist propaganda shows that it found new themes to capture its futuristic imagination. Whether or not activists and audiences were actually infected by this spirit of optimism, there is a striking contrast between it and the mood out of which postsoviet religious organisations emerged. In many interviews the year 1993 came up as a crucial time at which people turned toward religion. That year the Orthodox diocese of Yoshkar-Ola and Mari El was established, as were the Lutheran and Baptist congregations. The Adventists and Evangelicals held their first big revivals with American preachers. Marina and Aunt Valya were baptised. All these people remembered the early 1990s as a very difficult time – no pay, no money to buy anything and the feeling that some people were becoming very rich at the expense of others.

The same gloomy tone permeated the official Russian-language newspaper of the republic in 1993, a tone any atheist theorist might have seized upon to prove the link between religiosity and hopelessness. Articles were concerned with the high price of butter, schools forced to open their own businesses in order to cover expenses, factories of farm machinery beginning to produce sausage to feed their workers, and emigration. Letters to the editor asked why bread was more expensive in some places than in others, or complained about rising crime rates. Occasional brighter spots came from reports about visitors from foreign countries (until the late 1980s Yoshkar-Ola was closed to visitors from non-socialist countries because of its weapons industry) or reopenings of churches.

The overall picture is that of a time of insecurity in which nothing was dependable, whether it was the price of butter or the idea that a school is a place of education and a tractor factory a place that produces tractors. State employees were among the most adversely affected in this period, when their plummeting salaries were sometimes not paid for months. Having lived through this period, the teachers and professionals I talked with in 2003 remembered Soviet festivals with a good deal of ironic smirks, but with some regret as well. Many talked about sneaking away from May Day demonstrations and standing with freezing feet through the speeches on the

anniversary of the October Revolution, but almost invariably added that now that they were gone, people were missing these festivals, regretting that there was nothing to celebrate any more since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was a commonplace in many conversations that the Soviet holidays had no meaning any more, but that the Soviet period had also succeeded in making the religious holidays meaningless. In January 1996 the local folklorist Marina Kopylova organised an exhibit of children's drawings, 'Festival Culture through the Eyes of Our Children', to draw attention to the need for joy in the lives of children 'from whom practically all festivals have been taken, except 9 May and New Year', as she writes in the catalogue (Kopylova, 1996, p. 3).

Peledysh pairem and its Tatar equivalent *Sabantui* are, together with New Year and 9 May, the day of victory over Nazi Germany, the only Soviet-period holidays which are still marked by big public celebrations in Yoshkar-Ola.³¹ In the 1990s the administration started to join the Mari and Tatar festivals to Russian Independence Day celebrations on 12 June. In the city, this day, commemorating the declaration of sovereignty of the RSFSR in 1990, is a show of diversity in unity: Mari, Tatars and Russians each occupy a park or square and celebrate their festival with folkloric performances, dances and – mainly in the case of Tatar *Sabantui* – athletic competitions. While none of these festivals are framed as religious ceremonies, neither are they cast as antidotes to religion. In 2003 the High Priest of Mari El made a brief appearance at the Mari celebration in the central park (the one that used to be a cemetery). On the *Sabantui* fairgrounds there was a stand selling Islamic literature and women's white lace headscarves, and there was a fair number of men in *tyubeteika* skull caps and women in headscarves among the audience. Religion was being celebrated as part of an ethnic culture that had, at the beginning of the Soviet era, been constructed to exclude religion.

The conflict over the Evangelical church's attempt to claim its own space during the 12 June celebrations shows the reluctance of town administrators to allow any kind of public religious expression that cannot be subsumed under the umbrella of an ethnic culture. In part, this may be understood as an attempt to protect the peace between people of various nationalities, which might be disrupted by Protestant evangelising among people of all ethnic groups. A Tatar woman who converted to Lutheranism told me that even Russians had warned her that she would fall ill if she betrayed the faith of her ancestors, Islam.³² The presidential advisor on religious affairs noted proudly that the leaders of the three official religions of the republic understood very well that they needed to keep peace with one another, that each person had a right to his or her own belief. Although the Orthodox Church refuses narrow identification with one ethnic group – note that there was no representative of the Orthodox clergy at the Russian festival – the bishop recognises the close identification of Mari culture with Paganism and is very careful in his pronouncements about it,³³ something Protestants in Mari El hold against him. Even Protestants occasionally point to the relationship between religion and ethnicity (which their church doctrine denies) to articulate their fear of Russian Orthodox or Pagan dominance. An active member in the Adventist Church told me repeatedly that there should be neither religious instruction in the schools nor religious rites at state-sponsored events, because Mari El was a multiethnic republic and favouring one religion over another would amount to proclaiming the dominance of one ethnic group.

Such statements show some of the apprehensions that people have regarding the public role of religion. Their fear seems to be not so much – as in atheist propaganda – that religion will direct people's hopes and strivings to otherworldly ends, but that it

will set them against each other in this-worldly competition. It is partly because of such misgivings toward religion that it would be wrong to speak of a total 'desecularisation' of culture. The former graveyard is still a park, even though the public toilets are a church once again. Despite the increase of fenced-in church compounds in the city, the aesthetics of open spaces created by Yoshkar-Ola's Soviet planners remains dominant. However, religious groups are not the only ones recycling parts of public culture. Those cinemas that did not go out of operation in the early 1990s are scraping by with weekly discos or have been renovated with modern screens and stereo sound. One wing of the town's most central culture palace has been taken over not by a church, but by a night club and bowling alley.

Considering the entrance fees charged by such establishments, it is not surprising that some teachers, journalists and other cultural professionals are recycling themselves from atheists into religious people – they may have been some of the central agents and foci of atheist propaganda, but as state employees, many of them have also been among the most marginalised by postsoviet developments. By putting their skills to use in religious organisations, they are giving an interesting twist to the atheist assumption that it is social isolation and marginalisation that makes people susceptible to religious influence (Sofronov, 1973). It is because of their strong *integration* into a particular niche of socialist society that these people are threatened with marginality now, and for some, turning to religion becomes a strategy to avoid going into the dustbin of history.

Notes

- ¹ Research for this article was made possible by support from the Center for Russian and East European Studies, the International Institute and the Department of Anthropology, all at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The author would like to thank Ann Stoler and Nancy Hunt as well as participants in the 2003 seminar in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan for comments and suggestions. A different paper, drawing on materials from the same research project, was presented in the panel 'Religion, Power, Political Economy: Postsocialist Views' at the Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, 2003.
- ² 'The remarkable achievements of Soviet science and technology in the conquest of the cosmos and their atheist significance' and 'The exploits of Soviet cosmonauts and the religious fairy-tale of the "hard heavens"' are the titles of these recommended lectures (Nekhoroshkov, 1964, p. 53).
- ³ On Soviet cities as landscapes of hope and failure, see Gestwa, 2003; Kotkin, 1991.
- ⁴ These are meant to correspond to the major ethnic groups of the republic: Russians and other eastern Slavs (50 per cent), Mari (44 per cent) and Tatars (6 per cent).
- ⁵ These communities, which will be discussed in more detail below, were Russian Orthodox Christians, Mari Pagans, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists and Evangelicals. Each of the Protestant denominations has between 150 and 250 members; numbers of Orthodox and Pagan adherents are harder to gauge.
- ⁶ Under this term, I am subsuming types of 'mental labour' that Soviet statistics commonly differentiate into two subsets with fuzzy boundaries: education (*prosveshcheniye*) and science, culture and the arts (*nauka, kul'tura, iskusstvo*) (Arutyunyan, 1992, p. 97). The term '*intelligentsiya*' has a related range of meaning, but its Soviet usage includes people with a more technical education (White, 2000).
- ⁷ I use the term 'Pagan', though well aware of its negative connotations, because '*yazychnik*' is used as a term of self-identification in Russian. The term preferred by some Mari activists, 'traditional Mari religion', seems even more problematic, because Russian Orthodoxy has played a significant role in Mari life for almost 500 years.

- ⁸ These Baptists, although refusing to register officially, were well known to the authorities. The man who had served as plenipotentiary for religious affairs in the Mari Republic in the 1980s told me that he visited their meetings on several occasions, telling them that everything they did was perfectly legal, except that they were not registered. They in turn told him that it was the leadership of their branch of the Baptist Church that was prohibiting them from seeking state registration (Interview, 2 July 2003).
- ⁹ Interviews with a Baptist minister, 25 June 2003, and the presidential advisor on religious affairs, 26 June 2003. According to their minister, the Baptists were turned down by the directors of several culture houses before the Society of the Blind agreed to rent the space to them. His perception – shared by a journalist I spoke to who is herself Russian Orthodox – is that the Orthodox Church, or Orthodox members of the city administration, warns these institutions that it is dangerous to rent to Protestant groups. The Baptists are now building their own prayer house at the edge of the city, after relinquishing a more centrally located building site that had been vandalised and picketed when they tried to begin construction there.
- ¹⁰ The 1992 Constitution of Mari El protects Mari sacred sites, and the Ministry of Culture has since been working on a registry of sacred groves. According to staff members of the Ministry, information for the administrative regions around Yoshkar-Ola is scarce (for instance, Medvedovo region), because many groves have been cut down and people do not clearly remember where they were (Interview, 1 July 2003).
- ¹¹ On Russian neo-Paganism, see Meranvil'd, 2001, for Mari El in particular and Shnirelman, 2000, for Russia in general.
- ¹² Many people (though by no means all) I talked to in Yoshkar-Ola were aware of the fact that the park was a former cemetery, but I am not sure if this is due to *perestroika*-era publicity, or if these people were aware of their park's history when they were growing up during the postwar decades.
- ¹³ Interview, 17 June 2003.
- ¹⁴ Interview, 26 June 2003.
- ¹⁵ The Lutherans started by buying one plot of land on October Street in 1993, but successively bought the neighbouring plot and the one behind that one (facing a parallel street), and are currently negotiating with the owner of a fourth plot directly behind the church.
- ¹⁶ Interview, 4 July 2003.
- ¹⁷ Orthodox liturgy is also very effective as spectacle, but has a different use of space. The visual and musical beauty of Orthodox services was often cited in atheist literature as one dangerous appeal of religion (Sofronov, 1973, p. 29). What distinguishes Orthodox from Evangelical spectacle is perhaps that Evangelical worship is characterised by a division between stage and audience that is performatively overcome by signs of the visitation of the Holy Spirit among both worship leaders on the stage and congregation members in the audience, while in Orthodox services there are no spectators, only participants facing the altar together, but some participants (the priests) can move between the part of the church accessible to all believers and the inner sanctuary of the altar.
- ¹⁸ The names of my interview partners (except scholars and public employees interviewed in their official functions) have been changed. This interview was conducted on 24 June 2003.
- ¹⁹ The Kastren Society is not a faith-based organisation, but a Finnish foundation that supports cultural relations with the Finno-Ugric nationalities in Russia. In our interview, Marina interpreted the fellowship as a blessing sent by God as a result of her baptism (in the Orthodox Church, but inspired by contact with the first Finnish Lutheran missionaries to visit the republic). Besides, the work of the Lutheran Church of Ingria in the Volga region, supported financially by Finnish Lutheran congregations that 'adopt' sister parishes, is an example of the same kind of mutual interest of Finns and Russian Finno-Ugrians that motivates the work of the Kastren Society.
- ²⁰ Interviews, 6 July 2003 and 14 July 2003.

- ²¹ Interview, 22 July 2003. Note that atheist propaganda was an incidental part of her work, not its sole thrust, confirming Peris' finding that atheism was seen by the Soviet government as a natural outcome of 'political enlightenment', rather than a goal in which many resources should be invested (Peris, 1998, p. 99).
- ²² Interview, 6 July 2003.
- ²³ The concept of the 'individual, differentiated approach' (*individual'ny, differentsirovanny podkhod*) was one of the demands of *perestroika*-era educators, who denounced previous Soviet education as treating everyone the same and aiming to create a mass of 'normal' children (see Sutherland, 1992, p. 14).
- ²⁴ Interview, 10 July 2003.
- ²⁵ Between 2000 and 2001 I spent a year teaching German at Mari State University and participated in German lessons at six different middle schools in the republic and in continuing education for teachers. For an ethnography of postsoviet pedagogy in the context of a Moscow theatrical academy, see Lemon, 2004.
- ²⁶ Interview, 3 July 2003.
- ²⁷ In Mari El, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union (see Arutyunyan, 1992, p. 93), the titular nationality was disproportionately represented among actors, composers, writers and other members of the creative intelligentsia.
- ²⁸ Interview with painters in the workshop, 25 June 2003. See also Kudryavtseva, 2002.
- ²⁹ *Mariiskaya pravda*, 20 June 1965, p. 3. *Shymak* is the name of a traditional headgear of Mari women, which was condemned by Bolshevik propaganda in much the same way as Muslim women's head coverings.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ In the villages, this is not necessarily the case. The ethnographer Ol'ga Kalinina explained to me that *Peledysh pairem* used to be the day when collective and state farms recognised their labour heroes and outstanding achievements, and that this was no longer done in many places where the collective farm might be falling apart, with no achievements to celebrate and/or no money to have a celebration (Interview, 17 June 2003).
- ³² Interview, 10 July 2003.
- ³³ On the occasion of his visit to Mari El for the consecration of Bishop Ioann in 1993 Patriarch Aleksii stressed that the new diocese was not intended to stand in opposition to 'traditional Mari faith', but to live in 'harmonious coexistence, mutual understanding' (*Mariiskaya pravda*, 27 July 1993, p. 1).

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