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Religious Policy in Late Imperial Russia: State and Orthodox Church in the Buryat Spiritual Space

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Abstract. The paper analyses the situation that took the most expressed forms since the late 19th century and reflected strengthening criticism from the Orthodox Church against both the Buddhist clergy and the Russian state. The contradictions between the state and the Orthodox policies were caused by differences in principles, since when giving Buddhism some legitimacy the government was guided by the interests of Russia in the east of the Empire, while the Orthodox Church saw its task in suppressing the influence of the Buddhist clergy through the soonest religious and ideological homogenisation of Buryats with the ethnic Russian population.

Keywords: Buddhism, Orthodoxy, Buryats, Russian Empire, Christianisation, Russification, identity.

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Introduction

Buddhist studies in the context of social and political developments in the Russian Empire prove that the relationship between Buddhists and the Russian state has always remained complicated due to the desire of the authorities to keep Buddhists, and especially their clergy, under constant control (Gerasimova, 1957; Tsyrempilov, 2013, 2014; Amogolonova, 2015, 2017; Sanzheeva, 2015).

This paper focuses on the analysis of a separate aspect of the issue of the existence of Buddhism in the Orthodox state with a special accent on the policy of the Orthodox clergy aimed both at fighting the non-Orthodox religion and at changing the state's attitude towards Buddhists through tougher repressions and rejection of compromises. It is noteworthy that the current head of the Orthodox Church in Buryatia Metropolitan Savvaty, contradicting historical data states that 'the Russian Orthodox Church and the Buddhist traditional Sangha have *always coexisted peacefully* (emphasis added – D.A.). We have never competed and never had contradictions. There has been a certain neutrality" (Tsyrenov, 2017: 3). In reality, it was the state policy towards Buddhism that underwent significant changes throughout imperial history including the search for compromises. And the Orthodox Church focused on baptising as many Buryats as possible and, accordingly, on limiting the influence of the Buddhist clergy. In this endeavor, the state, of course, supported the Orthodoxy – the only state religion, the dominant status of which was confirmed even after the Highest Decree on strengthening the principles of religious tolerance (1905). The Code of Laws of the Russian Empire published in 1906 read: 'The primary and predominant faith in the Russian Empire is the Christian Orthodox Catholic Faith' (Article 62), 'The Emperor, as a Christian Sovereign, is the Supreme Defender and Guardian of the dogmas of the predominant Faith and is the Keeper of the purity of the Faith and all good order within the Holy Church" (Article 64) (Svod Zakonov, 1906: 5). According to these articles, which had invariably existed from the 18th century, the Orthodox Church had special rights namely on proselytism (up to 1905):

'Within the state, one dominant Orthodox Church has the right to persuade followers of other Christian confessions and other believers to accept its teachings about faith. ... The spiritual and secular persons of other Christian confessions and non-Christians are strictly obliged to leave alone the conviction of those who do not belong to their religion. Otherwise, they are subjected to penalties defined in Criminal Laws' (Svod Zakonov, 1857: 5). Although the same law stated that 'In the Russian state, the freedom of faith is granted not only to Christians of foreign confessions, but also to Jews, Muslims and heathens' (ibid.), nevertheless religious policy aimed in the long run at the cultural russification of non-Russian subjects at that moment meant strict control over non-Orthodox subjects and their clergymen. Despite this clearly articulated principle, the Orthodox Church headed by The Most Holy Governing Synod, one of the supreme state bodies in Russia, was of opinion that the state did not restrict Buddhists sufficiently, and local officials even contributed to the growth of Buddhist influence among Buryats.

Methods and materials

The relationship between state and religion in Russia, as well as interaction between religious communities, should be considered in a multidisciplinary and multidimensional key. Aernout J. Nieuwenhuis notes that for centuries religion has determined the position of the state. From the juridical point of view, it was not about religion itself, but about religious institutions that endowed secular power with necessary legitimacy. At the same time, a fairly strong state, acting as a defender of the faith, sought to regulate the activities of the church and religious communities. This situation persists today, and the nationalisation of the church led to its, often complete, dependence on state power (Nieuwenhuis, 2012: 153–174). However, in imperial Russia, a certain conflict between the secular and religious authorities existed, in particular, in relation to differences in understanding Russia's interests in the policy towards non-Orthodox communities. Sociologist Joachim Wach proposed to consider religion from the standpoint of comparative

studies, phenomenology and psychology; for him, the most productive approach, along with theoretical and practical ones, is based on the institutional or social aspect. From the point of view of this old, but not outdated approach, interactions between religious institutions and the state depend on religious values, which, in fact, form the institutions that expressed them (*Wach, 1944*). Continuing this thought, one can say that upholding religious ideology is a way of preserving and strengthening the religious institution and clergy. The ideas about *full legitimacy* of only one official religion and, correspondingly, *hostility* to the state and its interests of all other religions create insoluble contradictions in a multicultural community: division into principal and minor religions inevitably leads to the ideas about the best and worst religious communities or ethnocultural groups. In this respect, a special responsibility falls on researchers.

Among the theoretical principles, the principle of objectivity in Peter Berger's wording deserves special mention: "Every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism'" (Berger, 1969: 100). Alongside with objectivity, this principle implies avoidance of valence in considering the relationship between religions and religious communities, regardless of the religious preferences of scholars.

Materials for research and arguments are archival documents of the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), St. Petersburg, which according to their content and purpose are subdivided into: 1. Laws, decrees and regulations of the state authorities on religious issues in the Russian Empire; 2. Official correspondence between Orthodox religious organisations in Eastern Siberia and The Most Holy Governing Synod that was the *highest governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church*; 3. Publications in newspapers and magazines concerning the problems of relations between the state, Orthodoxy and Buddhism in the period from the middle of the 19th century till the first decade of the 20th century, as well as books written and published by Orthodox leaders at the same time; 4. Personal letters

concerning the research topic written by Orthodox and Buddhist clergy.

These materials fully reflect two trends in the religious policy of the Russian empire. On the one hand, the state and Orthodoxy were unanimous in their efforts to create the religious homogeneity of non-Russian subjects with the Russian majority. However, on the other hand, the state and the Orthodox leadership often came into serious contradictions concerning Buddhism, since in that period the suppression of this religion did not meet the interests of Russia in the east of the Empire and in the international arena.

Results

Strengthened efforts of the Orthodox leadership on Christianisation of Buryats, both shamans and Buddhists, and demands to restrict the activities of the Buddhist clergy even more are apparently connected with Alexander II's ascension to the throne in 1855. As he declared the dominant role of Orthodoxy, the steps were expected from him to tighten regulations concerning foreign religions. In particular, the Orthodox authorities were much opposed to *The Regulations on the Lamaist Clergy in Eastern Siberia* (1853) regarding them not limiting, but rather increasing the influence of Buddhist lamas on Buryat Buddhists.

From a formal point of view, Buryats followed the Regulations and were ready to compromises on institutional issues. In this respect, there was a very indicative (and absurd from the modern point of view) situation in 1859 when Khambo Lama Shoiwon Yoshizhamsuev passed away. According to the Regulations, three candidates could apply for a vacancy. Nevertheless, none of them met the demands because they did not know Russian. When presenting the problem to the Council of the General Administration of Eastern Siberia, Mikhail Korsakov, future Governor-General, made a proposal to appoint a person 'not hesitating regarding his religious creed'. This person would fulfill all the duties of the Buddhist leader and for this purpose should know the Mongolian and even Tibetan languages and enjoy confidence and special rights from the High Authorities (Lamaity Vostochnoi Sibiri). Mikhail

Korsakov was speaking about Archimandrite Avvakum who was perfectly advanced in Oriental studies and the Orthodox hierarch at the same time, he would be very successful in promoting morality among Buryats and in bringing them to Christianity through convincing them in the advantages of the true religion.

It is noteworthy that such a solution took place with the support of Buryats: at the meeting on election of the the Khambo Lama, clan chiefs of the Transbaikalia region and the Irkutsk Province, as well as deputies from 33 datsans (Tsyrempilov, 2013: 171) agreed to accept any person, including a non-Buddhist as an acting Khambo Lama, at the discretion of the authorities (Pravoslavnaja Missija). On the initiative of the Governor-General Nikolay Muravyov-Amursky, this unprecedented decision did not come into effect due to political expediency that took into consideration the situation with neighboring Qing China and particularly the Mongols: it was necessary to be especially careful about Buryat Buddhists.

As advocates of Orthodoxy, the Governor-Generals of Eastern Siberia in their activities towards Buddhism were guided by state interests that implied the need not to aggravate relations with non-Russians and look for possible mechanisms to maintain peaceful and even trust based relationships with them. However, the Orthodox Church interpreted state interests in a completely different way, believing that they consisted in the soonest total Christianisation of non-Christians and, thus, destruction of the social basis of Buddhism and more radical restriction of the Buddhist clergy activities. In their numerous reports and letters, missionaries lodged complaints about the malicious obstacles that Buddhist clergy made in Christianisation of Buryats. In 1866, on the basis of a similar report of The Transbaikalia-Irkutsk Orthodox Mission (for more details, see Amogolonova, 2015: 5-41), the Chief Prosecutor of the Most Holy Synod Dmitry Tolstoy wrote an official letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs Piotr Valuev with a request to immediately solve the problems of the missionaries, which consisted both in the poverty of Orthodox preachers and in the activities of the Buddhist clergy, who allegedly did not fulfill the

laws and meet the requirements. The Minister, in turn, sent his own letter to the Governor-General of Eastern Siberia, which repeated the report of the Orthodox mission and the letter from Dmitry Tolstoy. On February 12, 1867, the Governor-General Mikhail Korsakov gave detailed response to the Minister on all the points of specific complaints. He showed high-quality knowledge of the subject matter. According to the missionaries, one of the biggest mistakes of the authorities consisted in the appointment of Khambo Lama by the Emperor and this sealed letter gave Khambo Lama such a moral power in the eyes of Buryats that missionaries had nothing to compare it to (Pravoslavnaja Missija).

Mikhail Korsakov explains that since there was no such order of appointment to this position, Buddhists considered it necessary to receive approval from the Dalai Lama, since the position of Khambo Lama required the highest approval. And after the highest assertion was introduced by the Russian emperor, no Khambo Lamas appealed to the Dalai Lama; thus, the prohibition of relations with foreign clergy was fulfilled. Besides, Korsakov retorted the missionaries' demand that *shiretuis* and ordinary lamas were appointed and dismissed by the governor with the argument that since 1853, according to the Regulations, this had been fulfilled exactly, thus accusing missionaries of not knowing the situation. The most disadvantaged financial situation of the missionaries compared to the Buddhist clergy prompted the former to demand 'establishing a tax on various fees charged by Lamaist clergy from laymen for performing pagan rituals and for selling various Buddhist spiritual accessories of their superstitions like *burkhans* (statues), spiritual images, prayers, belts, etc.' To this, the Governor-General replied that 'on the basis of the Regulations, for the fulfillment of spiritual demands, the Lamas receive 'voluntary, by no means a forced payment' (§ 47); the sale of burkhans, images, prayers, belts, and other church items is based on the tax, which is annually compiled by the Bandido Khamba and approved by the Military Governor of the Transbaikalia region (§ 55). If Lamas force people to pay for church items, this compulsion

can only be moral, therefore the establishment of a tax can hardly avert it (§ 55).

Representing Buddhists as internal enemies of the state, the missionaries proposed to impose a ban on Buddhist clergy coming to Russia from Mongolia and traveling to Mongolia from Russia on pain of recruiting them to military service or penal *battalions*. Regarding this, Korsakov explained that the violators of this ban are legally turned into a secular state and according to Art. 1589 on the Penalties for criminals are subject to monetary penalty with relocation to remote places in Eastern Siberia. However, such violations, namely, pilgrimage to Tibet, cannot be completely eradicated, because ‘the worship of the Dalai Lama, the god who took human flesh and descended to earth to observe the people living on it, is one of the fundamental tenets of Buddha’s teaching’ (§ 55).

As for the accusations that lamas hinder Christianisation among Buryat Buddhists, Korsakov, in my opinion, rather mockingly replies that ‘to be honest, one cannot accuse the Lamaist clergy of obstructing the conversion of followers of their faith to Orthodoxy.’ At the same time, he believed that if any illegal actions of the Buddhist clergy took place (negative suggestions about Orthodoxy, conversion of non-Christians including shamanists to Buddhism), they should be punished in accordance with the law, and local officials must control this. To fulfill the regulations, he proposes to bring these laws to the attention of the Buryats by translating them into the Buryat language and widely spreading them among the clergy and laity.

At the end of his extensive response, the Governor-General wrote a very remarkable comment:

Without resorting to any restrictive measures regarding Lamaist teaching, which are incompatible with the spirit of our legislation and can hardly contribute to spreading Christianity among non-Russian heathens, it would be useful to put our missionaries in Siberia in more materially favorable conditions, and then it is to be hoped that the personal superiority of the

missionaries over the lamas and the truths they preach can be the best guarantee of success in the spiritual business than any police measures (§ 55).

Reasonable arguments of the secular authorities were based on a fairly good knowledge of the situation on the ground. Thus, an official of the Department for the Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions of the Ministry of the Interior prince Esper Ukhtomsky, a diplomat, politician and orientalist, on the basis of his own observations and research, came to the conclusion that any compulsion in Christianisation of heathens was inadmissible. Although since the early 19th century there were strict rules on that point, they were violated by the Orthodox clergy, which believed that forcible Christianisation was completely acceptable. On this occasion, at the Irkutsk Congress of Siberian Eparchs (1885), there was a discussion between the Bishop of Irkutsk and Nerchinsk Veniamin and representatives of the administration. At the same time, the congress raised questions about the unsatisfactory composition of the missionaries, about the facts of the ‘irrelevance and harmfulness of their behaviour.’ In addition, based on the documents of the Synod Archive, Ukhtomsky argues that ‘the local archbishop exaggerates the number of the converted, and missionaries are rude, drunk and ignorant, they burn and insult Buryat cult objects’ (Ukhtomsky, 1892: 7). Ukhtomsky, in particular, condemns the behaviour of the leaders of East Siberian Orthodoxy towards unbaptised Buryats, who expressed a desire to study at their own expense in a teachers’ seminary, but received a refusal:

If you do not accept but deny Buryats in their natural and in every way desirable readiness to implement government goals independently, which leads to gradual and painless Russification (emphasised by E. Ukhtomsky. – D.A.) – the latter, of course, will not happen soon, and similarly a momentous day when East Siberian lamaits, by conviction, will at least transit to the bosom of the Church will be far (Ukhtomsky, 1892: 7).

Prince Ukhtomsky occupied a prominent position in the public service and, at the same time, was a recognised liberalist. His convictions, thus, were so to say dualistic: on the one hand, he supported educating patriotic feelings and loyalty to the empire among non-Russians. But on the other hand, he opposed to the methods used by the Orthodoxy when Christian clergy openly discriminated the unbaptised, thus violating Russian legislation and contributing to the growth of discontent with power and anti-Russian sentiment among them.

Of course, the Orthodox clergy of Eastern Siberia, alongside with numerous claims to the central authorities, made great efforts to prevent the growing influence of Buddhism among Buryats, especially in Prebaikalia. Although, as it turned out later, in most cases the achieved successes in baptising activities were formal, the leaders of Irkutsk Diocese tried their best in converting Buryats and Evenks to Orthodoxy. Highest Siberian clergy not only made inspection trips to the territories entrusted to them, but also personally participated in the agitation and baptism of the indigenous groups. In his report for 1867, Irkutsk Archbishop Parfeni gave detailed information about the number of newly baptised and ways to persuade them to convert to Orthodoxy. Among the methods, he named financial assistance in the form of items for baptism (linen, crosses, and icons) and cash allowances for the poor. Explaining the need to bribe non-Russians, the archbishop says:

Non-Russians often resort to such excuses as: I will be baptised after others will do this; ... therefore it is not surprising that sometimes external attraction – friendship, gifts or honours – helps those who stand on a degree of sensual life to strengthen themselves in the determination of their goodwill. It would be strange to condemn those who are children in their age of spiritual life for the fact that their thoughts are not lofty because sensual wishes of children's age still guide them (Parfeni, 1868: 69-70).

In addition, missionaries vividly described the undoubted benefits of baptism giving nu-

merous examples from their practice. In full accordance with stereotypes of public conscience, Buryats baptised voluntary because of naive hopes to recover from diseases: it was a very effective tool in the argumentation. At the same time, late 19th and early 20th century was the time of Buryat social thought and ideology establishment. Buryat national leaders paid attention to Buddhism as one of the channels of national awakening aimed at all-Buryat integration. The Buddhist propaganda among the pre-Baikal baptised Buryats and the recent shamanists was successful. There were numerous reasons for this which included superficial ideas of baptised Buryats about Christianity, the lack of real work of missionaries among the flock, ignorance of Buryat culture by preachers, disrespect for the newly baptised co-religionists (to say nothing about the unbaptised Buryats), who were considered indigenous uncivilised people and, therefore, deserved treating them not as equal co-religionists, but as unreasonable children (Pravoslavnaya Missiya).

The desire to oppose the growing influence of Buddhism made the Orthodox clergy to resort to measures that directly contradicted the laws of the Empire. We are talking about cases of forced baptism (for more details, see Amogolonova, Sodnompilova, 2017: 241-263) that took place even in the late 19th century causing serious protests of Buryats. It is fair to say that the situation changed significantly in 1905 when the Supreme Decree to the Senate "On Strengthening the Principles of Religious Tolerance" was published. From that moment, no one had the right to obstruct the procedure of changing the Orthodox religion to any other. The new legislation was clear in all articles and had to be fulfilled within one month. However, Methodius, the Bishop of Transbaikalia and Nerchinsk, found a loophole in the new law that allowed rejecting petitions on changing Orthodoxy to Buddhism. He found the reason for this in the failure to comply with the condition that applicants had a right to get back to the belief confessed by themselves or their ancestors. As the newly baptised shamanists asked to cross them out of Orthodoxy since they intended to become

Buddhists, while they had never confessed Buddhism before, the bishop considered this to be a strong reason for refusal in the applications. In addition, he blamed Buryats for poor or lack of knowledge of the Buddhist doctrine, thus seeing another sufficient reason to keep them in Christianity (Po adhivu). The Orthodox leaders were forced to stop lawlessness in this field only after the official explanation that transition from Orthodoxy to Buddhism did not need the approval or permission of the Orthodox authorities and simple notification to the secular authorities was enough.

Conclusion

The fight for the supremacy in the Buryat spiritual space lasted for centuries. In this confrontation between Orthodoxy and Buddhism, the Christian religion and the church were supported by the Russian state laws that gave the right to proselytism to the Orthodox Church only. Public opinion was also on its side, and the Russian imperial enlightenment, in particular, by the mass media, contributed this a lot. The strategic task of Christianisation of non-Russians was conceived in terms of the education of imperial patriotism. As a foreign religion, Buddhism, thus, was understood as a potential threat to the Empire.

Buddhist clergy carried out its activities in the framework of prohibitive legislation. Under strict restrictions, the Buddhist lamahood could only seek support from their flock. Loyalty to the tsar and the state became a survival tool for Buddhists, moreover, a profound respect accompanied by presents and reverences was shown to both high officials and low-ranking

employees like constables or bailiffs who personified the state.

Expecting support from the state in any way to suppress Buddhism, the Orthodox Church faced the fact that state interests demanded – and these were tactical measures – a certain tolerance towards non-Russians and their religion. In such cases, Orthodox leaders saw nothing but connivance and even anti-state plans in the state structures activities. So, the objects of criticism became well-known and even prominent Siberian leaders (Governor-Generals Mikhail Korsakov and Nikolay Muravyov-Amursky), who were accused of protecting Buddhists and, accordingly, betraying the cause of Christianisation. It is also important to note that in addition to political senses, the inter-religious competition had a pronounced economic connotation. The accusations against the leadership of Eastern Siberia included dissatisfaction with the fact that the state did not interfere with the incomes of the Buddhist clergy and did not set any goals to control, that is, to take money from them somehow. So, in the eyes of the Orthodox clergy Siberian officials became almost enemies of the state and the only state religion.

Fortunately, in modern Russia, the equality of religions and beliefs has become a reality and is a real achievement of social transformations. The struggle for the flock is still topical, but it does not lead to any conflicts and does not have a political connotation. For Buddhism, institutionalisation and inclusion in the Russian socio-political structure turned out to be the most acceptable form for preservation and further development.

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Религиозная политика в позднеимперской России: государство и православная церковь в бурятском духовном пространстве

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Аннотация. В статье анализируются процессы, характерные для межрелигиозных отношений в России во второй половине XIX и начале XX века, когда усилилась критика со стороны православной церкви по отношению к буддийскому духовенству и руководству Восточной Сибири. Противоречия между государством и православной церковью были вызваны тем, что светская власть руководствовалась интересами России на востоке Империи и потому из тактических соображений наделяла буддизм легитимностью, хотя и строго ограниченной. А православная церковь видела свою задачу в подавлении влияния буддийского духовенства посредством как можно более скорого крещения бурят в православие, что подразумевало мировоззренческое единение бурят с русским этническим большинством и обеспечение полной религиозно-идеологической гомогенности населения Восточной Сибири.

Ключевые слова: буддизм, православие, буряты, Российская империя, христианизация, русификация, идентичность.

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