

OSSETIAN RITUAL FEASTS AND
 TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCE:
 RE-DESCRIPTION OF A RELIGION
 AS A RELIGIOUS PRACTICE*

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ABSTRACT

The protest of the North Ossetian nativist religious movement against discourses of dominant institutions in the public sphere involves as its necessary component ‘re-description’ of religion in general and ‘re-constructed’ religious systems in particular. Usually, this means revealing allegedly forgotten ancient meanings of indigenous customs, rituals and folklore texts through the use of various concepts taken from esotericism and/or practical psychology. The language for this re-description is provided by conceptual apparatus developed by New Age movements. Of particular interest in this respect is the language of ‘new science’, ‘alternative history’, ‘transpersonal psychology’, etc., employed as a tool for criticising the established system of Christian-centric understanding of what religion is and what its social functions are.

KEYWORDS: North Ossetia • New Age • religious nationalism • nativism • transpersonal psychology

In February 2013, a round-table discussion titled the Moral Health of the Nation was held on the ART TV channel, operating in the capital of North Ossetia, Vladikavkaz. Among the invited speakers was the psychologist Eduard Khubulov. He took the floor when the conversation turned to the meaning of Ossetian rites, which, according to the participants, were not clear to modern Ossetians. Khubulov, using the example of a prayer repast, presented his view of the meaning of that ancient custom: “I think our ancestors knew very well how the world works.” He appealed to the ‘ancestral knowl-

* This article was prepared with the support of a grant from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project No. 18-509-12017 (New Religious Culture in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Ideology, Social Networks, Discourses).

edge' that the material world visible to human eye is only five percent of what really exists. And why did so many people gather? What did they do during this prayer? They understood that through prayer they established a connection with the "subtle world" (the 95 percent of the real world that is not visible to us). The prayer, then, was a method to materialise the invisible and a form of collective meditation.

This explanation seemed very convincing to the audience, and one of the listeners, Alan Mamiyev, a well-known political analyst in the republic, enthusiastically pronounced:

In order to relate these traditions to today's world, they must be explained in modern language. They must be explained using a new vocabulary. That's exactly how Eduard explained it to us. Do you understand? That is, we need to rethink our traditions.

What he meant was that the best way to salvage ethnic traditions (in our case, traditions that can be understood as religious traditions) is to present them in terms of psychology. Here we are dealing with what can be called, to use Wouter Hanegraaff's (1996: 224–229) expression, the 'psychologisation of religion', a notable tendency of New Age spirituality.

This episode is a good illustration of what might be called a program of re-description of ethnic tradition through the use of a vocabulary of concepts of those discursive practices that are understood, on the one hand, as authoritative and progressive (for example, modern science and Eastern religious teachings and New Age spirituality) and, on the other, as competing with those types of discursive engagement with ethnic traditions that present them as something outdated and rapidly losing their social significance. Attempts to describe familiar phenomena of a particular ethnic culture through new discourses are intended to legitimise their existence in the modern world, to make them attractive in public space to new consumers, and, most importantly, to challenge the right of influential social institutions to privileged production of knowledge about the natural and social world, including religion and religions.

The purpose of this article is to answer the question of how people who seek to revive Ossetian ethnic religion use the discourse of both 'traditional' and, to a greater extent, 'new' science, which largely coincides with the discourse of contemporary 'alternative' spirituality, in their attempts to re-describe what they consider to be their ethnic culture, including epic, ritual, and folk beliefs. The material for my research was my field observations over the past ten years of the activities of Ossetian religious nativists, but primarily the media production that they place in the public space of the republic of North Ossetia-Alania in the form of books, articles, and video records.

WHAT IS THE ETHNIC RELIGION OF OSSETIANS?

The Republic of North Ossetia-Alania is one of the North Caucasus 'national' republics of the Russian Federation (i.e., having a non-Russian ethnic majority as the main people, the titular ethnic group). The population of the republic is about 700,000 people. Two-thirds of them are ethnic Ossetians, most of the rest are Russians.

One of the distinctive features of this republic is that it is the only one in the region without a Muslim majority. Many outside observers consider Ossetians the only Orthodox indigenous people in the North Caucasus¹ (and therefore natural allies of Orthodox Russia in this predominantly Islamic region).

The situation concerning the religious affiliation of the Ossetians, however, is not so simple and unambiguous. The fact is that there is no public consensus in the republic as to what an Ossetian national (or ethnic) religion is and what it should be. There is also no public consensus on the whether there is a single Ossetian religion (although many are convinced that Ossetians as an ethnic group should have such a national religion). The complexity of the situation is also largely determined by the dramatic history of religion among the Ossetians. The Alans, who are considered the ancestors of modern Ossetians, adopted Christianity from Byzantium in the 10th century. However, several centuries later the institutional Orthodox Church abandoned Ossetia (this event is often dated to the 15th century). In fact, the local Christian community, if we can speak of it in such terms, was left to itself. The life of the Ossetian people, including those aspects that can be called religion, was left without institutional control. This state of affairs defined the local religious landscape over the following centuries. The spread of Islam among some Ossetians further complicated the situation. When in the 19th century the Orthodox Church 'returned' to the region as an official state structure together with the Russian Empire, it began actively spreading Christianity among the Ossetians. This activity gave some results, but this did not change the overall situation with the everyday religious life of Ossetians. To this day, Ossetian folk religious practices, on the one hand, include certain elements corresponding to Eastern Christian (less often Islamic) traditions and, most likely, going back to them (such as calendar festivals and the worship of folk saints). On the other hand, there are practices and beliefs among Ossetians that are difficult to attribute to 'normative' Christianity or Islam.

In this context, the nature of the religious situation in Ossetian society was (and still is) often defined as 'mixture' or 'syncretism' – either of Christianity, Islam, and local paganism or Christianity and some local beliefs. Here is a typical example of such discourse by the prominent Ossetian philologist Tamerlan Kambolov (2011): "From the very beginning of the Christianisation of Ossetians-Alans in the 10th century their religious condition was characterised by a bizarre mixture of Christian and pagan traits, based on the mutual adaptation of both religions". Historian Sultana Ktsoyeva (2017: 52) begins her article with a very indicative statement arguing that "the absolute majority of researchers of the ethnic religion of the Ossetians recognise its syncretic nature". There are many other examples of this 'mixed' interpretation of Ossetian religiosity that can easily be cited.

Apart from this, some people in Ossetia did not and still do not want to represent their beliefs and (especially) practices, discussed as religious ones by scholars and national activists, in terms of any religion. Until very recently, things that a researcher might recognise as evidence of a religious cult (for example, practice of pilgrimage to local sacred places) were seen by the majority as ethnic or even local traditions. For many, this is an organic part of the established common everyday life and worldview, of what is called *Iron æhdaw* in Ossetian (literally 'Ossetian order', that is, way of life). Thus, in a conversation with me, one of consistent and successful ethnic activists who

did a lot to restore traditional places of pilgrimage spoke rather sharply about the very idea of the existence of a special Ossetian religion:

I say, I don't understand what the word 'religion' means when we speak of *Iron æhdaw* [Ossetian traditional culture]. Why should one create something that has never existed in Ossetia? The Ossetians have never had any religion at all. There was a certain worldview. (FM: June 2015)²

About two decades ago such uncertainty on the issue of Ossetian ethnic religion ceased to please a significant part of the Ossetian intellectual and then political elite, and attempts were made to apply religious terms to traditional practices in order to explain their functions and significance for the Ossetian nation. Then some ethno-religious leaders began to speak first of the implementation of some original Ossetian paganism and then of pre-Christian (ancient Aryan) monotheism. Some of them referred to this religion as *Wac din* ('proclaimed faith') or *Iron din* ('Ossetian faith'). For many, ideas about the existence of a special ethnic religion directly correlate with the notion of sovereignty and the particular historical path of the Ossetian people as an ethnic nation. As one of the nativists, or 'traditionalists', as these activists are usually called in Ossetia, told me (we were talking about the prospects of reviving the Ossetian priesthood): "Today we are separated from our faith, from our religion, so we are not capable of self-governance" (FM: November 2019).

Representatives of Orthodox believers have also actively joined in the discussion about what the ethnic faith of the Ossetians is, and they are now doing their best to present Ossetian ethnic culture as Orthodox in its very essence, and Orthodox Christianity as the faith of the venerable forefathers of the Ossetians.

Obviously, supporters of many ethnic religious projects proceed from an idea that every ethnic group has (or had or has to have) its own religion, just as it has its language and culture. For these activists it is very important to represent ethnic traditional beliefs, rituals, and other practices as a particular religion or even religious system, because, according to a Russian ethnologist and at the same time the main ideologist of Chuvash native religion, "only those people who created their own religious system are considered as, a rule, civilised. That system is testimony to the maturity of the ethnic organism; it is evidence of the completeness of ethnic integration." (Salmin 2007: 5) From this point of view, Christianity is dangerous and harmful for ethnic groups because it is an international and even cosmopolitan religion by its nature. Sometimes it is considered a forerunner and symbol of current processes of globalisation. According to this line of reasoning, Christianity is brought to non-Christian peoples by aliens and their voluntary or deceived local allies.

In our case, the leaders of the Ossetian nativist movement cannot simply reject Christianity as a 'religion of outsiders' (Russians and Georgians) because many Ossetians consider Orthodoxy the faith of their glorious ancestors, the Alans. In addition, criticism of Orthodoxy can be interpreted as disloyalty to the Russian state (this is a technique often used by local Orthodox polemicists in disputes with Ossetian nativists). This is why local religious nationalists have to spend a lot of time and other resources explaining why they do not accept Christianity. Therefore, they interpret Christianity not as a religion of the Russians, but as a tool of Western 'spiritual imperialism'. Quite

characteristically, Jerusalem or even the Vatican, rather than Moscow, is more often referred to as the citadel of Christianity's power.

Orthodox polemicists try to resist these accusations. They point out that present day Ossetian traditionalists are non-professionals, naive dreamers who have invented some kind of fictional ethnic religion from scratch: "The neo-traditional religion of the Ossetians is an artificially created nationalist quasi-religious doctrine" (Mamiyev 2017: 157). From the point of view of official Orthodoxy, respected and supported by the Russian political elites, the Ossetian nativists are simply a group of amateur antiquaries who take their hobby too seriously: "Uneducated and incompetent people, under the guise of preserving the Ossetian culture, promote their occult, theosophical or neopagan ideas, passing them off as the original beliefs of our ancestors" (FM: Ossetia Today 2019). For example, historian Mikhail Mamiyev, well-known for his work to strengthen the position of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia, describes the nativist project as a 'quasi-religion' "that is imposed on Ossetian society. Its followers are usually called 'traditionalists', although they have a very indirect relationship with traditional culture itself." (Ostanovit'... 2019)

Needless to say, the nativists' attempts to apply the term religion to their project cause condescending contempt among Orthodox priests and laity (and, more recently, it has also caused disappointment because the nativists have gained sympathy among some young Ossetian intellectuals).

The Ossetian nativists, in turn, developed their activities in two ways to make their project more credible and solid. First, they began officially registering their communities as religious organisations – there are now five 'Ossetian folk faith' communities. In this, they have been relatively successful. Second, their ideologists began active work, which can be defined as the 'decolonisation' of discourse on the Ossetian religion. They claim that they have to describe and define it themselves, relying on discursive models that are convenient for them. One technique that works well in this fight for the right to present their subject matter is to revise the very meaning of religion. The goal of this revision is to prove that the Revivalist project does not seem religious only to 'narrow-minded' Christians and Muslims who are unfamiliar with the latest developments in contemporary science. Obviously, an important aspect of this critique is the protest against 'cultural colonialism' by religious and academic specialists who base their understanding of non-Christian and non-Western phenomena on a view of the 'norm' formed from a Christian-centred interpretation of religion. In order to argue with their opponents on an equal footing, the ideological leaders of *Wac din* had to become experts in religious studies and acquire relevant professional skills. They began to publish books and articles that today are discussed by historians and folklorists as scholarly works rather than mere missionary publications.

LEARNING TO BE A RELIGIOUS STUDIES SCHOLAR

One of the most famous authors writing about Ossetian religion from the perspective of ethnic revivalism is Daurbek Makeyev, the head of the first traditionalist community officially registered by state structures. Among his fellow believers he has a reputation

as a lofty intellectual, prone to reason about simple things in very general terms, which commands both respect and a touch of irony. A former trainer of martial arts and a current farmer and gardener, he has been acquiring the skills of academic writing and argumentation in parallel with his main occupation. His latest book, published in 2017, is, unlike its predecessors, largely up to the standards accepted in academic comparative religion studies in some post-Soviet countries. His basic research presuppositions are as follows: non-modern societies were deeply religious; every detail of their lives had deep sacred meaning. Therefore, every little detail in a folk epic song or ritual had a deep semantics, going back to some ancient condition of human existence when it had not yet been destroyed by modernisation. From this point of view, the main task of the researcher of religion is to reconstruct the meanings lost in the process of the modernisation of social life. This reconstruction needs to be done in order to bring the 'original' sense of social and personal harmony back into the lives of modern people. As one can see, this approach is quite close in general methodology and rhetoric to the phenomenological approach of Mircea Eliade and the political traditionalist utopia of the European New Right (de Benoist 1981).

Makeyev's entry into the social field of academia is not limited to the fact that he writes books on certain academic models. He is also mastering other practices that move his activities from the sphere of religious activism into the sphere of academic practice. He now speaks at various academic conferences. He writes some of his texts in collaboration with Zaur Tsorayev, a doctor of philosophy who teaches philosophy at the North-Ossetian State University. Speaking on local television, Makeyev presents himself not as a religious activist as he did ten years ago, but as an author of books about religion. In addition, he demonstrates a fairly high level of proficiency in certain approaches to this area of scholarly practice. More importantly, he always presents himself as a great advocate of academic corporate interests. In his writings and public speeches, he argues that it is from the perspective of academic scholarship that religion should be studied. Moreover, he urges his colleagues (and himself) to recognise the importance of the social role of the scholar – the religious scholar, the anthropologist, or the historian – in creating a better world. After all, properly conducted research always leads to positive changes in society.

I think that the enhancing of knowledge in the field of religious studies will certainly make us realize that we are all one and the same. A deep research on mythology (or, more precisely, on the remnants of it) of many nations convinces us that all cultures have a common root. We just need to identify it and pay attention to it. I am sure that returning to our roots will enrich our lives. It will bring people back to the brightness and diversity of ethnic cultures, folk rituals, songs, and dances, which used to have a sacred religious meaning supported by the very religion that, owing to coincidence, has been preserved in Ossetia. (Interv'yū... 2017)

As to his general ideas on religion, Makeyev, following the way of the positivistic modern science, is sure that religion exists for real as a universal phenomenon for all of humanity (meaning that it is outside of our social imagination). And if it is so, then this phenomenon can and must be defined as universal. We find this definition, as well as a long commentary to it, in the book (in a paragraph on "Religion and Religious

Studies"). Makeyev did not invent it himself. It belongs to Russian scholar Yevgeniy Torchinov, who proceeded from the works by Stanislav Grof, a leader of the transpersonal psychology school. Torchinov, a professor at the prestigious St. Petersburg State University, was a renowned expert on Buddhism and a practicing Buddhist. This circumstance made Torchinov's opinion particularly important to Makeyev, since it guaranteed that this view of things would not be Christianity-centred.

The scientist [Torchinov] set himself the goal of deriving a common defining feature of all existing religions. The implementation of this task required not only theoretical knowledge of religious cultures, religious studies, theology, psychology, but also some practical religious experience. Proceeding from a huge amount of data, he came up with a general definition that sounds like this: it is "a complex of ideas, beliefs, doctrines, elements of a cult, ritual and other forms of practice, based on certain transpersonal experience and suggesting a reproduction of this basic experience" (Torchinov 1998: 64). (Makeyev 2017a: 19)

To make the concept of *transpersonal experience* clearer for readers who are not familiar with these pretty sophisticated terms Makeyev cites Russian Wikipedia on defining the term transpersonal psychology:

Transpersonal Psychology is a field in psychology which studies transpersonal experience, altered states of consciousness and religious experience, connecting current psychological conceptions, theories and methods with traditional Western and Eastern spiritual practices. The main ideas on which transpersonal psychology are based are non-dualism and mind expansion beyond the usual limits of the Ego. (Ibid.: 20)

To understand the logic of Makeyev's and his fellows' argument it is especially important to notice that Torchinov derived this definition not only from his theoretical, i.e. speculative, knowledge, but also from his personal, albeit transpersonal, experience of immersion in Eastern spiritual practices. Such religious experience is not understood as learned, imposed and dogmatic, but as experienced and personally verified by the individual. Being personal, a transpersonal experience implies what is known as 'unity', the establishment of a connection between an individual and the outside world and the removal of the opposition between the inner and the outer, the believer and God.

This, according to Makeyev, proves that the definition of religion he uses is progressive and ultramodern compared to Abrahamic (in fact, Christian) or Christian-centred ones. "The basic ideas of worldview, created by modern scholarship, correspond to the basics of ethnic cultures very well whereas the ideological basics of the Abrahamic religions and materialism come into conflict with the present-day conceptualisation of the world" (Makeyev 2013). It is interesting that this concept of religion does not include 'incorrect' religions into the field of its meaning, that is, those religions the representatives of which consider Makeyev's religion itself to be an absurd innovation. They turn out to be some kind of quasi-religions and look like relatively new phenomena.

The Abrahamic religions' teaching is built on the idea of separateness of being, separateness of the Creator and his creation. On the contrary, the Ossetian religion is built on holism – an idea of the integrity of reality, idea that God created

the Universe from himself, where God is inseparable from his creation. It is well-known that the Ossetian religion preserved basic foundations of the ancient Iranian (ancient Indo-European) religious tradition. For sure it [the Ossetian religion] is the most ancient religious culture. (Ibid.)

They are also presented not as ways to cleansing and deliverance of the consciousness but as the tools of ideological control.

In reality, many modern religions are far from pure transpersonal experience. In modern religious studies, such religions are defined as dogmatic. In these religions, the doctrine – ideology (the tool of control), prevails over pure experience, and sometimes it even almost completely hides it. Therefore, some religions can rather be considered as a tool of control, rather than a way to reveal the secrets of consciousness. The dogmatic religions in modern religious studies include the so-called Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (Makeyev 2010)

These quasi-religions are opposed to the real ones that meet the criterion of pure transpersonal experience: “The religions of pure experience include some doctrines of the Eastern religions and some ancient traditional ethnic mythological religions” (Makeyev 2010).

For Makeyev, the former (including the Ossetian ethnic religion) seem to be even better in some respect than some Oriental psycho-techniques like meditation because they are “more natural” and accessible for common people:

There are practices that are more natural for the people who do not understand them as something special. These practices are in the foundation of the traditional society’s culture. For example, in the ancient Ossetian culture there is a tradition of ritual prayer, singing, ritual dances at our folk feasts. All of them are different forms of spiritual practice from the point of view of religions of pure experience. (Makeyev 2010)

Those references to spiritual practice and transpersonal psychology are neither incidental nor accidental because they broaden the general perspective for religious creativity corresponding with New Age spirituality, which at the same time can be considered an academic practice of re-describing well-known phenomena (Ossetian ritual practices in our case) in terms of comparative religion, psychology and/or New Age spirituality. To put it in other words, the principal activity of the nativists is translation of ethnic concepts and practices into the terms of modern powerful cultural languages. Let us read a part of Makeyev’s typical (re)description of the ritual feast of *kwyvd*:

Spirits at a *kwyvd* are used to enter artificially into the state of mind expansion and non-dualism, that is, into the state of transpersonal experience. That was not the state of hallucinations at all. That was the state of natural relaxation and light inhibition of a cascade of uncontrolled vain thoughts (such a state can be reached without liquor as well). The ancient priests used spirits only for sacred repasts at feast prayers to define points on the journey to reaching states of mind expansion and non-dualism. This state of natural relaxation and inhibition from vain thoughts facilitates concentration and intensifies praying wishes. (Makeyev 2017a: 134)

In another description, Makeyev reveals the true physical and metaphysical nature of ritual singing:

The most effective practice of transpersonal experience is folk choral singing, reproducing the vibration of co-creation and the divine world, uniting many voices into a single whole. Merging in the choir, people form a single harmony and reproduce the vibrations of the Divine universe, revealing the world of truth, the world of light. (Ibid.: 135)

It is characteristic that in this statement, New Age ideas and the discourse of comparative religious studies coexist and complement each other in what is understood as up-to-date scientific methods. Another popular and easily recognisable word that refers the reader simultaneously to the field of natural sciences and New Age spirituality is energy. In the following citation from a YouTube video, Makeyev reveals to his interlocutor Alan Mamiyev the deeper meanings of Ossetian epic songs about the ancient heroes – *narts*. He explains that behind the images of the fearsome giants *Wægwytæ* there are completely different things:

In fact, *Wægwytæ* are some such energies, flowing, flowing... Here they are close to our thoughts. That is to say, when, say, [one of the main characters of the epic] Soslan became proud, *Wægwytæ* began to present themselves to him. So here we understand that this pride, this vanity here is called *Wægwytæ*, yes. If we go further and analyse, look, it turns out that here are all these certain flowing, passing energies in the form of our thoughts, our desires of some kind and so on, here are these parasitic energies arising from uncontrolled thoughts and the emotions connected with them. That's an easier way to put it. And when Batradz [the other *nart*] dissects one of *Wægwytæ*, we realise that he puts his thought under control, that is, he doesn't give in to the temptation to go after the thought. He chops it up. That is, as if to clear his consciousness. Here's more... And this is confirmed in the *Nart* epic. For example, *Sæwæssæ*, one of the first *narts*, "guarded himself from the *Wægwytæ*", whole armies marched on him, and he sat and guarded himself. If you understand what the *Wægwytæ* are, this is the most real meditation. Now, this expression is the very real yoga. [...] Today it is called meditation and it is practiced in India. Here we know it in Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. (Mamiyev 2021)

In the following quotation, Makeyev and his co-author refer to the concept of the ritual reproduction of the act of creation of the universe, endlessly reproduced by phenomenologists of religion after Mircea Eliade. Here the authors directly quote passages from Eliade's book *A History of Religious Ideas* in order to explain the supreme meaning of the Ossetian rite of sacrifice (*nyvondkænynad*).

In modern religious studies it is generally accepted that the act of sacrifice of peoples whose religion is conditioned by primary mythology (primary mythology is generated by transpersonal experience) reproduces the act of creation of the world. In particular, M. Eliade on this occasion wrote: "the sacrifice and the ritual accompanying it reproduced the act of creation and meant simultaneously death, conception and rebirth of the sacrifice" [...] Any person who offers a sacrifice [*nyvond*] repeats the process of creation of the world and participates in the creation of the

reality around him. [...] “However, the sacrifice must be offered, according to the rules, necessarily with faith; it is worth the slightest doubt of its effectiveness, and the consequences can be dire”. (Tsorayev and Makeyev 2010; citations from Eliade 2002 [1978]: 206, 213)

In this perspective, Makeyev interprets all the details of the ritual of the prayer meal in his other text:

public prayers in Ossetia regularly repeat the Divine act of creation of the World [...] Three pies symbolise continuous acts of creation, renewal of the World in the past, present and future and give these grounds for optimism in prayer-action, faith in the success of prayer. The vibrations of the sounds of a lingering folk song symbolise the appearance of vibrations of that divine Light that gave rise to Creation. The dance symbolises the stability of the manifest desired and joyful creation. (Makeyev 2017a: 132)

The search for new “deep meanings” of ancient practices is very characteristic to some trends in New Age spirituality and ethnic traditionalism overlapping in forms of new paganism and other nativist religious or “not-religious-but-spiritual” movements (Knorre 2013: 261; Aitamurto 2016: 174–175; Mamiyev 2017; Stasulane 2019: 11). We can see how the “hidden wisdom of the ages” is represented in terms of an ultra-modern and simultaneously anti-modern project of total re-representation of the whole world (and reframing religious phenomena) in order to avoid control by modern institutions such as ‘traditional’ religions and ‘traditional’ academic regimes of truth.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS A RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

As we can see, Makeyev believes that religion is a real phenomenon beyond our consciousness. For him, the whole history of humanity is the history of rivalry between Oriental (ideally, Indo-Aryan) and other ethnic religions, on the one hand, and Abrahamic ones, on the other. In addition, he believes that secularism (materialism) is the result of the development of Abrahamic belief systems. He considers the religions of the first type as primordial and, in consequence, beneficially influencing the preservation of the diversity of ethnic cultures. These religions are natural, useful for ethnic cultures and therefore real. He attributes the opposite qualities (such as artificiality and the desire to eliminate the specifics of ethnic cultures) to another group of religions that are not a natural part of people’s lives but a special and separated domain of social life. Therefore these artificial religions do not have tight connections with local cultures.

Obviously, in these constructions one can see a consistent attempt to present the modern Christian episteme, claiming the status of a universal mechanism for describing the world, as something local, limited, specific. In this context, a local phenomenon, in our case, the Ossetian ethnic religion, acquires ironically the properties of a universal phenomenon.

In his theory of religion, Makeyev proceeds from the fact that only a real religion is responsible for the peculiarities and sustainability capacity of ethnic cultures. As for ethnic religions, he considers the following idea (or intuition) to be self-evident: being

a total determinant of our ancestors' entire social life, our own (native) religion is a guarantee of the survival of an ethnic group (in this case, the Ossetian people) in harsh conditions of "religious information wars" or "long-term information aggression on the part of worldview systems with a shared understanding of reality" (Makeyev 2017a: 29, 31). From this point of view, it is natural that aggressors have as their primary goal the destruction of precisely the religion of the people, who should be enslaved.

Since ancient times there has been an understanding that the traditions of the people are associated with beliefs and religion. Tradition itself is an expression of religion, the purpose of which is to hold the people together, to make it unite. It is religious tradition that is the first aim of information aggression. (Makeyev 2017b)

Makeyev connects the loyalty of the Ossetians to their ethnic religion – the "popular religious tradition" (Makeyev 2017a: 99) – not only with the prospects of preserving the nation, but also with maintaining the entire world order. Analysing one of the Ossetian *Nart* epic songs, he comes to the following imperative: "deviation from this tradition is a betrayal of the Divine order and should be understood not only as a betrayal of our own people [...] but also of God." He claims that the successors of this tradition have a "special responsibility in the quest for universal order and justice". (Ibid.: 100)

Moreover, in accordance with the principles of modern ethnic traditionalism, the religion of the ancestors, which must be preserved and/or restored, is seen by him as a kind of proto-science, a perfect knowledge of the world that has exceptional value:

the religious knowledge of our ancestors is not a primitive declaration of the rules and laws and worship of anything, but a deep understanding of Being on the basis of deep self-knowledge, knowledge of one's Divine nature, free from material attachments and passions. (Ibid.: 117)

Nostalgia for the lost totalistic religion that pervades all aspects of social life makes activists of nativistic religious initiatives appeal to their compatriots "not to seek knowledge somewhere on the side, but to appeal to the heritage of their ancestors, their elders" (ibid.). Again and again they look back at the distant past of their people, or rather, look at a variety of historical, folkloric, and ethnographic sources (and sometimes, according to local wits, draw "their knowledge from the bowels of sacred YouTube and REN-TV broadcasts"; FM: October 2019). The authors of traditionalist studies employ methods of comparative religion, and sometimes so-called alternative history in their reconstructions of more and more 'ancient' cultural meanings of traditional ritual and narrative practices. They put these meanings into the conceptual basis of the ethnic religion of the Ossetian people. But to reconstruct it they need to reform the usual conception of religion to receive something to work with in the time of desecularisation, when we are moving towards an understanding of religion in post-Christian and non-Christian terms, religion after the New Age.

Here we come across a paradox. Makeyev and many other religious activists in Central and Eastern Europe use two different understandings of the social nature of religion at the same time. For them, religion as an element or even the basis of ethnic culture, is something naturally inherent in the members of some ethnic group and is assimilated almost automatically: "there are more natural practices for the people that are not recognised by the people as special practices, but are the basis of traditional

culture and society”, being forms of spiritual (religious) life “from the point of view of religions of pure experience” (Makeyev 2010). However, at the same time religion remains the subject of an individual rational choice or a decision of each individual made under the influence of nativistic sentiment. The authors, representing their traditionalist projects, expect to convince readers to make this internal choice. At the same time, they appeal not only to people’s attachment to their native culture and their fear of losing, together with ethnicity, access to a unique solidarity and security resource due to the natural diversity of national cultures, but also to the prospects of individual self-improvement and psychological stability. Makeyev, taking on the role of personal growth coach, convinces his audience that “in the most ancient religious teachings [...] the nature of the human psyche and the mechanisms of its action hidden from an external observer are revealed quite deeply” and the comprehension of these teachings, accessible to our contemporaries in the Ossetian religion, which “of course, is the oldest religious culture” (Makeyev 2013), will be able to help everyone to “improve” their consciousness (Makeyev 2010).

It seems to me that the attempt to combine two different understandings of religion – as the phenomena of the individual and the super-individual – also determined the use of the concept of transpersonal psychology in the constructions by Makeyev, which thus evaded an individualistic understanding of religious experience in the spirit of William James. In addition, he quite sensitively grasped general tendencies in criticising the conceptual apparatus adopted in the social studies of religion. By this, he not only answered the challenges facing his own nativistic project, but also proposed a platform on which equal rights can be given to religious activists and representatives of what he, like many other supporters of the idea of a fruitful dialogue between science and religion, represents as a ‘progressive science’. The classics of this science include quite different authors, from Fritjof Capra, the author of the *Tao of Physics* (1975), the classics of the New Age, to the ideologist of the European new right Alain de Benoist (Makeyev 2017a: 24–26, 73–75). Of course, in these ranks there are also representatives of the same transpersonal psychology, which has opened up not only new horizons in the study of religion, but also has itself, according to some, become a new religious movement (Ozhiganova and Filippov 2006: 232–241). And perhaps it would be worth remembering that Wouter Hanegraaff, speaking about psychologisation of religion, meant transpersonal psychology primarily.

This connection seems a prime example of the “discursive unity of academic theories and religious practice” that Kocku von Stuckrad (2014: 152, 158) wrote about in describing contemporary processes of “the scientification of religion”. We can see that the re-description of religion offered by religious activists constitutes a crucial religious practice and is almost indistinguishable from academic practice in some characteristics, including in its functional aspect.

NOTES

1 Sociological research provides very different data on the religious identity of the population of North Ossetia. For example, various surveys establish Orthodox Christians as between 40 and 70 percent of the population. Part of the difficulty in counting the representatives of various religions is due to the fact that the status of the so-called Ossetian ethnic religion discussed in this article is not fully understood, either by the researchers themselves or by the people who answer the corresponding questions in the questionnaire.

2 The fact that the Ossetian religion is something more than a ('normal') religion is one of the favorite topics of conversation among Ossetian religious nativists. In November 2019, I attended a discussion at one of the meetings, which discussed the prospects for a further revival of the Ossetian people's faith. At some point, it was said that the word wisdom or knowledge rather than religion is much more suitable to denote the spiritual heritage of Ossetians. In this context, the two leaders of this movement exchanged statements such as: "You know, I am the most non-religious person!" – "Me too." – "Still, I am the most non-religious person." "And I am even more." The last remark was said by the official head of the religious organisation of Vladikavkaz.

One can encounter similar discussions among other religious nativists including Russian new Pagans. "[Russian] Rodnoverie cannot necessarily be defined as a religion in the strict sense. Some of its followers prefer to speak of spirituality (*dukhovnost'*), wisdom (*mudrost'*), or a form of philosophy or worldview (*mirovozzrenie*)." (Laruelle 2012: 294)

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials of the author

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