Abstract

The neo-charismatic movement has rapidly expanded globally. The article examines how the western-based religious movement has been indigenized in Russia. It focuses on the analysis of ethnographic data collected in four neo-charismatic churches in St Petersburg between 2006 and 2009. The data were collected through interviews and participant observations as well as analysis of Internet sources and texts that the churches had produced. This article asks: How have the neo-charismatic churches with western origin been tailored to Russian atmosphere? Which strategies and tools have been used by church leaders and members to legitimize and negotiate the position of these movements in society? What distinguishes the churches in this study, and what do they have in common? My findings indicate that neo-charismaticism is indigenized when churches distance themselves from what are viewed as western values and adapt localized rituals, re-construct the usable narratives of the history, and work to alleviate Russian societal problems. The churches differ from each other in their age cohorts, worship styles and outreach strategies, but they share an orientation to social responsibility and individual self-discipline as well as a conservative ethos in ethical questions.

Keywords: Pentecostal movement, neo-charismaticism, indigenization, Russia, minority religion

Introduction

This article examines the indigenization of the western-based neo-charismatic movement in Russia. It analyses the juxtaposition of the western background and local societal expectations in Russian neo-charismaticism. The research focuses on the analysis of ethnographic data collected in four churches in St Petersburg that could be categorized as neo-charismatics, i.e., new Pentecostal/charismatic communities that are independent from the traditional Christian denominations and emphasise spiritual gifts, such as healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues (Anderson 2010: 19). The churches were called: the Union of Christians (Soiuz Khristian), the Bridge (Most), the Victory...
The churches were founded at the beginning of the 1990s after the law on freedom of conscience and religious associations went into effect. After the collapse of communism, many Pentecostal/charismatic churches especially from the United States, Western Europe, and South Korea capitalized on the opportunities the new freedom offered in a formerly officially atheist society; they saw it as a new mission field. Classical Pentecostalism that had begun in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century survived the seventy years of the communist period only as an oppressed or underground phenomenon (Löfstedt 2011). Because of the subdued nature of classical Russian Pentecostals, the «neo» brands, thriving on their global momentum, became dominant in the Russian Charismatic/Pentecostal field after the collapse of communism (Agadjanian 2012: 5).

The early 1990s was a successful period for different neo-charismatic churches in Russia; they were equal with other religions by law. However, the rapid growth of religious groups did not result in harmonious co-existence of various religious traditions, but soon the new freedom, liberal religious legislation and westernization tendencies created a common fear of «losing Russia» (Kääriäinen 1998; Shterin 2003). The Russian Orthodox Church, and many secular actors, including key Russian ministries (such as the Ministries of Defence, International Affairs, Health and Medical Industry, Education, and the Federal Security Bureau) was active in the process of strengthening the legal position of «traditional» and «Russian» religions in Russia (see more, Shterin 2003: 121–124). Furthermore, by the time that the new federal law on religion was signed in 1997, already one third of Russia’s 89 federal subjects had adopted their own local laws on religion that usually distinguished between «traditional and non-traditional religions» and «Russian and foreign religions» (Shterin 2003). This clearly indicates that there had been dramatic local changes in the religious landscape since the collapse of the Soviet Union (see e.g., Pelkmans 2009b).

Protestants are a religious minority in Russia, totalling between 0.6 and 1.8 per cent of the population. Of those about one quarter are Pentecostals that include most of the registered neo-charismatic groups (Kuropatkina 2012: 134; Report 2011). Most of the neo-charismatic churches are members and have a legal status in the unions of Evangelical churches, which are registered as religious organizations with the Ministry of Justice. The unions may include congregations with very different views and from different Pentecostal historical waves (Lunkin 2004). However, the nature of charismatic groups as local, independent groups makes it difficult to estimate their real number in Russia. Not all the churches can cope with registering with the authorities, and many of those registered do not announce when they cease to function as a church (Emicheva 2010). Furthermore, many Pentecostal churches refuse official registration as a matter of ideology (Löfstedt 2011: 9; Lunkin 2005). Many neo-charismatic groups founded during the 1990s have been dissolved, while some have gained a stable position (Kuropatkina 2012: 135).
Minority churches today meet challenges connected to strict regulations on reporting their activities and funding. Even cities’ regulations affect their functioning (see e.g., Shterin 2003; Eremicheva 2010). For example, renting facilities in state institutions is restricted in St Petersburg, and therefore most of the neo-charismatic churches have their meetings in private halls, hotel auditoriums or on the property of other churches. For a new denomination, it is almost impossible to own real estate (Eremicheva 2010). However, in spite of the tendency of government regulations to diminish their freedom, they can act and gather freely. According to a pastor of the Apostle St Peter’s church in 2013, the tendency does not yet interfere with their activities.

Public opinion and the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church easily negatively label Evangelicals as sectarians, as did the Tsarist officials and Orthodox theologians earlier, and the Soviet authorities after them (Löfstedt 2012: 101). Russia is regarded as the «canonical territory» of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Eastern Orthodoxy has always been closely linked to national cultures and willing to marginalize those they consider aliens (Agadjanian 2012). Furthermore, the Soviet policy of combining identity politics and religious objectification reaffirmed, and inscribed in popular consciousness, ideas about the close connection between religious and ethno-national categories (Pelkmans 2009a: 6). Considering this background, this article explores how a new religious minority negotiates and legitimizes its position in society as a church of both western origin and Russian identity. The article takes the following format. First previous scholarship on indigenization of Pentecostalism is discussed; next, the focus, data and methods of the study are explained. Following that, a brief history of the churches in this study is explored, and finally, the four themes of indigenization of the Russian neo-charismaticism today are identified in various data sources.

**Indigenization of Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism is multifaceted and probably the fastest expanding Christian movement in the world (Cleary 1999: 131; Anderson 2010: 13; Robbins 2004a: 117; Martin 2002). During the past few decades, the scholarly interest in Pentecostalism has grown (e.g., Anderson 2010, Robbins 2004b; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Meyer 2010). Pentecostalism is very complex, and it has been questioned whether all churches under its umbrella should be lumped together. Furthermore, neo-charismaticism often differs theologically and ritually from classical Pentecostalism (Anderson 2010: 19; Robbins 2004a: 121). However, many scholars assume that their common features, most notably their shared emphasis on ecstatic experiences that are available to all believers, analytically unify the movement (Robbins 2004a: 122).

The global growth of Pentecostalism has made its interaction with various social contexts an interesting topic. According to cultural anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2010: 119), the movement has always been «transnational,» reaching out to the world often by making use of modern media facilities and global infrastructure. Although many Pentecostals are strongly oriented toward the world, they also tend to consider it a dan-
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gerous place. The positive or negative nature of any commodity or technology is thought to depend entirely on the «spirit» behind it; in Pentecostalism, any object can be «imbued with the Holy Spirit.» Meyer argues that this accounts for the close connection of Pentecostalism to the spread of capitalism, consumption, and new technologies, which many Pentecostals utilize in their world outreach (Meyer 2010: 118, 124).

In my view, this «world-making» (Robbins 2004a) can also be seen as part of the «indigenization process.» Expansion in space (in both the world mission and such actions as filling public space with Pentecostal signs, such as bumper stickers) is a distinctive characteristic of Pentecostalism (Meyer 2010: 119). Here the issue of the indigenization of the neo-charismatic branch of Pentecostalism in local ambience is examined. I understand indigenization to describe the phenomenon when locals take something from the outside and make it their own, as in the process of Africanization or Russianization. I view the process of indigenization as one that often includes an essentialized notion of local culture, i.e., the religious leaders and participants tend to have a perception of what the essence of «culture» is and what it means to be an adherent of that culture. This essentialized perception of Russian culture is what the neo-charismatic believers studied here use in indigenizing the churches.

Pentecostalism is often at the same time an individual and a collectivistic religion, i.e., it emphasises, on the one hand, individual conversion and an individual’s opportunities to gain spiritual authority in his or her community, and on the other hand, strong collectivistic communities often with authoritarian leadership and norms (Agadjanian 2012: 6). The believers have roles and responsibilities that tie them to the church (Anderson 2004: 208–209; Coleman 1998; Robbins 2004a: 130). It has been argued that the growth of the Pentecostalism may have been successful because the pattern is to soon shift the leadership of the groups, founded by missionaries, to local members who embody the habits they consider are essential parts of their own cultural heritage (Robbins 2004a: 131).

The main issue that has accompanied the expansion of Pentecostalism everywhere is the question whether this brand of Christianity is «foreign» or «indigenous» (Anderson 2004: 206–209; Coleman 2000: 191; Casanova 2001: 436). Although Pentecostalism originated in the United States, it arrived to Latin America even before it had taken root in North America, and immediately assumed an «indigenous» Latin American form (Casanova 2001: 436). Its adaptability to various cultures has been seen as a reason for its rapid global expansion. Many scholars argue that the accessible doctrine and flexible ritual structures allow various manifestations in different parts of the world, and yet local beliefs and practices can also be uniquely adapted and incorporated (Anderson 2004: 212–213; Dempster et al. 1999; Martin 2002: 142–143; Robbins 2004a). It lacks the fixed nature of large-scale organizational structures and is capable of enveloping the local into a larger scheme (Meyer 2010: 121). Many scholars have described Pentecostalism as a movement that is always in the process of becoming, a matter of movement and performance, rather than a fixed religious system (Meyer 2010: 12; Anderson 2010: 15; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001).

However, according to Robbins (2004a: 130), Pentecostalism seems to be very consciously antisyncretistic although it often gives local characteristics to the Christian
message missionaries have brought to a particular place. Many Pentecostals share a view of the world as the site of a spiritual war between demonic forces and God (Meyer 2010: 117), which is one explanatory factor for their success in those parts of the world that take spirits for granted (Anderson 2004: 212). Previous research has often shown that Pentecostalism takes local forms not by fitting into indigenous cultures via syncretic melting, but by accepting local spirit worlds as real and then fighting against them (Robbins 2004a: 126–130; Casanova 2001: 437; Martin 2002: 142). For example, earlier studies have revealed that Pentecostals have led the onslaught in many parts of Latin America against spirit-cults; in Haiti, some Pentecostals have fought against Voooodoo; in Africa they are aligned against witchcraft, and in Korea they have preached against shamanism (Casanova 2001: 437; Robbins 2004a: 129; Meyer 1998). However, struggle against local culture has also been a disadvantage of Pentecostal mission encounters, i.e., this type of Christianity has not been accepted by the wider public in many other parts of the world since it may fight against such values that are viewed as essential parts of a specific culture. For example, Pentecostalism has never been especially successful in Russia, and according to Kuropatkina (2012: 135), one reason has precisely been the teaching of many American missionaries in Russia on the national cultures and traditions as «dead weight» and that Pentecostals should actively aspire to change their society on the basis of «universal values.» Diminishing what people understand as Russian culture has been tailor-made to alienate people from the American-based, neo-charismatic churches, and consequently make the local neo-charismatic form their own theological positions. They may draw from traditions they consider to be essentially Russian and from the particular circumstances of modern Russia (Kuropatkina 2012: 136).

Lately, there have been some studies on the Russian neo-charismatic movement, which analyse missionary encounters and local forms of Pentecostalism in various parts of Russia; the most relevant is the volume Conversion after socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union (Pelkmans 2009b) and several articles (e.g., Kuropatkina 2012; Poplavsky 2012; Lunkin 2005). This article is based on an ethnographic study that has been conducted on the indigenization of Russian neo-charismaticism in the second largest and wealthiest city of Russia, St Petersburg, which is known as the «Russian port to West.» The city is known for its history of the Evangelical movement and western religious influences existed already under tsarism. Thus, the context of this study is religiously diverse and represents a more tolerant attitude than can be found in many other parts of Russia.

Focus, data and methods
This article examines the indigenization of neo-charismaticism in post-Soviet Russia by asking three questions: 1) How do the neo-charismatic churches with western origin tailor themselves to the Russian ambience? 2) Which strategies and tools do they use to legitimize and negotiate their position in society? 3) What distinguishes the churches in this study, and what elements do they have in common? By exploring these ques-
The data were collected during fieldwork in four neo-charismatic churches in St Petersburg between 2006 and 2009 (altogether a four-month period), and updated via email with some pastors of the churches in 2013. This analysis does not focus on those neo-charismatic narratives that attack their own culture, for instance, the ritualism of Orthodoxy (especially worshipping icons) and an alcohol-oriented way of celebrating. My interest is in the process of indigenization, in the ways by which churches use certain essentialized perceptions of Russian history and culture to present themselves as «Russian» and create congruence with common perceptions of what it means to be Russian. In other words, the analysis concentrates on the process in which the characteristics in Russian «own culture» are «imbued with the Holy Spirit» (phrase from Meyer 2010). This process occurs by promoting continuity with the «Russian tradition» rather than rupturing it. Here Russianization is understood as a socially constructed and continual cultural process that includes the constant borrowing and adaptation of elements from outside that are internalized, which Russian cultural researchers argue has occurred throughout Russian cultural history (see e.g., Huttunen et al. 1999: 30–31).

The data consist of 16 interviews, participant observations and informal discussions in the churches and in the evangelical union, the Association of Christian Churches «Union of Christians» (ACC). Furthermore, Internet sources, i.e., homepages and virtual groups in social media, such as group of the project Seeking God in Russia, the youth group Dream Team and groups of various churches (in vkontakte.ru and facebook.com), and texts and books that the churches and the association have produced were analysed. The books were authored by the doctor of social sciences, Professor Vladislav Arkadevich Bachinin, who is the founder of the ACC’s scientific research centre and a participant in one of the ACC’s member churches, the church Mercy. The publications of the centre are mainly authored by Bachinin whose analyses lean explicitly on Christian values.

The interviewees’ ages varied from 17 to 65; seven were men and nine were women. Five were from the Bridge, three from the Apostle St Peter’s church, three from the Victory church, and five from the Union of Christians. They were pastors, voluntary workers, and active religious practitioners. Their income levels and professional backgrounds varied. The churches are small and I use the real names of the churches, but in keeping with ethical standards to protect the interviewees’ anonymity, I do not use their names or specify the church affiliation of the quoted interviewees, although by doing that I lose some of the advantages of making comparisons. Observations made in the meetings of the churches and the ACC provided direct information about the life of the communities. Un-taped discussions with other churchgoers and pastors of other churches in the ACC provided a broad perspective on the neo-charismatic field in St Petersburg. Additionally, the produced texts and Internet sources are analytically important since they provide a picture of the churches as the believers themselves wish to portray it. Interviews as well as other texts are analysed with the help of thematic content analysis. From the analysis, I have formed four themes of indigenization of the
Russian neo-charismaticism today: moving from the western influence to local leadership and ambience; criticizing the «western» prosperity gospel and liberal sexual norms; re-constructing the history of Russian spirituality; and repairing «my home Russia.»

The studied churches

The history of the Union of Christians and the Association of Christian Churches began in 1986 when the future pastors and figureheads of the church and the association, Igor Nikitin and Dmitri Poliakov, converted to Christianity through an American pastor, who was visiting Leningrad. Since there was only one open Evangelical Baptist church in the city, they soon organized a group, the Union of Young Christians (later: the Union of Christians). They began to recruit new minority churches, and soon about 60 groups, formed as a result of western missions in Russia, joined their organization (Bachinin 2006: 9–11). Their association was registered as a religious organization in 1996 (Ustav Religioznoi organizatsii Assotsiatsii khristianskih tserkvei «Soiuz Khristian») and received the re-registration in the Ministry of Justice in 1998 (Bachinin 2006: 14). According to the ACC’s own statistics, it has more than 450 member churches. The Union of Christians, Victory church, and Bridge are members of the ACC. The Victory church was founded by pastors from the Victory church in the United States, and the Bridge was based on the work of the missionary organization, Bridge International, and their founders were from The Netherlands.

The Apostle St Peter’s church belongs to the Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith, which is the largest organization of Protestant churches in Russia with more than 1,500 member churches. It has members from both traditional Pentecostal and neo-charismatic groups (Yakunin et al. 2009: 21). The Apostle St Peter’s church used a name, the New Generation, when I first went there in 2006 when it had just divided into two groups. Alexei Lediaev, raised up in a Russian Baptist family, originally founded the New Generation in 1989 in Riga, Latvia. In its early years, the church was supported and influenced by the Swedish Word of Life movement and its founder, Ulf Ekman. I was told that the split within the St Petersburg New Generation group in 2006 was connected to Lediaev; some of the members did not want to follow him and the group that is part of this study, as they said, «remained under his protection.»

The Union of Christians and Victory Church have both stabilized their position with full-time pastors although their membership figures have declined. From the first years, the main services on Sundays have been said to have become less charismatic, and spontaneous ecstatic elements are more supported in small-group prayer meetings. Some members are disappointed by the change, while others think there is now a «conciliatory atmosphere.» The Bridge, on the other hand, is a tiny group of about ten persons, which could be categorized as a social gathering with a homelike atmosphere. Their hallmark is silence; they have peaceful, meditative meetings and believe in listening to God’s voice in silence. This practice has attracted older people who viewed many charismatic churches as too noisy. The Apostle St Peter’s church gathers mainly
young adults and is the most charismatic church of the target group. Their worship style is loud, accompanied by movement and dance, and they practice exorcism. The churches form a suitable sample for studying the indigenization process of neo-charismaticism in St Petersburg since they are two of the more active and internationally orientated churches: the Union of Christians is nearly thirty years old, while the Apostle St Peter’s church is rather new and still growing. Two smaller and less active churches: the Bridge, and Victory church, which were formed by overseas missionaries after the collapse of communism, no longer have much international contact.

Moving from western influence to Russian leadership and ambience

The beginning of the churches in the 1990s was influenced and financed by western missionaries. Non-Russians were the primary founders of most of the churches and many of the local leaders, for example, Nikitin and Poliakov had an opportunity to study abroad. The believers read translated literature and joined the courses that the missionaries organized. At the time, local Orthodox priests struggled with the Soviet legacy of the church, such as poor infrastructure, low educational level among church workers, and a lack of theological literature. Missionaries, on the other hand, were well-financed and educated. They were able to organize attractive church meetings, teach people the basics of the Christian faith, and answer questions (see also, Barker 1998). Although there was some official church structure during the Soviet era, and some underground religious life did take place, for most those religious experiences were invisible. A fifty-year-old female pastor said:

[During the Soviet time] I sometimes visited Alexander Nevskii monastery [where there was an open church]... The workers drove me away several times, since I didn’t have a scarf or wasn’t dressed correctly [for the Orthodox Church]. Well, it was really typical in the 70s... Only in 1989, we could buy the New Testament... Then I heard that there would be a crusade [of a neo-charismatic church] and in the first service... I heard the word, I heard the praising, and that’s how I came to the church.

Today the churches have been transformed from western mission churches to churches with local leaders. Previous research has verified that is a common step in the neo-charismatic indigenization process (see Robbins 2004a: 130–131). Furthermore, today’s churches invite preachers and evangelists to their meetings from the Baltic countries, Ukraine or other parts of Russia more often than from the West. One reason some pastors mentioned is a conscious choice of the Russian churches to distance themselves from western ideas: their wish to support what they view as Russia’s and Eastern Europe’s own Christian culture. Another reason is probably connected to the problems Americans began to have in getting long-term visas especially after the turn of the Millennium. Poplavsky (2012: 116) noted in his research on the Pentecostal churches in Tyumen that the Russian churches no longer view their western founders as teachers, as they did in the 1990s, but as equal partners. A close association with western mis-
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sionaries could also mean negative labelling for the reputation of the neo-charismatic churches (Löfstedt 2012).

Although at first the ACC was a mission church organization, it now emphasises its own outreach and mission not only in Russia, but also abroad, especially among the Russian-speaking minorities in Europe, the Middle East and the USA. Nikitin, the President of the ACC, has mentioned that reaching Russians abroad helps the expatriates to preserve their Russian origin, which he regards as one of the top goals of Russia (ACC’s News 8.10.2013). Outreach is a characteristically Pentecostal strategy, but it also echoes the attitude of the Russian state, whose foreign policy has lately actively attempted to strengthen its international position, particularly among the Russian expatriates (see e.g., Mäkinen 2011; see also Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013).

However, there are still many elements from the founder churches in the churches today. For example, Nikitin has made it clear that today’s believers should speak modern languages and use modern technology (ACC News 8.10.2013). The ACC has its own satellite TV, and the leaders of the Union of Christians and Apostle St Peter’s church are now active in the social media. In the church life, the clearest influence is music: many worship songs in all the churches are translated from English and western-style rock and pop bands play at the Sunday services of the Union of Christians, Victory Church and Apostle St Peter’s church. The latter is also active in flash mob shows on the streets and in shopping centres with various other Evangelical/Pentecostal churches not studied here.

Local culture has also become expressed as part of church life. For example, especially in the Bridge, speaking in tongues has some elements from the Orthodox liturgy: it may sound like recitation and take place while the worshipper is kneeling down. High culture, which is valued in Russia, is practised in the Apostle St Peter’s church, where events sometimes include live classical music or an opera singer and an orchestra. All the churches now celebrate Easter according to the old church calendar, just as the Russian Orthodox Church does; they do not observe Easter at the same time as the western sister churches. Western neo-charismatic tradition is criticized as lacking cultural heritage and depth, while the Russian one is seen as drawing from the essence of Russian culture, which some interviewees argued is unappreciated by the western believers visiting the St Petersburg churches. A 29-year-old female actor mentioned: «We have a very beautiful city and when the [western] Christians come, they say [condescendingly], ‘Well, yes, there shall not be left here one stone upon another.’ I feel it is strange.» Interestingly, the interviewee criticized the visitors who had used the citation of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus emphasises the transience of «earthly culture» when his disciples show him the buildings of the temple. For the interviewee, the «culture» as such was highly valued as God’s gift and not only something that would perish at the end.

In many cases, current church leaders actively utilize aspects of their own Russianness to their strategic advantage. For example, the ACC gives the pastors identity cards on which it is stated that a person is a priest (sviashchennosluzhitel) instead of a pastor (pastor), which is a term that is used among the neo-charismatics. The term priest
refers to the Orthodox priesthood and evokes respect among the secular authorities with whom the pastors may need to cooperate to solve issues regarding their permission to rent and use facilities. Another example is the change of the church’s name, New Generation to Apostle St Peter’s church. The main reason one of the pastors mentioned for changing the name was to make the church «more recognizable for the people in the city.» Obviously the title, New Generation is easier to connect to a new religious movement, whereas the new name gives both members and town officials a more stable and traditional connotation, supporting Russian religious origins and, of course, the city itself.

Criticizing the «western» prosperity gospel and liberal sexual norms

The believers often stated that «the foreigners’ values» the prosperity gospel and liberalism, do not align with the «Russian mentality,» which is never clearly defined. The churches in this study draw from the Word of Faith Movement, and are linked to prosperity theology. In the 1990s, the prosperity gospel with its ideas of neo-liberal capitalism at first attracted many people who had lived in the socialist society and desired the benefits of capitalism (Löfstedt 2011). However, soon people realized that the prosperity gospel gave people an unrealistic picture of living in faith and was far from life’s realities. A fifty-year-old female pastor said:

There was a difficult period in our church and in many churches in St Petersburg when we were taught «everything you ask in my name, you’ll get» because Americans established our churches. Do you know how tempting it is? It tempts and really excites you at the first moment. However, when you don’t get everything «in the name of the Lord,» difficult times begin, and unfortunately many people turned away and left the church.

The churches founded after the collapse of communism have now distanced themselves from the teachings of prosperity by faith or teach it moderately. The youngest church I studied, the Apostle St Peter’s church, however, more openly proclaims healing miracles and success in a Christian life. The ACC and some members of the Union of Christian practise business consulting, which is said to be based on an understanding that «Christian business is successful.»

However, earlier research has shown that in Russia the prosperity gospel and what is understood as western consumerism have been criticized in the Pentecostal movement (Kuropatkina 2012: 141). Thus, Meyer’s (2010: 115) argument, that the taken-for-granted relation between Pentecostalism and capitalism must be resisted, seems relevant in Russia. It was more common in the interviews and the church services I attended to emphasise that suffering is a part of God’s will and suffering will turn to blessing. I view this teaching as more congruent in the midst of Russian present-day societal challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, and public health problems. The interviewees claimed that God repairs a believer and his or her life, but only little by
little, and after a believer’s full commitment to serving, praying and working for the church. A 34-year-old male church social worker commented:

This path is not a smooth one, of course. They say that when you become a believer, everything becomes excellent in your life. Just recently, one of the pastors said this is not correct. [But when] you come to Christ, he shows how hard everything is, there is a lot of work to do, many responsibilities in life.

I also heard many faith stories in various churches in which a believer had sacrificed oneself for faith and afterwards received blessings. For example, a businesswoman revealed how she gave money to the charismatic community and then «success flowed to her.» This turn was often connected to breaking with the past, since a radical-moral conversion is valued in the Pentecostal tradition (Holm 1991; Meyer 2010: 120). For example, giving up prosperity gained possibly by illegal or semi-legal actions meant the birth of a new Christian self, whereas prosperity received after finding faith could be seen as God’s blessing.

Differences in ways of expression in the United States and Russia were seen as one reason to modify the teaching in this doctrine to be more suitable for Russia, where saying «everything is great» might sound suspicious. A forty-year-old male pastor said:

There is one characteristic of a Russian person... he is generally a pessimist; it is even regarded as a stamp of wisdom... I just saw the results of some research on the happiest countries in the world... In the first place, there were, of course, Americans; that is also controversial because... [they say,] «I am fine» although everything is breaking up in life, and it is not a fact because people lie. Additionally, Russians were the saddest. But a Russian is «unhappy» particularly because he cannot say that everything is good. If all is well, that is definitely not a good thing.

Another «western theme» from which St Petersburg churches wanted to distance themselves was liberal sexual norms. The clearest threat, «western liberal sexual morality,» was expliclited to culminate in the LGBT pride parades and the acceptance of same-sex marriages. For example, the Association sent a letter to St Petersburg’s governor, Georgii Poltavchenko, to deny «homosexual propaganda in the cultural capital of Russia» and turned to President Putin to deny the march of sexual minorities in St Petersburg in 2013 with the following argumentation:

The event leads to disturbance of stability in society, escalation of aggression, disorder that influence citizens’ security, and also goes against the law on prohibition of homosexual propaganda in St Petersburg, destroys the reputation of the city, and spiritual traditions and values of the Petersburgians (ACC’s News 16.5.2013).

In addition to the actions of the ACC, the sermons in the Apostle St Peter’s church expressed a negative attitude toward the rights of sexual minorities. This theme commonly arose in the interviews although I did not pose a question on the topic. What is interesting in the argumentation is that the negative attitude toward the rights of sexual minorities is not justified on the basis of the Bible, as many conservative Christians in
the West do, but on the basis of what was perceived to be «the conservative nature of Russianness.» According to an interviewee, a 17-year-old female university student, «These values are alien to Russia» and «Most Russians are against them.» It was also argued that liberal sexual norms accompany democracy building, and Russians do not need that as they wish to find their own way in the modern world, different from western practices. Another interviewee, a 29-year-old female actor, stated:

It is said that democracy will free people from bad things.... In today’s Sweden, democracy has resulted in a situation when people are not allowed to say publically that homosexuality is a sin. I heard in a conference that a Swedish rock singer was in court defending a pastor who was put in jail when he condemned homosexuality on a television programme.

In these interviews, the participants in these neo-charismatic churches concur with the Russian Orthodox teaching which has condemned «western liberalism» and some Western European churches for their liberal and inclusive theology (see more, Brüning and van der Zweerde 2012). Most of the Russian churches and believers, both the Protestant and the Orthodox, share a conservative view on sexual ethics. These attitudes can be seen as a continuation from the late Soviet period, which was largely, yet not entirely isolated from the moral changes that occurred in the West (Agadjanian 2011: 17). The Soviet moral system was more traditional and conservative, controlled by censorship of the state and consequently created what is well-known as a «double morality» by distinguishing the public from the private (Agadjanian 2011: 17). A wish to put sexual minorities in the private sphere and a fear of what will happen if they are visible can be seen to mirror this background.

Re-constructing the history of Russian spirituality

A wish to «return to one’s own tradition» has been articulated in Russia since the 1990s and has also led the neo-charismatic churches to demonstrate evidence that their churches actually are Russian and traditional. Most clearly, this attempt is explicated in the «educational and outreach project: Seeking God in Russia» (Russkoe bogoiskatel’stvo) organized by the Apostle St Peter’s church. Its goal is to search for the evidence of the history of evangelical revivals in Russia and connect today’s neo-charismaticism in Russia to them. The project states that «the history of Russian religious non-conformity is poorly investigated and mysterious, surrounded by legends and speculations» (Seeking God in Russia 2013). The Baptists and the ACC are also connected to the project. Furthermore, the ACC’s scientific research centre has similar goals (Christian idea 2013). The name of the project refers to non-conformist paths of spiritual searching, termed «God-seeking» in late Imperial Russia (see Steinberg and Coleman 2007: 3), and to Nicolai Berdyaev’s (1907) article: Russian God-Seekers, in which he writes that God-seeking is lodged within the Russian soul. The eve of the October Revolution that is glorified as a time of the revival of Evangelical Christianity in the project, is regarded as such also by the researchers (Steinberg and Coleman 2007; Werth 2007: 190–194). However, this popular religious revival, often functioning
outside the established church, that included non-Orthodox denominations, notably Baptists, also comprised a variety of other forms of spirituality: mysticism, theosophy, Nietzschean philosophy, and Eastern religions (Steinberg and Coleman 2007: 3–5). Thus, we can interpret this to echo what Meyer (2010: 118, 124) said about imbuing things with the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism: a historical term is given a Christian meaning and used as evidence of the works of the Holy Spirit.

Many educated members especially in the Union of Christians and Apostle St Peter’s church wanted to identify themselves with the Evangelical and Pentecostal revivals in tsarist Russia. It was emphasised that although westerners had founded their denominations, their roots actually were in Russia and in the Russian spiritual tradition. A forty-year-old male pastor said:

[Our church] is registered as an Evangelical church. Moreover, our Russian Evangelical Christians were organized at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the pre-Revolutionary atmosphere when there was also a very confusing but favourable time for revival. By the way, even the Orthodox Church came close to it. It was really a time of re-considering during the age of Prokhanov and other Christian thinkers, Bulgakov and Solovev... This historical landmark is better. I wouldn’t say we are charismatic in an American sense, or Pentecostal, although we can trace and see a certain connection.

Ivan Prokhanov is considered one of the key people legitimizing the charismatic historical position. He is known in the Russian Evangelical milieu as a founder of the Baptist-Evangelical movement (see e.g., Karetnikova 2001). However, he is comparatively unknown compared to the well-known Orthodox philosophers, Sergei Bulgakov and Vladimir Solovev mentioned in the quotation. Drawing a parallel to them is to legitimize the position of a new church established by western missionaries and to construct its collective memory. Besides Baptists, neo-charismatics also state that Prokhanov’s communion was one of the predecessors of their church type. Another pre-Revolutionary evangelical figure whose memory was taught was Baron Pavel Nikolaevich Nikolai (Paul Ernst Georg von Nicolay) known from the Russian Christian student movement. The project of «Seeking God in Russia» organizes festivals and camps in his memory in Vyborg, in the park Monrepo where he owned a farm and was buried.

Bachinin (2005) and the «Seeking God in Russia» project looked even further to the history and they saw they have common roots with Strigolniks, Molokans and Dukhobors, Russian religious minorities from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Their members rejected all ecclesiastic hierarchies, monasticism, icons, and sacraments of the priesthood and communion of the Orthodox Church (see more, Klibanov 1982; Kuropatkina 2012: 138; Breyfogle 2007: 224–225). The project has organized trips to the traditional believers of Molokans, who still have their communions in Russia. Bachinin (2005: 75–78) claims that these are early forms of Russian Evangelical movement, as ancient «proto-evangelical» and «pre-evangelical» forms existed before the foundation of the Russian Evangelical movement. The Russian Evangelical movement, his argument goes, is formulated to be suitable for the Russian societal context and spiritual land. This argument of connecting Evangelicalism to Russian land has similarities to a definition of Russian Orthodoxy as a symbiosis of
«Faith, Land and State» (see e.g., Shterin 1999: 42). According to Bachinin, at the same time as the Reformation in Germany or even earlier, there were similar ideas being expressed in Russia, and this line of Russian Protestantism continues.

Earlier research has shown that some of the charismatic leaders in Russia have wished to indigenize their faith by creating a basis for a national Pentecostal theology by studying Orthodox theology. For example, the Cornerstone church in Kazan, which Kuropatkina (2012: 137) has studied, tries to achieve the creative synthesis by taking «depth» from Orthodoxy and «spirit» from charismaticism. Furthermore, Poplavsky’s (2012: 115) interviewees in Tyumen asserted that it is «time to turn from foreign philosophy to Russian philosophy.» Some of my interviewees also valued Orthodox philosophers from the beginning of the 20th century, such as Vladimir Solovev and Sergei Bulgakov. Their relation to the official Orthodox Church was contradictory back then and was also seen to contradict today’s Moscow Patriarchate, as a sixty-year-old male businessman noted: «I’d like to go to the Orthodox Church of [priest Alexander] Men, who was murdered, but where is this ‘Men?’ My spiritual fathers, Bulgakov, Sergei, Trubetskii, Solovev, were intellectuals, but where are such people in the Orthodox Church?»

The interviewees of various churches articulated that the neo-charismatic movement in Russia is a continuation of the Russian spirituality formerly expressed in the Orthodox Church, and a sign of the spiritual nature of the Russian people. The nation itself is at the centre of religious sacredness. For example, on Victory Day of the Second World War, the sermons and speeches repeated that the Soviet Union (though atheistic) won the war «with the help of God,» which reveals interestingly how the continuation of religious memory is reconstructed: God guiding Holy Rus’ is emphasised; the persuasion of atheism is forgotten.

Repairing «my home Russia»

«A tree is known by its fruit,» was a common proverb used as a defence against their opponents by the small churches struggling with the sect label and practical problems in organizing their activities. The social responsibility of neo-charismaticism is evident in its group solidarity as well as its help for other people outside the own group. According to various researchers (Caldwell 2011; Zigon 2011b; Wanner 2007), in the post-Soviet period morality has emerged as an important venue through which religions can articulate their roles in society and attract followers. This seems to distinguish them from a trend that many sociologists (e.g., Salmenniemi and Rotkirch 2008; see also Tocheva 2011) have argued is prevailing in Russia: solidarity concerns mainly one’s own social net. Even the smallest churches do charitable work for drug and alcohol addicts and children in orphanages; they organize youth camps and help pensioners. For example, in the project «Bread of life» of the Union of Christians, the church members go to the villages and distribute the Bible and bread to people. In the Victory church, the churchgoers bring food to the service on Sunday and homeless children and youths come to the church to eat. Social work is also seen to legitimize a minority church’s position in society. One interviewee, a 55-year-old female business consultant, described:
It is hard to say that I’m a believer but not an Orthodox, as generally assumed... Only recently, I have started to say the truth... I know the Lord protects me and I can say that I go to a Protestant church, and I can say what kind of problems the church solves. That is, the church works hard in both children’s homes and drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, and all the work is done by ordinary people.

The interviewees mentioned their loyalty to the state: «Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s» was viewed as a guiding principle of a believer’s obligations to the state. The interviewees also viewed positively the future of Russia and its presidents, and prayed for the state and power. The ACC also gave advice on how to avoid conflicts in society.

The churches call their adherents to social responsibility by demonstrating their faith in their neighbourhood. For example, since it is usually no one’s job to maintain apartment buildings, the believers might themselves clean the staircase, paint the walls, bring flowers for the windowsills or change broken light bulbs. All these acts for the public good are, according to my observations, otherwise rare in Russia. In the sermons of the Apostle St Peter’s church, Russia often is allegorized as a house that must be restored, and a home in which God has placed them. According to the teaching of the Apostle St Peter’s church, the greatest lie of this time is that one cannot influence the future. They have a charitable youth group, which is called the Dream Team, and they conduct seminars on «Training for the realization of dreams» (Dream Team 2013).

The interviewees mentioned that a change of values occurred when they became a believer. The clearest change was usually eliminating alcohol or other intoxicants from their lives, but they also devoted more time to family life. It had brought many positive effects to believers’ lives both at home and at work, which, in turn, had improved financial conditions and social relationships. According to the charismatic narration, through serving God, a person could learn to gather inner strength to become more moral and manage with the responsibilities. A female artist in her thirties said:

God is interested in values of human life, and he is against chaos in people’s lives... I started to come to such conclusions. It brought peace, confidence, and happiness to my life... That is, for me, Christianity became a guiding light in personal growth... I learned how to gather inner strength to manage the tasks at hand.

The believers connected lifestyle change as creating a new moral self by imitating God. Many scholars (e.g., Zigon 2011a, 2011b; Panchenko 2011; Ładukowska 2011) have discovered affinities between religious and Soviet moral codes. Zigon (2011b) views that the moral discourse that is central in many religious practices in contemporary Russia, have a much wider historical cache from the Soviet discourse of creating a «New Soviet Man» by means of individual discipline, which in turn, had roots in pre-Revolutionary Russian Orthodox rhetoric (see also, Agadjanian 2011; Kääriäinen 1998: 31–50). The implicit moral continuity of some elements from the Soviet past (and indeed earlier times as well), like the conservative ethos mentioned earlier, and heightening a sense of social duty, might be one source in the neo-charismatic narrative of becoming more moral, yet cultivation of spiritually enhanced self-control is an
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important personal project in the Pentecostal tradition more generally (e.g., Robbins 2010: 166).

Conclusion

Although the popularity of neo-charismaticism in Russia has diminished from the 1990s, it was not just a phenomenon of the times. The churches, which both the religious legislation and public opinion often regard as a new form of Christianity in Russia, have been indigenized in Russia in the sense that the leaders and participants have adapted to their faith elements that they view as essential for Russian culture. The churches under study increasingly utilize the perceptions of their own culture rather than attack them. They more strongly support and justify their own «Russianness» than try to distance themselves from the surrounding society and habits. The process of indigenization in St Petersburg churches include distancing themselves from what they view as western values, adapting localized rituals, reconstructing usable, historical narratives, and working to mitigate Russian societal problems.

The interviewees positioned themselves historically in the Russian Evangelical landscape and constructed a perception of being a link in the chain leading back to Russian ancient spirituality. However, it would be a mistake to deny the effects of the Soviet break in the religious views of the people studied here. The Soviet anti-religious policy that resulted in lack of elementary religious knowledge and education, and the view of religion as an «opiate of the people,» have led the neo-charismatics to (re)construct religious traditions and identities. The recent reconstruction of the pre-Revolutionary past in the Russian Orthodox Church is also a project of neo-charismaticism, but its form differs from the pre-Revolutionary paragons. The reconstruction is a form of indigenization embedded in cultural, social and historical structures having both «new western» and «traditional Russian» elements. Furthermore, there also is some continuity in the neo-charismatic views with the Soviet past, such as the conservative ethos and the emphasis on social duty.

However, the churches were not all the same, but differed from each other in their age cohorts, worship styles and outreach strategies, perhaps because the Bridge and Victory church evidently had less financial basis for outreach than the two more active churches. They shared with the others an orientation to social responsibility and individual self-discipline as well as a conservative ethos in ethical questions. The Bridge and Victory church were less active in the reconstruction of Evangelical history and distancing themselves from their western origin, although they were the ones with the least overseas contacts nowadays. It could also be argued that the ACC, Union of Christians and Apostle St Peter’s church precisely needed to attack the negative sect label by ambiguously constructing their Russian history since they also needed more official contacts in order to join the public discussions in the media and to be allowed to organize large conferences.

The results reveal a current Russian attitude toward minority religions, which is similar to attitudes to many other non-governmental organizations that have contacts abroad: their position in society is unpredictable and they have to remain on guard with a range of negotiations of their position. Neo-charismatic narratives follow general ide-
ological and social patterns of Russian society. This highlights how the teachings of the new churches intertwine with and articulate the particular local, historically embedded understandings of culture, tradition and ethics.

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Notes

1 The three major waves of Pentecostal movement are: classical Pentecostalism, which originated in the early 20th century in North America, the Charismatic Renewal (in mainstream churches, Roman Catholicism in particular), and the Neo-charismatics/Neo-Pentecostals, which have been in existence mostly since the 1980s-1990s. The latter are the targets of this study.

2 The Word of Faith movement is based on Essek W. Keyon’s and later Kenneth Hagin’s teachings on physical health and material prosperity by faith. Since 1974, in Tulsa, Oklahoma the RHEMA Bible Training Centre has educated pastors based on Hagin’s doctrines; thus, one of the most interesting nets of neo-charismatic churches surrounds him. Many leaders of independent neo-charismatic churches, such as Ekman, had finished the RHEMA Bible School training programme (Burgess 2006: 392–395; Anderson 2004; Hovi 2007: 64). Nikitin and Poliakov with his wife Anna Poliakova, and many American missionaries in 1990s’ Russia, e.g., the founders of the Victory Church, had studied at the school.

References


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