

14 Religious nationalism in contemporary Russia: the case of the Ossetian ethnic religious project

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Our people preserve an ancient and probably in former times world-wide religious teaching disseminated by ancient Indo-Europeans.

(Makeyev 2007: 49)

During the last two decades the phenomenon of ‘religious nationalism’ has become a subject of academic debate. In many respects this has been caused by the outstanding role that religion and religious institutions have played in the dramatic political processes, which have occurred in the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, as well as in the Islamic and/or postcolonial world. Understanding nationalism as a phenomenon, secular in principle and, therefore, competing with religion and even destroying it, came into conflict with observable social reality. So, standard theories of forming nationalist movements and national states have demanded correction. On the other hand, the supposed close connection between the processes of modernization and secularization was revised. A number of scholars have paid attention to the fact that such a correlation actually applies only to some European cases (Stark 1985). Such criticism caused the revision of widespread Eurocentric theories and the search for more flexible explanatory models to consider the specific character of local social contexts, starting with the peculiarities of understanding the social nature of religion in various societies and during different historical periods and finishing with the unpredictable and unexpected consequences of actions by supporters of secularization, which often stimulate the revival of religious life.

In modern social studies the analysis of religious nationalism is developing in several directions. A significant number of works is dedicated to relations and conflicts between a secular state and religious nationalism (Juergensmeyer 1993; van der Veer 1994; Asad 1999). In addition, connections between national identity and confessional affiliation are being studied in some research concerned with modern European contexts, where the adherence of practically faithless people to national churches (‘belonging without believing’) is marked (Botvar 1996; Davie 2000). As a special research direction one can consider work on nationalism (racism) in some neo-paganism movements (Shnirel'man 2004: part 3; Moroz 2005). There are some attempts to create a general conception of analysing the interaction of such concepts as ethnicity, nationalism, and religion (Baumann 1999).

Generally speaking, the prospects of creating a unified model of interaction between religion and nationalism look improbable at the moment – groups that have developed or are developing as nations have passed along such different historical paths, and the imagined social reality where the members of the various groups live is rather specific in almost each case. It largely concerns the question of forming relations between religion and nationalism or, to put it more precisely, the consequences brought about by the nation construction project for the religious life of various nations and ethnic groups; the attitude of religious institutions (existing or being created) to such projects; and the segments of social reality that define the trajectory of interaction between religion and nationalism (a religious institution and a national state).

Indeed, in most cases we may say that during the modern epoch nationalism, acting as a secular ideology and pretending to be a quasi-religion, has forced religion out of such important segments of social life as economy and politics. Religion finds itself in a kind of ghetto where it is expected to function as a keeper of tradition and spirituality, separated from economy and politics. But, as is well known, national projects during their realization essentially change public opinion and the image of social reality. So-called *cultural nationalism*¹ makes active efforts to change tradition (national culture), along with language (Shtyrkov 2011), into an absolute good in public opinion. When tradition starts to be taken as the main condition of preserving ethnic (national) specificity, the situation changes – a keeper of tradition becomes a socially significant figure. In this way nationalism creates preconditions for increasing the social importance of religion, which becomes one of the main symbols of an ethnic group (nation). In such circumstances, a world religion is often nationalized. For example, the image of Orthodoxy as the quintessence of Russian culture was formed in this way; consequently, it is now taken as the traditional religion of the Russian people. However in a number of contexts ‘ethnic tradition’ or, rather, its image in public opinion, is supervised not only by religious, but also secular institutions – first of all, by nationally orientated academic disciplines (ethnology, folklore studies). In that case, religious institutions try ‘to assimilate’ the knowledge of the ‘spiritual culture of a people (nation)’, which may well be secular in origin, resting upon its authority as the keeper of spirituality. The close connection between spirituality and religion that exists in the perception of people may allow a church institution to privatize a wide area of national spiritual culture. But sometimes nationalists, while not trusting religious institutions for various reasons but at the same time being sure of the religious nature of all spiritual phenomena, can undertake their own attempts to recreate a folk (ethnic, national) religion on the basis of folkloristic, historical, and ethnographic data.

Thus, religion and nationalism have a rather intricate relationship. Nationalism, to accomplish its tasks, may adopt some concepts from religion, which are useful by virtue of their high emotional loading – ‘Chosen people’, ‘redemption and (national) resurrection’, images of martyrs and prophets, to mention a few (Hutchison and Lehmann 1994). But religious activists, in turn, actively use nationalism’s conceptual arsenal. They start using some images, which were religious in origin and than received certain new connotation in the nationalistic discourse

(the idea of national Messianism). But many such images and rhetoric devices actively used by existing (or embryonic) 'nationally focused' religious institutions are invented by nationalist ideology itself – such discursive strategies include portraying the common people as the collective keeper of the higher wisdom, the nation as the only absolute value, and the ethnic tradition as the most important information base whose use can guarantee survival to an ethnic group (nation). In the social landscape created by cultural nationalism where the concepts of tradition, people, spirituality, and religion are closely connected, the activist supporters of a national (ethnic) religion can expect serious political dividends. For example, they can expand their religious group's borders to include the whole nation. The people who they present as their supporters do not always have any connection to the activity of a religious institution disposed to speak in their name. So, according to sociological research in Russia, 75 per cent of those questioned called themselves Orthodox, but only 40 per cent called themselves believers (Kääriäinen and Furman 2000). Thus, a sizeable number of non-believers defined themselves as Orthodox, using religion as an ethnic marker (Agadjanian 2001: 481).

Whether a national-religious project will be started and how effective it will be, depends on many factors concerning the spectrum of ideas about social reality. I will identify some of them:

1. The status of traditional national culture as national property. Here a lot depends on the activity of the scholars who create the image of tradition by collecting and publicly presenting data on national popular culture. In addition, a significant influence upon increasing the status of a national culture is exerted by public campaigns intended to popularize certain practices (customs, folklore genres, etc.).
2. The status of religion (religious institutions) as a source and controller of spirituality and public morals. In some social contexts these functions are perceived as the natural sphere of religious activity.
3. The degree of correlation of a certain religion and an ethnic group. If in some society the degree is high, we could say that religious nationalism is a special way of thinking about the social landscape, where an individual 'receives' a certain confessional affiliation together with his/her ethnicity. In these circumstances, the religious identity becomes 'natural' and practically obligatory, and an individual has either to let it be known demonstratively that he or she is not 'like everyone else', or to accept the identity 'by default'. In some cases the mono-religiosity of an ethnic group is considered to be the natural state of affairs; in the case of poly-religiosity, the confessional diversity is presented as an unnatural phenomenon, which should be eliminated. In such circumstance religious minorities are often regarded as potentially or actually dangerous marginal groups, and converts to another ethnic group's faith are regarded as traitors to their own nation.
4. The degree of development of national eschatology, that is, of ideas that the nation (ethnic group) is under the threat of disappearance and/or enslavement. It should be mentioned that I am not inclined to distinguish between

imaginary and real threats. All of them influence a situation irrespective of so-called expert opinion. A sense of national humiliation, an expectation of the loss of one's ethnic language (language shift), an obvious or latent ethnic conflict with unclear result, and various other factors in the image of social reality may all stimulate the creation of national-religious projects.

Let us take a look at the current situation in Russia from this general perspective. In the social consciousness of contemporary Russian society there is a very close relationship between the concept of religion and the concept of nation (or ethnic group). A nationalistic style of thinking about religious issues determines the logics of behaviour and discourse not only for the so-called radical Orthodox nationalists but also various new pagans,² who are trying to revitalize an allegedly ancient, even primordial, ethnic faith. One can come across such statements in very different, sometimes unexpected contexts. For example, the leaders of the main religious communities in Russia usually define the number of their followers just by the so-called ethnic principle, whereby Orthodoxy is presented as the religion of the Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chuvashes, Mordvins, Karelians, Komi, Ossetians, and so on; Catholicism as the religion of the Poles and Lithuanians; Lutheranism as the religion of Germans, Finns, and Estonians; and so on. Estimating the number of believers in this way involves nothing more than taking the data on ethnic identity from the latest population census and equating ethnic groups with religious communities (Filatov and Lunkin 2005: 35–37; Verkhovsky 2003: 120).

The easily recognizable rhetoric of nationalism is a 'natural' part of the discursive habits of many religious authorities. When one listened, for instance, to the late Patriarch Aleksiy II, the head of Russian Orthodox Church, who was persistently stigmatized by the so-called *reuniteli Pravoslaviya* ('adherents of the Orthodoxy') as a traitor to the Russian people and faith, you could easily hear references about the 'unity of the Russian nation', the 'national originality of Russian Orthodoxy' and even about 'the extinction of the Russian people'. Some of his statements were not far from the idea of 'an international conspiracy against Russia': 'We must win in the war levied against Orthodox Russia; we must bring up a new generation of Orthodox Russians, who love Russia', and so on.³

Similar affirmations can be heard from ordinary, non-radical Orthodox people. And it is quite usual for these themes (a conspiracy against Russia, a secret war against Russia, a special predestination of Russian people, and so on) to appear in a conversation with an 'ordinary orthodox person', even when talking about such non-political things as children, food, or the weather.

Russian Orthodox believers are not the only social (or religious) group who represent religious questions in terms of ethnicity and nationalism. Evangelical missionaries, working among indigenous peoples of the Russian north, like to stress that their mission is not only the Christianization of these indigenous people but also the preservation of their ethnic culture. Many Muslim leaders eagerly talk about traditional ethnic Islam and even ethnic Muslims. So in contemporary Russia it is quite common to find that religion and ethnicity are represented

through each other, when it comes to thinking about social groups and their corresponding social identities.

Under these circumstances, for some ethnic nationalists universalistic Christianity (and in some contexts Islam) is the main threat to national and ethnic cultures, to the very existence of ethnic variety. Some activists try to ethnicize the local variant of a world religion as far as possible; some create new ethnic religions (or, according to many of them, recreate old ones). The latter movement considers Christianity almost an absolute evil.

Here is an opinion of an Udmurt pagan priest from the Middle Ural region:

The aggressive world religions led mankind into a deadlock. Russians and other peoples rejected their own gods and adopted Christianity. That is why there is no future for them. Their spiritual betrayal and the long domination of Christianity resulted in a deep corruption of the people's soul. The progress of mankind will make some peoples reject Christianity and will lead them to Paganism. If they still have the strength of mind to do it, they will be able to survive.

(Filatov 2002: 147–48)

Supporters of ethnic religions proceed from the idea that every ethnic group has (or had or must have) its own particular religion, just as it has its own language and culture (Shnirel'man 2005: 8). For many ethnic activists it is very important to represent ethnic traditional beliefs, rituals, and practices as a particular religion or even religious system, because 'Only those people who created their own religious system are considered as a rule civilized. That system is testimony of an ethnic organism's maturity; it is evidence of ethnic integration's wholeness' (Salmin 2007: 5).⁴ From this point of view, Christianity is dangerous and harmful for ethnic groups because it is an international and even cosmopolitan religion by nature. Sometimes it is considered as a forerunner and symbol of today's globalization (ethno-nationalists' worst nightmare).

Christianity is brought by aliens and their voluntary or deceived allies. Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nationalistic new pagans are inclined to accuse the Jews and construct an image of an ill-intentioned invention of Christianity and a secret spiritual invasion. Non-Russian activists of ethnic religions prefer talking about an undisguised Russian cultural imperialism with Orthodox Christianity as one of its main tools.

One can continue listing particular accusations against Christianity (it suppresses human initiative by preaching humility; it humbles human beings through its concept of the original sin and Christian priests are, of course, greedy, etc). Essentially, none of these accusations are new: they can be found in the works of Nietzsche and Feuerbach or, for example, Soviet atheist ideologists. More interestingly, in some sense, such accusations seem to be superfluous. All of them lead to one simple conclusion: we do not need any alien values, beliefs, practices, and institutions, because we have our own. And they are better because they are ours.

My point is not to indicate the vicious circular nature or unoriginality of religious ethno-nationalists' arguments. I argue that activists of ethnic religious projects have a more complicated relationship with Christianity than a simple outright denial. First, they take their very concept of a proper religion from the religious traditions they would like to reject, and use it in their own creative way. Second, by constructing a new religion, they deny not Christianity but rather a modern Western category of religion. Thus the creation of new ethnic religions appears as a complicated and dialectical process. In support of my argument, I will now turn to two classical anthropological works.

The first work is Clifford Geertz's article "Internal conversion" in contemporary Bali' (1973). Here he describes and analyses social transitions relating to changes in attitudes of different social groups of Indonesian Balinese society towards a local Hinduism. Those changes took place in the 1950s and early 1960s. Geertz talks about three main aspects of that process – 'the intensified religious questioning, the spread of religious literacy, and the attempt to reorganize religious institutions' (Geertz 1973: 189). I think it is worth adding some specific traits of this process – attempts 'to segregate religion from social life in general' (ibid.: 184), the systematization and interpretation of sacred texts (i.e. the creation of dogma and creed), the unification of ritual activity, and the organization of institutional control over local religious life (the local 'Ministry of Religion', qualifying examinations for priests, and a religious school). To include those processes into a more general conceptual scheme, Geertz uses Max Weber's dichotomy of 'traditional religion vs. rational religion' and names the transformation he writes about 'the rationalization of Balinese religion' (ibid.: 181).

Why did the rationalizers of Balinese religion choose those particular ways for their activity? Geertz did not give us a clear answer to this question. He seems to think about this issue in terms of general laws of religious rationalization, as when he writes about some 'social and intellectual processes which gave rise to the fundamental religious transformations of world history' (ibid.: 189) and compares indirectly the case of Bali with ancient China and Greece. However, I think that we have no need to look for some general laws and remote parallels for understanding modern and post-modern religious transformations. Probably, the Balinese know what they have to do to reform their religion because they have a bright and obliging model of a 'proper religion' not so far from them. I mean Islam.

Geertz notes that the Balinese are 'a people, intensely conscious and painfully proud of being a Hindu island in a Muslim sea, and their attitude toward Islam is that of the duchess to the bug' (ibid.: 181). But Muslims are a powerful majority in Indonesia, and they control all state institutions including the state Ministry of religion. The Balinese do not want to convert to Islam and they do not want their religion to be considered by the majority as a local and 'wild' one. They try to make their religion respectable in the eyes of their neighbours (and in their own eyes). In this context the outer model determines their activity and the Balinese have to accept the majority's rules of the game and communicate with that majority to achieve their aims. Geertz provides an example of such communication:

The Muslims say, you have no book, how can you be a world religion? The Balinese reply, we have manuscripts and inscriptions dating before Mohamed. The Muslims say, you believe in many gods and worship stones; The Balinese say, god is One but has many names and the 'stone' is the vehicle of God, not God himself.

(Geertz 1973: 188)

I would like to note that in these circumstances the Balinese have no opportunity to reply: 'So what? There are many religions without any holy scripture and there are many polytheistic religions.' It would break the rules of the dialogue and destroy it. But the dialogue is very significant for them. Through it arise Balinese Holy Writ, dogmatics, theology, unified rituals, and religious institutions. Such conversation does not necessarily take place in the form of direct contacts: religious reformers can imagine this discussion, but they have to imagine it quite correctly.

It is important to note that here I mean not just relations of direct obtrusion and, correspondingly, forced adaptation of a certain religious model. For the successful reformation of some religion that model has to be interiorized by reformation activists.

In the Bali case we are faced with a situation where a certain system of religious practices undergoes a substantial reorganization (or rationalization in Geertz's terms) on the external pattern. And we can say for sure that some form of Balinese religion existed before the reforms because the Balinese, not just Geertz, proceeded from the belief that some of their practices and ideas were religious. But sometimes we can see that an interaction takes place between a big religion and a society where almost nobody could say that their certain practices are religious. Nevertheless that interplay results in the creation of similar perception.

Here I turn to my Northern Ossetian subject. The official name of this Northern Caucasian national republic is Northern Ossetia – Alania. The last part of the name indicates the relation between contemporary Ossetians and their glorious militant ancestors the Alans. The population of the republic is about seven hundred thousand. Four hundred and fifty thousand of them are Ossetians. The Ossetian language is a Northern Iranian one and has no linguistic relatives in the region. In addition, Northern Ossetia is special because it is the only national republic of the region that does not have a Muslim majority. Sometimes, to outsiders, Ossetians appear to be the only Orthodox native people of the Northern Caucasus, but the situation is not so simple. There are many religions, traditions, and movements in the republic, including Ossetian religious traditionalists. To begin with I will try to describe briefly the context of public debate about Ossetian ethnic religion. Usually in this connection one speaks about creating a neo-pagan religion, similar to the one that may be observed, for example, in some republics of the Volga region (Shnirel'man 1998, 2002; cf. Filatov and Shchipkov 1996).

However, the situation only appears to be this clear in the absence of knowledge of the local religious and political context. The fact of the matter is that in

Northern Ossetia there is no distinctness about what is the Ossetian national (or ethnic) religion or what it should be.⁵ Nor is there any public consensus on the existence of a specific Ossetian religion. The nature of phenomena ascribed to the area of Ossetian spiritual culture is a point at issue over which there are clashing interpretations. The complexity of the situation and the tension of the discussions in many respects are determined by the distinctive religious history of the Ossetians. The acceptance of Christianity from the Greeks by the ancestors of today's Ossetians in not later than the tenth century, and then the 'retreat' of church structures from Ossetia several centuries later (this event is often dated to the fifteenth century) defined the landscape of the religious life of the people during the following centuries. Without pastors, the congregation was left on its own. The expansion of Islam among a part of the Ossetians added some extra shades to the situation. Even the active propagation of Christianity by the Orthodox church, which 'returned' as a state religion in the nineteenth century together with the Russian Empire, has not changed the general picture: in Ossetian religious life it is easy enough to find elements corresponding with East-Christian (less often Islamic) culture and, most likely, going back to it and, on the other hand, practices and beliefs that can hardly be traced back to Christianity or Islam. Given this situation, the most widely used term to define the nature of the religious situation in Ossetian society was (and still is) 'mixture' – of Christianity, Islam, and paganism, or Christianity (religion) and superstitions. However, not everyone in Ossetia wanted to determine the nature of the phenomena, discussed by scholars and national leaders, in terms of religion. For the majority, practices that a researcher may recognize as indicative of the presence of a religious cult (for example, the practice of making a pilgrimage to local sacred places) are not essentially religious phenomena, but just old good ethnic (or local) traditions.

At the end of the last century such uncertainty has ceased to be convenient for a section of the Ossetian elite, and attempts were made to apply religious terms to traditional practices. Then one began to speak first about Ossetian paganism, and then about pre-Christian (ancient Aryan) monotheism. For many national activists that conception of an ethnic religion correlates directly with the conception of a particular spiritual path of the Ossetian people. Orthodox activists also joined the discussion and tried to represent Ossetian culture as Orthodox *per se*. Eventually, a significant section of the republic's establishment and the ordinary population consistently began to avoid applying religious terminology to the phenomena which some people take as demonstrations of religiousness, preferring to speak about ethnic traditions, customs, and so on.

So in the society under consideration, there are different interpretations of the republic's ethnic cultural heritage and different perspectives regarding its use for some national interests. Each of them formulates strategies for the perception and representation of the ethnic spiritual tradition. It often causes open public debates.

In any event, leaders and supporters of the Ossetian ethnic religious project occupy a visible place in the social landscape of the republic. Some words should be said about three particular features of their mission.

1. Their activity did not start in a vacuum but in a specific historical context. The concept of an Ossetian ethnic religion was created by academicians a century ago and was popularized since the 1950s by Soviet atheists who furiously fought against Ossetian paganism. It was Soviet anti-religious activists who drove certain local practices (pilgrimages to local sacred places, ritual feasts, etc.) from the field of ethnic tradition into the religious sphere in people's minds (Shtyrkov 2009, 2010). This now gives religious nationalists the right to talk about the persecution of their faith.

2. The leaders of the movement cannot just renounce Christianity as a religion of aliens, namely, Russians and Georgians because many Ossetians consider Orthodox Christianity as the faith of their glorious ancestors – the Alans. Hence, religious nationalists have to spend much time on explaining their anti-Christian position. Daurbek Makeyev, perhaps the brightest representative or even head of the movement, in attempting to be more persuasive uses, among other things, anti-Semitic stereotypes to connect Judaism with Christianity:

There are no words about Honesty in the Jewish religion, but there is a description of how to achieve one's own self-interested goals. It is necessary to say that the conception of making profits through the corruption of other nations and their moral depravation is crucial for Judaism. It is the basic religion for Christians and Muslims.

(Makeyev 2007: 19)

The other recognizable ideological image is related to the concept of the Jewish conspiracy: 'The degradation of the Ossetian nation is not a consequence of progress and technological revolution. It is a result of the successful work of Moses' followers and their gone astray assistants [Christians]' (Makeyev 2002: 56). It should be added that for Makeyev and his associates Judaism is the main enemy and a certain ideal at the same time:

Moses understood perfectly that to betray some people's God means to break off their roots, to bring about universal debauchery, to loosen traditional values and thereby weaken their ethnic identity and make that people perish. He considered a betrayal of somebody's God as the ultimate crime – as a crime against the Nation.

(Makeyev 2007: 25)

3. In their polemics with Christianity they stress the supposed vicious nature of the Church as a powerful institution. This argument makes their teaching attractive to some people, but at the same time does not permit them to speak openly about the establishment of a new priesthood.

It is no surprise that despite rejecting a world religion, Ossetian religious nationalists have to copy its main traits. They consider *Nart* folklore epic songs as Ossetian Holy Writ (Makeyev 2007; Chochiev 2009).⁶ Through a very complicated exegesis of those texts they create their own dogma and theological system. The

main methods of that exegesis are audacious etymological construction and drawing parallels between Ossetian linguistic, folklore, and rituals and those of Indo-Iranian (Aryan) ancient cultures. Activists of the religion, which is new and ancient at the same time, try to create a unified ritual system, every tiny element of which has a theological motivation.

It is not worth reducing this project to a simple blind imitation of 'big' religious traditions. There are some traits of this movement that make it, in my opinion, a bright and original phenomenon. Ossetian religious nationalists are not simply trying to create one more religion. They are trying to construct a system of faith that could go beyond the restrictions of modern Western conceptions of religion. And here is my second theoretical foundation – Talal Asad's discussion of the specificity of the Western modern conception of religion as an academic and, I would like to add, cultural category in his 'Construction of religion as an anthropological category' (1993). Here I mean that the scantiness of the modern Western idea of the nature of religion is conceived not only by the new generation of anthropologists but also by some leaders of new religious movements.

The Ossetian religious nationalists disapprove of a concept of religion as something that saves human souls and takes persons to Heaven, that is, as a teaching that places ultimate human values into another world. The religion of Ossetian traditionalists deals with this world, and its main function is to protect the ethnic culture and save the nation from assimilation and disappearance. The misdeeds of Christians and Muslims are sins against God; in the Ossetian ethnic religion they are sins against the nation because they result in, for example, the demographic crisis and extinction of the nation. And the main sin would be the abandonment of their forefathers' faith. 'A person who abandoned his people's God and adopted the alien faith (ideology) from Moses' followers brings damnation not only upon himself and his descendants but upon his whole people and all their lands and possessions' (Makeyev 2002: 57). As one can see, Ossetian religious nationalists deny that religion is a question of individual choice. The Ossetians' ancient religion is or must become a matter for the whole nation. 'If the people forget their [religious] tradition, it will lose its significance to God and be doomed to extinction' (Makeyev 2002: 47). The greatest sin is an apostasy from the national religion. Makeyev likes to cite historical examples where Ossetians' ancestors – the Scythians and Alans – killed apostates and believes that those acts were reasonable and legal (Makeyev 2002: 56, 2007: 25–26; see also Gazdanova 2007: 115–17).

The last, but not least, of the anti-modernist traits of this nationalist project I would like to mention is the refusal to accept a restricted function for religion in modern society, that is, to accept a situation where modern religious systems are forced to stay out of politics and where they have no actual working cosmology – they lose the battle against the Western modern natural sciences and political thinking. Ossetian religious activists need a total religion, a religion that is not just a part of social life or culture, but the whole life of the nation. The whole of Ossetian culture is religious by nature. Their religion is politics and they contend

that they are able to create a system of faith where ethics, sociology, and cosmology are interrelated. ‘We are talking about a three-level structure of the universe which is a psycho-emotional structure of the human being at the same time’ (Makeyev 2002: 2).

The ideology of Ossetian religious nationalism is not new. Its slogan ‘The nation is our religion’ is well known. It is becoming more and more popular in contemporary Northern Ossetia. As one comment on an article by an Ossetian religious nationalist noted (the title is very characteristic – ‘Truthful words against Christians’ (Morgoyev 2006)): ‘Today a supporter of the disappearing Ossetian culture can be forgiven for anything’.

In June 2009 the first community of the traditional Ossetian religion was officially registered in the Ossetian town of Mozdok. Daurbek Makeyev is its head.

Notes

- 1 This ideology proceeds from an understanding of nations as entities based on a mono-ethnic group with a common language, past (first of all, origin), and so on.
- 2 As shown in my discussion below, today some of them refuse to present their religious projects in terms of old or new paganism more and more often.
- 3 *Obrashcheniye Svyatoyshogo Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseya Rusi Aleksiya k kliru, prikhodskim sovetam khramov Moskvy, namestnikam i nastoyatel'nykh monastyrey na Yeparkhial'nom sobranii 2007 goda*. Online. Available: www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/356093.html (accessed 29 March 2011). The following citation was taken from a normal (non-radical) diocesan newspaper:

The West hates Russia unreservedly because the Russian land was and is the stronghold of the Orthodox Faith ... Now it is important [for the West] to annihilate the Russian man, who keeps the Orthodox world-view, Orthodox culture and Orthodox faith, and who will never permit the West to become the absolute ruler of the World

(Opletnin 2009).

- 4 The metaphors of ‘ethnic organism’ and ‘integrity (wholeness)’ are very important and characteristic in this context. The former permits one to talk about some ‘total amount of ethnic religious experience’ and the latter, about perspectives of destruction of the ethnic culture because of the loss of a single element in the religious system (Salmin 2007: 610–11).
- 5 On some aspects of this discussion and on ritual and tradition in ethnic nationalism in Northern Ossetia, see Shnirel'man (2006: 182–85).
- 6 *Nart* epics are considered by most Ossetians as their main cultural heritage and one can find implicit and explicit references to these songs everywhere. For example, it is customary to name children after the well-known characters of the songs.

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