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**NEOPROTESTANTS IN DAGESTAN: VALUE ORIENTATIONS IN
POST-SOVIET MISSIONARY PRACTICES**

O.B. Khalidova (a)*, M.K. Nagiyeva (b), M.M. Amirkhanova (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) FSBIS IHAE DSC RAS, 368305, RD, Makhachkala, Russia,

(b) FSBIS IHAE DSC RAS, 368305, RD, Makhachkala, Russia,

(c) FSBIS IHAE DSC RAS, 368305, RD, Makhachkala, Russia

Abstract

The post-Soviet "evangelical revival" in Russia has clearly revealed itself in religious and social life of national regions, in the Republic of Dagestan in particular. The ensuing crisis in society provoked the "influx" of Western missionaries into the multi-confessional space of Dagestan. Protestants did not have any kind of religious, religious-national or any other restrictions for conducting missionary activity. Gradual transformations of the post-Soviet social space cause recession in the missionary activity of neo-Protestants of Dagestan. In this regard, this study attempts to analyze the chronological dynamics of the evangelical mission from its rise to gradual decline.

As a result, the sociological survey of the religious well-being of Protestant followers shows their commitment to missionary activities and their focus on spreading their dogma among adherents of a different religion. The study results demonstrate a positive assessment of proselytism by Dagestan Protestants who advocate for its non-violent. It is established that the missionary and social success of the Protestant doctrine made its followers a part of the religious society of the post-Soviet Dagestan society with simultaneous negative perception of the Eastern Orthodox by the mass consciousness of the Dagestanians. It is revealed that the respondents have different attitudes to the spread of their religion among those who profess other religious doctrine. The proclamation of principles of free choice of one or another religious worldview and the emphasis on exclusivity of one's dogma, its "perfection and correctness" allow concluding about contradictions in opinions of the respondents.

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1. Introduction

Escalation of the religious factor historically tends to coincide with the crucial stages of social development. Changes in the lifestyle and emergence of the new one are always accompanied by social upheavals and spiritual crisis. This makes the religion in demand for society, strengthens social expectations addressed to religious organizations.

A similar period of deep transformation of society that covered both material and spiritual aspects of life was a post-Soviet, which, in our opinion, proceeded in Russia most intensively. Gradual collapse of the socio-economic, political and ideological base of the socialist system in the late 1980s brought the country to temporary ideological vacuum, which allowed religion and religious institutions to expand their area of influence and strengthen their role in society after long years of Soviet anti-religious policy. Their social prestige and influence rose markedly. Religion became an important factor in social development. The development of a new legal and regulatory framework for building state-religious relations provided the conditions for different confessions in Russia to have an active and legitimate influence on social development and social foundations.

An impressive event of the religious life of Russian society was the activity of Protestant preachers and the occurrence of new neo-Protestant communities. Being one of the dynamically developing religious trends of this period, they were significantly ahead of the so-called traditional religions and churches in the first five years of the 1990s (Odintsov, 2010). Being not only the part of the religious picture, civil life, social and political discussions of the post-Soviet space, Protestants gain relevance in the studies of religion scholars (Kurbanov & Kurbanov, 2006; Omarova, 2002a; Omarova, 2002b; Zueva, 2003; Zueva, 2007; Hanbabaev, 1993). This topic becomes relevant at the regional level, where intensive preaching activity of the adherents of these communities often leads to exacerbation of the confessional situation. A sufficiently long period of their activity in the republic is a distinctive feature of the visits of Western preachers of the gospel.

In this regard, one of the most resonant events in the life of the Dagestan people in the period studied was settlement of the American family, whose head was a Christian pastor, as permanent residents in the mountains of the Tabasaran region. In 1994, an American Philip Schenk visited Dagestan as a tourist. The trip resulted in foundation of the local society of Friends of the Tabasarans, and in June 1996, their number amounted to 500. However, he and his family soon returned to the republic and settled in the mountains of Tabasaran "to live with the Tabasaran people, to learn the language and to be a loving representative of their organization ..." (Schenk, 2007). The American was engaged in "building international bridges of friendship" – he worked as a teacher at school (English teacher), distributed medicine and preached love of neighbor relying on biblical postulates of belief "in love from God that rules the world, and God commanded to care of those who are in need" (Schenk, 2007). Routine of rural life, unhurried, long and thorough conversations, hospitality of the highlanders and employment of young people in the field work – all this predetermined the choice of the American missionary in favor of the Dagestan village rather than the city.

Similar visits of Protestants in the rural areas of the republic were also registered in Tashkapur, Levashinsky district, in Terekli-Mekteb, Nogai district (Baptists), and in Kochubey, Tarumovsky district (Adventists). The specialists of the Committee for Religious Affairs suggested that Jehovah's Witnesses

were actively engaged in preaching in Khunzakh, Khunzakhsky District (CSA RD). Thus, in Soviet times, visits of foreign preachers were episodic and individual, and they preached exclusively in prayer houses, however, now these visits have taken the form of "collective landing". It is self-evident that such activity of Christian missionaries could not but provoke tensions in a multi-confessional region. Despite bureaucratic delays in the system of registration of foreigners, the family lived in Dagestan until 2005, and then were removed from the Russian Federation. The reason was "increased tension and confessional confrontation in the south of Dagestan" (Bekmurzaev, 2004).

The tension in intra-and interfaith relations was also noted in the studied period by the DSU and DSPU faculty and researchers from Dagestan Scientific Center RAS. In the sociological survey, 82.7% of the respondents noted the spread of new, non-traditional religious movements and cults, including Protestant communities in the republic (Murtuzaliyev, 2006).

A certain tension was also caused by the national composition of new religious communities. Most of the adepts were represented by ethnic Muslims though becoming a Christian is a very uneasy step for a Muslim. To be converted to Christianity is perceived as the greatest shame and humiliation for the family, and more often for the tribe of the one who turned to different religion. In order to return a person back to Islam, all types and forms of pressure are used: threats, contempt and all kinds of oppression (Shaadia, 2011). The Osanna Church, where the majority of believers were Laks, was particularly popular in this regard. The leader of the Lak people and a supporter of building an Islamic state Nadir Khachilayev made repeated threats against Arthur Suleimanov, the pastor of the Osanna Gospel Church. A. Suleymanov had a specially arranged meeting with N. Khachilayev, after which the leader of the Lak movement stopped public speeches against Osanna (Lunkin, 2011).

It was not always easy to preach in a multi-religious republic, where orthodox religions take sufficiently strong positions. The leader of one of the Protestant communities noted that in the period of the new revival of their activity in the 90s–2000s, they were often threatened, and attempts were made to disrupt religious services and even "to force believers to refuse Jesus" (Ushakova, 2004). Religious intolerance and certain actions taken by certain representatives of traditional religions can be attributed to the wave of Islamic revival, which tried to consolidate its position and status in the religious space of Dagestan. In addition, fierce disputes arose over power and influence on the minds of people within the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan, which once ultimately led to a split within the organization in terms of ethnicity (Shakhbanov, 2008; Shakhbanov, 2016).

Today, attempts to more broadly explain this popularity in the republic in the 1990s revealed a number of crisis factors. This is confirmed by the pastor of the Osanna Church, who indicated in a personal conversation the growth in the number of adherents of the church at times of crisis in society.

2. Problem Statement

Gradual transformations in the cultural and religious self-identification of the population caused metamorphosis in the missionary work of the Protestants. The predominantly atheistic society in the early 1990s, which was experiencing a period of ideological disorientation after the collapse of the former ideological views, was replaced by the majority of Russian citizens, adherents of the traditional religions of their country. As a result, the growth in the number of Protestant churches in the Russian Federation and

adherents who were baptized slowed significantly. For example, in 1992 in churches of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Russia, 9,700 new members were baptized, in 1999, there were 5,000 people, and in 2008, the number amounted to 551 people (Kravtsev, 2018). The “anti-mission laws” adopted in 2016 (Andreev, 2016) upended the period of religious freedom and active evangelism.

The results of the gospel mission were fewer in Dagestan. Fewer people distributing religious literature could be observed in the streets of the republic. However, the very nature of the Protestants fosters in them not only desire, but also a commitment to missionary practice. When developing measures for spiritual and moral education, Protestant ideologists aim primarily to transform all the needs of believers in social activities into religious ones and to put them in service of the church. This, in turn, calls for revitalization of the religious practice. Such "proselytizing" practices by Protestants are increasingly regarded as those directed against the foundations of the social and even state structure.

3. Research Questions

Based on this, the subject of the study is investigation of the nature of the Protestant proselytic activities in the republic.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to examine and analyze the current orientations of the Dagestan Protestants in the missionary activity, their attitude to proselytism and the mechanisms of its use in the environment of a different nation and foreign religion.

5. Research Methods

In 2016, one of the authors of the study conducted a sociological survey to investigate the factors of the formation of tolerance in modern Dagestan society, the state of Protestant and neo-Protestant communities and their attitude to proselytism. The questionnaire was discussed at the meeting of the Department of Sociology, Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography DSC RAS. The survey covered Protestant communities, which are currently the most numerous in terms of the number of active religious associations of all Protestant associations in the modern Russian religious space. The sociological survey was conducted in the form of an interview.

The study of Protestant communities in Dagestan with two dominating beliefs– Islam and Orthodoxy – raises the question "What does a socio-demographic portrait of a Protestant look like?" According to the results of our study, 26.8% of men and 73.2% of women reported themselves as "true believers", 31.8% of men and 68.2% of women joined the subgroup of "believers", which shows that a greater proportion of women indicate their attitude towards religion as compared to men. With regard to the adherence to religion, 65.1% of the respondents are "true believers", and 34.9% of those surveyed are "believers". With regard to the age of the respondents, "true believers" make up 9.8% of the total number of the respondents "under 20 years old", 19.5% of those aged "20–30 years old", 17.1% of the respondents aged "30–40 years old", 14.6% of the respondents aged "40–50 years old" and "50–60 years old", and 22.0% of the respondents aged "60 years old and above"; "believers" include 31.8% of the respondents aged "20–30 years old", 18.2% of "30–40 years old", 31.8% of "40–50 years old", and 13.6% of those aged "50–60 years old". With regard

to the educational basis, 22.0% of the respondents with secondary education, 24.4% of the respondents with specialized secondary education and 53.7% of the respondents with post- or undergraduate degree are "true believers"; 27.3% of the respondents with secondary education, 18.2% with specialized secondary education, and 54.5% of those with post- or undergraduate degree belong to the subgroup of "believers". With regard to the social status, 12.2% of workers, 22.0% of employees, 9.8% of students and entrepreneurs, 34.1% of pensioners, 4.9% of housewives, and 7.3% of the unemployed are "true believers"; 31.8% of workers, 36.4% of employees, 9.1% of students, 18.2% of pensioners, and 4.5% of housewives are "believers". With regard to the national basis, 7.3% of Avars, 7.3% of Kumyks, 9.8% of Laks and Lezgins each, and 46.3% of Russians are "true believers"; 13.6% of Avars and Lezgins, 4.5% of Dargins, 4.5% of Kumyks, 22.7% of Laks, and 31.8% of Russians are "believers".

One of the features characteristic of the considered Protestant communities is their multi-ethnic composition. Therefore, Muslims adopted a different religion are of particular interest to us. According to the results of the study, the Pentecostal community comprises 4 Avars, 1 Dargin, 4 Kumyks, 3 Laks, 3 Lezgins, and 8 Russians; despite the fact that the main Protestant trends were listed, 9 respondents chose the answer option "other". There were also responses "Protestant" (2 people) and "Christian" (2 people) written by hand. The average percentage of those surveyed was 49.2%. Some people reported themselves as members of the Adventist community: 1 Avar, 6 Laks, 3 Lezghins, and 14 Russians. Two Russians reported themselves as Baptists. It should be noted that many of the respondents refused to indicate their nationality explaining it by religious freedom.

6. Findings

The status of Protestants in Dagestan has an ambiguous context. Many people claim an immediate prohibition of the activities of new communities, since they define them as totalitarian sects that pose a threat to traditional society. Appealing to government officials and public opinion, the Muslim clergy emphasizes that new communities shake the indigenous principles of the population of Dagestan (Kurbanov & Kurbanov, 2006).

Based on the above, to analyze the religious attitude of the followers of the considered Protestant communities and to identify religious freedom in Dagestan, the respondents were asked a question to establish the existence of religious freedom (see Table No. 1 on the distribution of responses to the question "Do you have a free choice of religious beliefs in Dagestan?")

According to the results of the study, every second respondent reported the possibility to adhere to his religion when "having sermons among the followers of one's religion", and the idea of "the ability to fully adhere to the principles of one's belief" occupied the second ranking position in the survey conducted. At the same time, every fifth respondent of those surveyed noted that he faces attacks from the followers of other religions. The assertion "our religion and religious organization are persecuted by unofficial, non-traditional Muslim religious communities" was reported by every eighth respondent of the total number of the people surveyed. A statistically insignificant part of the respondents chose the assertions "our creed and religious organization are persecuted by the official Orthodox Church" and "our creed and religious organization are persecuted by the official Muslim authorities".

Thus, the results of the study show that in the modern society of Dagestan, followers of different religions do not manifest negative attitude to Protestants who, therefore, do not feel constrained. However, during personal communication with church members, we concluded that Protestants do not always find support and understanding of their relatives and friends for visiting the Protestant church. Neophytes converted from Islam to Protestantism are mostly subjected to ostracism.

While compiling the questionnaire, we assumed that a specific feature of Protestants in the republic is their orientation towards proselytism and missionary activity. For this reason, the respondents were asked the question "Is it possible to spread your religion among those who do not profess similar religious doctrine?" to investigate the tendencies of proselytism spreading throughout Dagestan. A positive attitude towards proselytism with the argument "if this is done by reasonable and peaceful reasons" prevailed in most of the respondents (52.4%); the subgroup of "true believers" is dominating (61.0%) versus 36.4% of "believers". The assertion "if these people are close to me" was noted by every third respondent in both subgroups of "true believers" and "believers". The possibility to impose one's belief "to everyone without exception" was reported by 27.0% of the respondents, of which 29.3% of the respondents are "true believers" and 22.7% of the respondents are "believers". At the same time, the assertion "it can exacerbate relations between people of different beliefs" was noted by insignificant number of respondents (1.6%), which indicates the orientation of Protestant to spreading their belief among the followers of other religions. With regard to the age of the respondents, proselytism with the argument "if these people are close to me" was positively estimated by the respondents "from 60 years old and above" (66.7%), 38.5% "from 40 to 50 years old", 33.3% "from 20 to 30 years old" and "from 50 to 60 years old", and those "under 20 years old" were the least numerous (20.0%). At the same time, 80.0% of the respondents "under 20 years old" and 40.0% of those "from 20 to 30 years old" reported the proselytic activity in all people without exception. The share of people supporting the assertion "if this is done by reasonable and peaceful reasons" increases with age – 55.6% of the respondents "from 60 years old and above", 38.5% "from 40 to 50 years old", 33.3% "from 20 to 30 years old", 77.8% "from 50 to 60 years old", and 90.9% "from 30 to 40 years old". At the same time, every ninth respondent aged "50 to 60 years old" showed a negative attitude towards proselytism asserting possible exacerbation in "relations between people of different beliefs". Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents are positively oriented towards proselytism regardless of their adherence to religion and age. The share of the respondents who consider possible negative consequences of proselytic activity in the form of exacerbation in interfaith and interethnic relations is ignored.

In order to establish the dynamics of spreading of other beliefs among the followers of different religions, the respondents were asked the question "What are the ways of spreading the principles of a different religion among the followers of other religions?". The consistency of religious attitudes is evidenced by obvious domination of the assertion "voluntary" (92.1% of the total number of the respondents) in the subgroups of "true believers" (90.2%) and "believers" (95.5%); 1.6% of the respondents admitted the possibility of spreading their belief "offering money and benefits", and 4.8% admitted "imposing and persuasion", but all the respondents regardless of their adherence to religion completely refused a violent method of forcing the followers of other religions. In our opinion, this attitude in mass consciousness shows religious tolerance, which is characteristic of the society of Dagestan at almost all

stages of its historical development. This trend is also confirmed in personal communication with the community leaders reporting a tolerant attitude of the republic authorities towards the communities.

At the same time, the results of our study reveal a contradictory cult behavior in mass consciousness, which is confirmed by responses to the question "Do you preach your religious doctrine to people who do not profess your religion?". According to the results of the survey, 66.7% of the respondents gave a positive response, as opposed to 9.5% and 20.6% who found it difficult to express their attitude. About 75.6% of "true believers" and 50.0% of "believer" reported that they spread their belief among the followers of other religions; 7.3% of "true believers" and 13.6% of "believers" noted that they do not preach their belief to the followers of other religions; whereas 12.2% of "true believers" and 36.4% of "believers" found it difficult to answer the question.

Thus, the responses to the above questions indicate that the respondents show positive attitude towards proselytism only if it is non-violent and voluntary, but they preach to those who profess another religion, without considering possible negative consequences of their actions.

As noted above, the activity of Christian missionaries in the villages of the republic caused interreligious conflicts. In this regard, it was important to establish the positive/negative role of Protestant missionaries in the modern society of Dagestan. More than half of the respondents (61.9%) found it difficult to answer the question "Does the proselytic activity play a positive role in maintaining stability and harmony in Dagestan?", 31.7% of those surveyed indicated a positive role in the formation of the principles of interreligious harmony and stability in the republic, and insignificant part of respondents showed negative attitude towards proselytic activity (4.8%). In the subgroups, "true believers" (58.5%) and "believers" (68.2%) found it difficult to answer the question; 34.1% respondents in the subgroup of "true believers" and 27.3% of "believers" reported positive attitude towards the activity of proselytes; a statistically insignificant number of "true believers" and "believers" negatively treated the activity of proselytes (4.9% and 4.5%, respectively).

To clarify the motivation and religious behavior of the respondents, they were asked the question "What is the purpose of preaching your religious doctrine to the followers of other religions?". According to the results of the survey, 58.7% of the respondents indicated that "they do not impose their religion; those who want can accept their religious doctrine", with an additional argument that states that "their religion teaches people goodness and sympathy more than others" (27.0%). In the subgroups, the first assertion is reported by 61.0% of "true believers" and 54.5% of "believers", whereas the second one is noted by 26.8% of "true believers" and 27.3% of "believers". The opposition and religious intolerance are evidenced by the attitudes of 17.5% of the respondents, including 14.6% of "true believers" and 22.7% of "believers" who consider their religion "more perfect and true" compared to others." A statistically insignificant part of "true believers" (2.4%) reported that preaching aims to "increase the number of followers of their religion".

7. Conclusion

Thus, we can ascertain that the respondents have different points of view on spreading their belief among followers of other religions, as well as on the mechanisms of preaching. However, the respondents exhibited inconsistency in their attitudes. On the one hand, they enunciate the principles of religious

freedom, and on the other hand, they emphasize the exceptionality of their religion posing it as "perfect and true".

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