

Article

Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Freedom for Religious Minorities in the Russian Arctic

Nadezhda Beliakova ^{1,*}  and Vera Kliueva ² 

¹ Department of History, Philosophy and Theology, University of Bielefeld, Universitätsstraße 25, D-33615 Bielefeld, Germany

² Tyumen Scientific Center, The Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Chervishevskiy Trakt, 13, 625008 Tyumen, Russia; vormpk@gmail.com

* Correspondence: nadezhda.beliakova@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract: In this article, using the example of the Russian Arctic, we analyze how the anti-cult movement creates the conditions for the discrimination and suppression of religious minorities. The anti-cultist (anti-sectarian) fears and phobias of the Russian establishment are closely bound to the fears of missionary activity. The change in legislation regulating missionary activity deliberately limits the activities of those religious communities, which, at the suggestion of the anti-cultists, are labeled in Russian society as “sectarian” and/or “foreign”.

Keywords: anti-cult movement; Russia; religious freedom; legal regulation of religions; missionary activities; indigenous people; Russian Arctic

1. Introduction

Since 2006, we have been closely following the developments in the Russian legislation on religious minorities. We have observed local and federal authorities forming a system of preferences for some faiths while oppressing others. We recorded the infringement of religious freedom through the de facto discrimination of believers from non-Orthodox churches. Surely, we cannot ignore the statewide anti-cult movement; however, the present study focuses on individual regions and groups. Our attention was drawn to the activities of the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Sectarianism (FECRIS (in French: Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d’Information sur le Sectarisme) in the context of the recognition (or branding) of Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist organization in Russia, with a new round occurring in the context of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, FECRIS is represented by the Center for Religious Studies (CRS), the umbrella organization federating the Russian FECRIS affiliates. One of the vice presidents of the FECRIS was Alexander Dvorkin, an anti-cult activist. However, on 8 March 2022, member organizations voted for his expulsion from the CRS (Berzano et al. 2022, p. 27). In July 2023, the FECRIS website (<https://www.fecris.org/> accessed on 13 July 2023) omitted any mention of Russian anti-cult organizations and Alexander Dvorkin personally.

There are a number of studies devoted to the spreading of the anti-cult movement in Russia¹. However, since the publications exposing the activities of Alexander Dvorkin have already appeared in the public space, we strongly recommend them to the reader.² One should also examine, or at least pay some attention to, the rather specific optics of this organization concerning the problem of religious freedom in Russia. In our article, we focus on domestic Russian optics and regional specifics. In the study, we use the methodology of Ideentransfer in combination with area studies, which provide us with the tools to specifically identify aspects of religious freedom for religious minorities in the Russian North in the context of the development of the global anti-cult movement.



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In our opinion, it is vital to emphasize that the anti-cult movement in Russia³ directly stimulated the state legislation pertaining to religious freedom. We sincerely believe that—appealing to the defense of “traditional values” and traditional religions and limiting missionary activity—the Russian lawmakers and authorities (of varying ranks and regions) consciously limit religious freedom. The most consistent restrictions are applied to religious minorities. It should be noted that, in modern Russia, the term religious minority also refers to faiths that have become widespread in the world, e.g., to various Protestant denominations and churches. It is regarding these religions that the authorities, anti-cult organizations, and official leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church find common ground. This is because over a decade ago, the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church were enabled by the Presidential Administration to make a public statement, or rather to broadcast their views to officials of various levels on socially significant issues, including the policy on religious minorities.

In this article, using the example of the Russian Arctic, we plan to show how the anti-cult movement, which acts in accordance with other parties, creates the conditions for the discrimination and suppression of religious minorities. The Arctic is special in respect to the paternalistic policy toward the local indigenous population. Throughout the Soviet period, Russian authorities there declared the need to preserve and revive traditional culture. Therefore, the religion is perceived by the local authorities primarily as an integral part of the culture, understood solely as ethnic culture (Vydrina 2004, p. 103; Tiugashev et al. 2004, pp. 35, 125, 200), whereas in the first post-Soviet decade (in the 1990s), religious diversity was actively spreading among the indigenous population. Protestant and other churches appeared there, along with the preservation of traditional (pagan) beliefs and orthodoxy.

2. Russia’s Religious Landscape after the Collapse of the USSR

Throughout Soviet history, it has been formally stated that religion belongs to the private sphere of relations. However, the state did not interfere in people’s private lives unless a believer began to state his/her views publicly (even among a small group of people), thus transferring them from a private to a public, state-confessional sphere. State-confessional relations were regulated by a number of normative acts, the main one being the resolution of the VTsIC and the Council of People’s Commissars “On religious associations” (Postanovlenie 1929), which specified the legal relationship between the state and the church. The resolution adopted in 1929, with changes and additions from 1962 and 1975, was in force throughout the Soviet era. The resolution set out the parameters by which a particular religious group could be classified—whether it was entitled to registration or banned. The ban applied to religious groups whose theology or religious practices were perceived by officials as being in conflict with the State ideology (e.g., true orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses) or fanatic (Pentecostals)⁴.

In the late 1980s–early 1990s, the states of the USSR (and the former USSR) were involved in a period of religious diversity. During that period, the government tried to regulate the legal basis for further relations between the state and religious communities. On 1 October 1990, the adoption of the Soviet Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”, which turned out to be the first and last law on freedom of conscience for the entire history of the USSR, occurred. In October 1990, the RSFSR Law “On freedom of religion” was adopted. At the same time, the main legal acts regulating the religious policies of the USSR and RSFSR⁵ were declared effectively superseded. These included the Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR of 23 January 1918 “On the separation of Church and State” and the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR of 8 April 1929 “On religious associations”. The Russian law abolished restrictions on the religious activities of religious associations and also lifted the ban on social and other non-cult activities of religious organizations.

Since the early 1990s, with the adoption of the Russian Law “On Religious Freedom”, foreign missionaries representing various religious movements have been able to enter the

country. An unimaginable variety of religious literature made a sudden appearance. It was a period of considerable “street evangelism”, concerts and performances by preachers (with many filling up stadiums), and large-scale missionary campaigns that covered and engulfed literally all of Russia. As a result, we witnessed the rapid growth of charismatic churches. These groups were distinguished by the high emotionality and excessive manifestation of the signs of the Holy Spirit (healings, holy laughter, holy anger, etc.), and used the doctrine of “health and wealth” (“the Prosperity Gospel”). Despite the variety of religious practices, post-evangelicalism did not become popular. Here, we can observe that the difference between the charismatic evangelical movement in Russia and the that of churches in Latin America, where some believers, due to disagreements with the conservative views of the leaders, began to declare themselves as post- or ex-evangelicals (Barreto and Py 2022). This may have been due to the predominance of conservative fundamentalist views in Russian religious communities (Kuropatkina 2012). It seems more similar to the spread of charismatic evangelism in Africa (Balcomb 2016). Moreover, unlike in other states (e.g., Schwörer and Fernández-García 2023; Boas 2020), Russian religious leaders tried to avoid public political appeals to believers—until the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian war.

Let us at least mention some of the major missionary campaigns. The most famous of these was the appearance of Billy Graham in Moscow at the Olympic Sports Complex (1992). In the Russian North, the missionary expeditions “Christ to the Peoples of Siberia” (in the fall of 1991) and the “Gospel Train” that ran along the route St. Petersburg—Abakan (in the summer of 1992)—were organized to preach the gospel. The 2000s witnessed another attempt to revive the missionary movement, this time without the participation of foreign organizations. The Russian ECB Union started the project “The Many Colors of Russia”, the purpose of which was to preach the gospel, including to the indigenous population. However, the campaign led to underwhelming results.

The new evangelical Churches that emerged after these campaigns, with divine services having been uncommon in the post-Soviet pseudo-secular society, attracted those who were disillusioned with Orthodoxy and those Protestant churches that had existed since the Soviet era, and who were distinguished by more conservative views on theology and forms of worship. It is noteworthy that the attitude towards charismatic churches turned out to be a point of convergence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Evangelical conservatives (although, on other issues, they still had rather different, often opposing views).

Problematic for the so-called “Soviet” (or rather, Soviet era) evangelicals was the exodus of their faithful, especially the younger, generation from their churches. Former members of the “old” communities left them under the influence of personal religious research, missionary campaigns, and the spread of new religious literature; they founded their own churches, often using charismatic forms of worship. Russian orthodox hierarchs saw the religious pluralism of the early 1990s, especially the spread of charismatic pluralism, as a direct incursion on their traditional territory.

It is important to note that the implicitly negative attitude towards foreign missionaries and the results of their activities (the emergence of new churches/communities) fueled and was fueled by anti-sectarian sentiments in society⁶. For the average Russian, all believing Christians who were not related to the so-called “traditional” confessions (primarily orthodoxy, with some exceptions for Catholic and Lutheran communities) were seen as sectarians. Therefore, the anti-cult organizations that began to take shape in the early 1990s listed churches and religious movements with many years of existence across the globe as “sectarian” organizations. Various Protestant churches, not only Pentecostals (such as The Word of Life, The Grace Faith Movement, etc.), but also Baptists, Presbyterians, etc., were classified as “sectarians”. From the mid-1990s, the anti-missionary orientation of the legislation began to intensify.

3. The Official Face of the Russian Anti-Cult Movement

In Russia, the personification of the anti-cult movement is Alexander Dvorkin. He left the Soviet Union in 1977 at the age of 20 years old to study in the United States, where he remained until 1992. While in the United States, he embraced Russian orthodox Christianity and spent time working at the U.S. government-sponsored news outlet Voice of America. His years in the country coincided with a growing anti-cult movement informed by pseudo-scientific concepts, such as “brainwashing” and “mind control” and the theories of psychologist Robert Jay Lifton and anti-Communist activist Edward Hunter. This movement described New Religious Movements (NRMs) as “fanatic” or “bizarre,” and portrayed individual members as helpless victims without their own free will or ability to save themselves. This rhetoric enabled groups to justify the forced removal of friends and relatives from the religions of their choice, and even advocated for “deprogramming” regimens that used coercive (and highly questionable) psychological techniques. Dvorkin brought many anti-cult ideas with him when he returned to a newly independent Russia in 1992 to work at the ROC’s new Department of Religious Education (see [Morton 2020](#)). In 1993, Dvorkin founded the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information Consultation Center (SILIC) under the auspices of the ROC. Almost 30 years later, SILIC remains the propaganda center of the anti-cult movement in Russia and maintains an online database of new religious movements, as well as an archive of writings ([Correspondent of HRWF 2012](#), pp. 272–79).

Dvorkin and his circle of “religious scholars” (who he trained and continues to train actively) used the concepts of “totalitarian sect” and “destructive cult”, as well as the prefix “pseudo” (as in “pseudo-Christianity” or “pseudo-religion”), and also the prefix “neo” (“neocharismatic” or “neopentacostal”). In his attacks, Dvorkin targeted numerous religious movements, from the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Charismatic Pentecostals to New Age, Buddhist, and Hindu groups. He also stated that “sects” were a threat to the national security and spiritual welfare of Russia. Dvorkin outlined these views in his book, *The Study of Sects: Totalitarian Sects*, which was published and reprinted several times and was even suggested reading in some state universities for Religious Studies students. In 2009, the same year in which he was appointed the head of Russia’s Council of Experts, he also became the vice president of the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS), a French anti-cult organization. Various Russian human rights activists made several attempts to challenge Dvorkin’s statements through lawsuits. One of the very first cases (1997) is analyzed in detail here ([Shterin and Richardson 2002](#)). Other cases against Dvorkin are also available (see: [Richardson et al. 2004](#)). The activities of Dvorkin and his fellow anti-cultists succeeded in creating a negative image of various denominations, and especially of new religious movements that appeared in Russia in the 1990s. Even at present, Dvorkin is a welcomed guest at regional events dedicated to national security and the danger of the spread of “totalitarian sects”. This is a prominent example of the active interaction of anti-cult organizations with government agencies and “traditional” religious confessions. Salekhard (in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region) in September of 2017 hosted the International Conference “Destructive and pseudo-religious organizations, sects and cults: challenges and solutions”. The speeches of the main participants were published in the *Missionary Review* journal, the official publication of the Synodal Missionary Department of the Russian Orthodox Church. The conference participants were representatives of both state organizations (the Federal Agency for Nationalities and the Federal Scientific Center for Mental Health), and of the so-called “traditional religions”—Orthodoxy and Islam (the Salekhard Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, the spiritual administration of Muslims of the Yamalo-Nenets region, and the Human Rights Center of the Global Russian People’s Council), as well as of Russian and international anti-cult organizations (the Center for Religious Studies of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects; I. Corvalha, J. Armstrong, T. Gandow).

Moreover, we examined how the anti-cult indoctrination affected the evangelical churches and missionaries who worked among the indigenous population of the Russian Arctic.

4. Anti-Cult Rhetoric and Indoctrination of the Russian Legal Framework

The anti-cultist (anti-sectarian) fears and phobias of the Russian establishment are closely bound to the fears of missionary activity, or rather, of any preaching whatsoever. Moreover, foreigners and even non-orthodox Russian believers were viewed by the state as “missionaries”; although, in reality (which is confirmed by our field research), a significant part of these missionaries came to Russia from the former Soviet republics (Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Estonia, etc.). Ties between the missionaries and Russian-based communities were not initially “international”; they developed within the framework of the post-Soviet landscape, through Soviet-era ties. Interestingly, most religious leaders did not perceive them as a “foreign influence”. However, of course, some missionaries did arrive in Russia from outside of the former USSR.

Accordingly, the change in legislation regulating missionary activity deliberately limited the activities of those religious associations, which, at the suggestion of the anti-cultist leader Dvorkin and his supporters, were labeled in Russian society as “sectarian” and/or “foreign”. Therefore, we should dwell in more detail on modern-day Russian anti-missionary legislation. For more information about the anti-cult legislation of the 1990s in Russian regions, refer to Shterin and Richardson 1998.

Russia’s Law on Religion “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” (Davis 1997) was aimed at “non-traditional religions” (with the law’s preamble manifesting “the special role of Orthodoxy in the Russian history, and in the formation and development of Russian spirituality and culture”, also marking the unique roles of traditional “Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions that are an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia”) (Federal Law no. 125-fz 1997). This law limited the activities of foreign missionaries and introduced an additional requirement: from then on, in order to register and obtain the status of a legal entity, a community applying for such a status must have existed in the country for at least 15 years. The remaining communities would do without state registration as a religious group (which significantly limited their missionary and educational opportunities) or be registered within a centralized organization. Religious organizations began to adapt to these norms. Thus, the role of centralized organizations began to be performed by unions and associations: those who had previously existed and new ones. At the same time, the mass creation of centralized organizations led to the reality that “under the same roof” there were doctrinally different churches (as an example, we mention the Russian United Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith). This was reminiscent of the Soviet experience and, in particular, the creation of the All-Union Council of the ECB, which united completely different evangelical churches that could only receive registration within this union.

Formally, in Russia, the law of 1997 remains in force to this day; it is constantly supplemented by various amendments that primarily complicate the missionary and educational activities of religious associations.

In addition, Russian legislation on religious associations was supplemented by various acts that did not take into account the presence of religious specificity or interfered with the activities of believers. It is important to point to the Law “On the Counteraction Extremist Activity” (Federal Law no. 114-fz 2002), due to which some Muslim organizations (such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir), as well as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are banned as extremists, and the Church of Scientology is recognized as an “undesirable organization” in Russia.

In 2016, two federal bills were adopted in Russia, declared by their authors as having an anti-terrorist agenda (in Russia, these are known collectively as the “Yarovaya Law” (On Amendments to the Federal Law 2016; Legislative Acts 2016); although, in reality, these are actually amendments to existing separate legislative acts of the Russian Federation aimed at establishing additional measures to counter terrorism and ensure public security. This package of amendments significantly enhanced the scope and penalties of previous laws governing religion and anti-extremism. The law characterizes sharing religious faith, or extending invitations to religious services, as illegal missionary activity if it occurs outside of officially registered spaces (including in private homes or over the Internet).

As a result of these legal measures, Chapter III (“On Missionary Activity”) was added to the 1997 Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations”, which significantly limited the possibility of missionary activity by religious organizations, and not only foreign ones.

The provisions of the Yarovaya Law on missionary work are as follows:

1. Every believer who speaks about God outside their respective religious building on behalf of their religious association must carry a document from the organization in question (yet, in reality, the police and courts can fine and detain anyone who preaches, regardless of provided documentation).
2. Religious groups and associations must issue documents to their missionaries (in reality, the police and courts have begun to require any religious groups to notify state authorities of their existence; although, this is not required by law).
3. Religious ceremonies may be held in living quarters; however, it is prohibited to preach or invite non-believers to such gatherings. In addition, a residential building cannot be permanently used as a site for religious worship.
4. Those who preach their faith online, in the media, “or by other legal means” must also have a proper document from their religious organization.
5. A foreign missionary must secure an employment contract with a Russian-based religious organization, that is, enter on a humanitarian or religious visa and receive a quota, and preach only in the territory where, according to the charter, the inviting organization operates.
6. Sanctions provide financial fines for citizens (up to RUB 50,000) and organizations (up to RUB 1 million).

In addition to restricting missionary activity, the law allows the application of penalties for religious associations and, due to the extremely free interpretation of the concept of “missionary work”, can be used as a lever of pressure on any religious community.

It is crucial to emphasize that this law did not appear out of nowhere and it cannot be attributed to the work of federal legislators⁷. Even before 2016, local laws “On missionary activity” were in force in a number of regions of Russia (Belgorod, Smolensk, Pskov, Voronezh, Kostroma, Novgorod, Kursk, Tambov, Arkhangelsk regions, and in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous region). Additionally, in another 20 regions in the country, such laws were proposed and were either not adopted or were subsequently repealed. The reason for the discussion and adoption of regional laws lies on the surface. The lawmakers themselves speak of this: “The reason for such a legislative initiative, according to its authors, deputies Alexander Dyatlov and Ekaterina Pozdeeva, was the reception of numerous complaints from citizens about the annoying behavior of representatives of various religious associations, or simply—sects”. Another notable example is the following: in 2016, in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous region, the bill “On missionary activity in the territory of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region” was proposed. Yamal legislators were also concerned about the spread of “non-traditional” religions in the region and their influence on the indigenous peoples of the North (Zakon 2016). We know of several precedents when people protested the regional laws. In November of 2015, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation considered the application by the Prosecutor of the Novgorod Region to invalidate certain provisions of the Regional Law “On Missionary Activities in the Novgorod Region” (2014). The Prosecutor’s Office of the Novgorod Region stated that the regional legislator had exceeded his authority by engaging in the introduction of amendments to the federal laws.

It is our conviction that the gradual enactment of laws in the regions aimed at restricting missionary activity led to a special mention of missionary activity (presented to the public as protection against religious extremism) in the Yarovaya Law. We are also sure that the active anti-cult “lawmaking creativity” in the mentioned districts was largely stimulated by programs and conferences under the auspices of the center headed by Alexander Dvorkin.

Following the adoption of the Yarovaya Law, we can observe a sharp increase in the anti-cult legal implementation in various regions.

One of the cases of application of the law was the closure in 2016 in the city of Noyabrsk (in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous region) of a children's camp (according to one account) or a day-care playground (according to the local pastor). The official reason for the closure was the presence of violations—from safety regulations to qualifications of the educators. However, the main thing is that not only Russian staff looked after the children, but also staffers from Ukraine, and even American citizens. In addition, children were told about religion, which violated the law; although, in previous years, such summer playgrounds for children in the city existed openly and did not interfere with anyone's legal interests.

Another example of the application of the "Yarovaya law" was the precedent in the city of Orel, where the court, applying the additional provisions on missionary activity of the law "On freedom of conscience", indicated that one of the conditions for the implementation of the activities of a religious group at present "became the need to notify the Ministry of Justice about the beginning of the activity of a new religious association (group)". Additionally, according to the requirement of the court, the American missionary Donald Jay Osewaarde was fined because he did not notify the Ministry of Justice about the commencement of the activities of his religious association. The American citizen became one of the first foreigners in Russia who fell under the sanctions of the amendments and the first to challenge the decision in court (Volin 2016). In May 2020, the case of Curran Raymond Gerard, a pastor of the Association of Evangelical Christian Churches, was dismissed. Nevertheless, the Russian judicial system was so casuistic that the pastor was accused of "illegal missionary activity" for preaching during a prayer meeting where only members of the church were present. The case was dismissed due to the "expiry of the statute of limitations" after the drafting of the protocol (Oktyabrsky District Court of Tambov 2020; Sovia Center for Information and Analysis 2020). Thus, Russian law-enforcement agencies often treat (and may treat) any religious activity of citizens or religious associations as missionary activity.

The emergence of new requirements for missionary activity was superimposed on the existing anti-sectarian sentiments in the regions of Russia, which were actively supported by anti-cult organizations. Here are just a few examples of such sentiments.

In April 2017, in one of the sections of the Forum of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation, information was broadcast about the influx of representatives of the "totalitarian churches" in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous region. The journalist who wrote about it accused the Protestants of "promoting Western values. They gently proposes to the peoples of the tundra the idea of the alleged dangers of the Russian presence in the North, and the dangers of Russian orthodoxy, which in the memory of the Nenets, was associated with the Russians. Preachers oppose their "faith" to the faith of the Russians. Aborigines are taught by methods of neurolinguistic programming that they are the masters of the Earth but receive a meager share from natural resources. In the event of an unfavorable scenario, family and tribal communities covered by foreign religious missions may fall under external influences. This is what Western "puppeteers" are working on" (Morozov 2017).

5. An Overview of the Religious Structure of the Russian North

The modern Russian North (the Russian Arctic) is a uniquely accurate reflection of the country's religious realities. In the Soviet period, part of the northern territories were completely excluded from any form of religious tradition. In the Yamal and Taymyr Peninsulas, in Yakutia, and in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug-Yugra, one can still find the sacred grounds of indigenous peoples (the Nenets, Yakut, Khanty, Evenk, etc.). Yet, neither society, nor the state, sees these as sacred; they are merely seen as heritage sites of the northern nations. In other territories, in the so-called "classified cities" (for example, in Severomorsk, which is still a base for the Russian Northern Fleet), and in oil and gas centers in Western Siberia (for example, in Nefteyugansk, Novuy Urengoy, etc.), the

population comprised nonreligious newcomers. In old settlements, in towns and villages founded in the Imperial period (for example, in Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Surgut, and Salekhard), religious views—as a part of everyday life—lingered; yet, this was a kind of latent religiosity that could be observed among the majority of the Soviet population.

In the post-Soviet period, all religions that existed in the country were present here. It is impossible to talk about the number of believers, since there are no official statistics. One can only roughly estimate the number of registered churches and communities.

The Russian Orthodox Church has the largest number of believers in the region. There are four metropolitan archdioceses in the Russian North: Arkhangelsk (including Arkhangelsk itself, as well as the Kotlas, Naryan-Mar, and Plesetsk dioceses), Murmansk (with the Murmansk and Severomorsk dioceses), Krasnoyarsk (with the Krasnoyarsk, Yenisei, Kansk, and Norilsk dioceses), and Khanty-Mansiysk (which includes the Khanty-Mansiysk and Yugorsk dioceses). There are also six lesser dioceses: Salekhard, Syktyvkar, Vorkuta, Anadyr, Chukotka, and Yakutsk. There are registered religious organizations of the Russian Orthodox Church in most settlements; their total number is about 800. These include parishes, monasteries, and sisterhoods.

The next orthodox denomination in terms of membership is the Old Believers, with the largest jurisdiction being the Old Orthodox Pomor Church. Only two Old Believer organizations are officially registered in the region; however, given the long-standing Old Believer traditions of the Arkhangelsk region, the Krasnoyarsk Territory and the Komi Republic, it can be argued that the number of people who adhere to the Old Believer traditions is far greater than the official data shows.

The number of registered Protestant communities and churches in the North number around 280. Among the organized Protestant communities, one should name:

- The Lutherans, belonging either to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria (based in Murmansk) or the Evangelical Lutheran Church of European Russia (in Arkhangelsk).
- The Adventists, belonging to the Euro-Asian Division of the Seventh-Day Adventists.
- The Evangelical Christian Baptists, part of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists.
- The majority of the Pentecostal communities that are part of the Russian Union of Evangelical Faith Christians and in the Russian Church of Evangelical Faith Christians. A portion of the Pentecostals, whose communities hail from the unregistered Churches of the Soviet era, are part of the United Church of Evangelical Faith Christians or the Union of the Evangelical Faith Christian Missions.
- Communities of the New Apostolic Church, which are under its regional leadership.
- Local Methodists belonging to the United Russian Methodist Church.

It needs to be stated that the Protestant communities need to become part of larger organizational structures in order to coordinate their work and support their communities.

There are very few Muslims in the Arctic. Most of them dwell in the Yamal-Nenets region. During the development of the oil and gas complex in the Yamal, large diasporas of Azerbaijanis and Tatars came to the region; yet, these communities only latently profess Islam. The economic prospects of the fossil fuel industry keep most of the Muslim communities in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous region; although, back in the 19th century, the first Muslim community in the Arctic was located in Arkhangelsk.

In addition to the numerous believers already mentioned, there are other religions present, including adherents of Judaism, Hinduism (Krishnaites), and a few Buddhists. Until April 2017, there were still Jehovah's Witness Communities officially registered in the region. However, in April 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, recognizing them as an extremist organization. All Jehovah's Witness communities were liquidated; however, the followers of this religion, of course, remained in place. Their numbers at present are, obviously, unknown.

The diversity of religious life in the Arctic is not limited to registered religious associations. Russian law allows believers to gather as part of a religious group without official Ministry of Justice registration. Some denominations are not registered due to their own

dogmatic ideas (for example, some classical Pentecostals, Old Believers, and the clergies and flocks of alternative orthodox churches). In other cases, there are so few believers that they cannot form their own community.

The specificity of the Russian Arctic lies in its indigenous population (the indigenous peoples of the North, according to official Russian terminology). Historically and even at present, these nations have been paternalized by both society and state. This paternalism has extended to the worldview of the indigenous peoples. Until recently, it was a priori assumed that members of the Selkups, Nenets, Mansi, Chukchi, and other northern peoples adhered to a form of dual faith: a combination of paganism and orthodoxy. However, this statement no longer correlates with reality. In the beginning of the 1990s, Protestantism (primarily Baptist faith and Pentecostalism) began to spread among the indigenous population of the Russian North (Rud' 2016; Rybakova 2009; Pelkmans 2009; Wiget and Balalaeva 2007).

Let us not reminisce about accepting the “new faith” in terms of “good” and “bad”. Among the positive aspects, one must note that the Nenets, Khanty, and Evenks who embrace Protestantism stop smoking and drinking alcohol, and this is noted even by secular/foreign-religious opponents of the spread of Protestantism. Yet, there is an opinion, which is actively broadcast by journalists and officials, that “if the faith in pagan gods and spirits will disappear—the basis of the spiritual culture of the indigenous people, and with it/the people themselves as an ethnic group will disappear as well”. However, is that the case? Here, we are more likely to observe a situation where the representatives of the indigenous peoples of the North are treated as residents of an “ethnographic village”, with state and society denying them the right to decide for themselves how to live and what to believe in.

The reason for the apparent alarmism regarding the spread of Protestantism among the indigenous peoples lies in the changes that affect their traditional way of life after conversion. The change in tradition is seen in the destruction of “protective spirits” (ancestral idols) and in the refusal to eat raw meat and fish. However, in fact, many representatives of the Northern nations, of different faiths, show an indifferent attitude towards elements of traditional cults, and even living in the tundra, they may not adhere to these traditions. From our personal experience of working with Protestants who hailed from the indigenous population, we noted that they did not give up their ethnic identity. Their self-identification was closer to those indigenous people who abandoned their traditional image for other reasons, for example, those who moved to the city.

Why do we pay such attention to the regional level? Why do we focus on examples related to indigenous peoples? Because it seems important to us to pay attention to how the “global” anti-cult agenda is playing out at the regional level, in the multinational and multicultural context of the Russian Federation, and the example of the indigenous people is particularly noteworthy here. The discussion around missionary activity among the northern peoples (and this is primarily about the missions of different evangelicals—Pentecostals and Baptists) shows the presence of a multi-level complex of stereotypes that appear in relation to religious minorities, in particular, and religion in general.

The discussion on the conversion of the indigenous population occurs on several levels. Thus, the issue is regularly discussed by journalists, voiced by state officials, and analyzed by scholars. However, the ethnologists and anthropologists engaged in the study of traditional culture may also be subject to moral panics regarding to the spread of Protestantism in the Arctic (Wiget and Balalaeva 2010, 2014; Rud' 2020). They apply their scientific expertise at the request of state bodies, and the authorities adopt their attitudes towards the religious minorities according to their results. However, such expertise is not always sufficiently objective or free of bias against religious minorities. The most trustworthy are the examinations performed by indigene scientists. Among the regional officials and journalists, there is a belief that local scientists—Mansi, Khanty, Evenki, Selkup, etc.—better understand what is “better for their people”.

The embracing of Pentecostalist or Baptist faiths by the Nenets, Khanty, Evenks, and other small indigenous nations in Siberia and the Arctic is met with open hostility by the

Russian Orthodox Church and parts of Russian society. The hostility is brought about by the widespread Russian perception of evangelical believers as strangers who came to destroy the traditional culture. Here, is an example of a typical argument from one of the opponents of Protestant missionary activities: “The activities of Protestant religious organizations have a negative impact on the ethnic culture of the Khakass, effectively levelling it. Protestant Khakasses become alien to their own culture and ethnicity. They become an obedient tool in the hands of Western missionaries” (Burnakov 2005). Although the article was written in 2005, by 2022, the rhetoric and argumentation had remained the same. However, in reality, missionaries may have very different attitudes towards traditional ethnic cultures and national languages. Alexandra Terekhina, describing her field observations, highlighted two opposing phenomena that she witnessed occurring (Terekhina 2014, pp. 311–12) from the need to preserve ethnic identity (as in the Church of Evangelical Christians “The Good News” in Salekhard) to a complete ban on the use of national languages during worship due to their association with “pagan” culture (Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Salekhard). Here, Terekhina referred to her fieldwork, indicating that this example referred to a “radical” Baptist church. However, we do not know which church she means. The field research of one of the authors showed that, recently, missionaries have been trying to avoid difficult questions on the destruction of patron spirit imagery (Kliueva 2012).

Since the territories of the Russian Arctic were closed to missionary activity throughout almost the entire 20th century, a tense religious competition began to take shape in the 1990s, continuing to the present day. Missionaries of different faiths began to come to the actual “pagans”, to people who retained their traditional beliefs, and in order to preserve the already established communities, the missionaries themselves used anti-sectarian arguments. Tatiana Vagramenko quoted one of the Protestant ministers from the village of Belayarsk (the Yamal Nenets Autonomous Region): “Nowadays there are many missions that want to come here, but we don’t let them [come here]. Because they do only harm. I am sure there exist destructive sects. Never mind that they want to evangelize and so on, we don’t let them come here, don’t cooperate with them, and sometimes even prevent them from their activity. I would rather complain against them to the local administration than let them go to the tundra” (Vagramenko 2018, p. 148). This quote reveals the clear presence of religious competition and describes the means of fighting one’s opponents, mainly through the appeal to the state in the context of the “anti-sectarian” discourse.

The first point is directly connected with general xenophobia, the lingering Soviet-era confidence in the harmfulness of all ideas coming from the “West”. The second prejudice is associated with nationalism of the primordial type, which considers ethnic groups and nations as historically long-formed groups with stable psychological, mental, cultural, and social characteristics. It means that introducing innovations into the life of the group associated with the so-called “cultural codes” of other nations—and religion is precisely this type of phenomenon—leads to the destruction of the group, assimilating new, alien norms. Thus, in the eyes of a part of the Russian establishment, evangelicals have turned out to be very dubious from a cultural, moral, and political point of view.

6. Concluding Statements

In the Russian Arctic, religious diversity only took hold after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, a religiously diverse landscape was built from scratch. There was no rooted dominant denomination here; there was not even a historically dominant orthodox church. The indigenous population, in most cases, was conditionally pagan—observing some ethnic traditions associated with the veneration of their sacred places and appealing to tribal spirits. At the same time, during the Soviet period, the majority of shamans was effectively annihilated; therefore, in the post-Soviet period, all religious groups found themselves here in equal conditions, as “newcomers”.

The attitude towards the indigenous population was formed and is being formed by Soviet paternalistic views: the indigenous peoples are observed as a people who need to be protected and instructed, with decisions being made for them. This is typical for both

state officials and a significant portion of researchers: ethnographers and anthropologists. The indigenous population is essentially a non-independent actor—rather, an object of regional politics.

In religious policy (especially in relation to evangelicals and new religious movements), the policy, which is shaped by local officials and the opinions and proclamations of experts, plays a crucial role. The officials themselves are mostly completely secularized and rely on various experts. These experts are religious authorities from traditional confessions, religious scholars (who, in fact, are the bearers of anti-cult discourse), ethnographers, and anthropologists. In all actuality, it is the experts who shape the anti-sectarian agenda in the region. Here, we might bring to light the central nuances of their discourse: if representatives of the anti-cult movement view the evangelicals simply as dangerous sectarians, the ethnographers believe that the spread of evangelical communities in the region will lead to the loss of the ethnic identity, traditional culture, and the traditional way of life of the indigenous people. This article shows that the anti-sectarian discourse of religious experts is formed by the international anti-sectarian movements, which, however, correspond with local ethnographers.

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Notes

- ¹ About the anti-cult movement in Russia in the 1990s, see (Shterin and Richardson 1998, pp. 334–37).
- ² Of clear interest on the subject is the analytical report of the political scientist Jason Morton ‘The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union’, published in July, 2020 by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- ³ In the Russian language, one finds abundant usage of the word ‘sect-fighter’ (*sektoborets*) and the ‘anti-sect movement’. Since the word ‘sect’ has a clearly negative connotation, the use of the term ‘anti-sectarian’ emphasizes the positive nature of the anti-cult movement.
- ⁴ For more information on specific legal frameworks in which religious communities operated throughout the Soviet Union, see: (Martin and Beliakova 2024, pp. 3–9; Dyck 2024, pp. 76–87).
- ⁵ The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest and most populous Soviet socialist republic of the USSR from 1922 to 1991.
- ⁶ The research by Karpov and Lisovskaya (2007, p. 891) shows that “The attitudes of Russians towards Western Churches form the only area where public opinion is congruent with legal and ideological divisions of religions into “traditional” and “non-traditional” ones. Western Churches are the out groups least tolerated by both the Orthodox and Muslims. Moreover, popular attitudes are in fact more restrictive of these Churches than even the 1997 law itself. While the law limits the newcomers’ rights, a large proportion of Russians would ban their activities altogether”.
- ⁷ One of the authors wrote about this in detail (Kliueva and Shestakov 2016).

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