

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN THE RUSSIAN NORTH

From 2006 to 2009, a team of scholars from U.S., Finland, France, Switzerland, Russia and Estonia carried out a Collaborative Research Project (CRP) within the framework of EUROCORES BOREAS Programme. The BOREAS Programme is the first large-scale international initiative in the humanities and social sciences and is targeted at developing global cooperation in the Arctic studies. Urgent need for such collaboration has been voiced also by the BOREAS Programme's initiator and coordinators:

The circumpolar North is now widely accepted as a unique early warning system for changing relations between society and the environment. This region, which includes the Arctic and the sub-Arctic, has moved to the centre of global debates on environmental change, human adaptation, new post-cold-war partnerships and issues of post-colonial governance and strategy. (Klein, Rustat-Flinton & Vitebsky 2007: 3)

The Collaborative Research Project entitled "New Religious Movements in the Russian North: Competing Uses of Religiosity after Socialism" (NEWREL, Project Leader Patty Gray) aims to better understand the contemporary religious landscape in the Russian North as it appears after Glasnost (1985–1991) and the collapse of the Soviet system. Freed from restrictions on religious practices, the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union have shown in recent decades a growing interest in various forms of spirituality, religious experience and religious institutions. Nonetheless, few scholars have paid attention to the recent rearrangements of religious life in the Russian North, the area stretching from the Finnish border to the Bering Sea.

Our specific interests could be characterized by emphasizing

[...] religious practices over beliefs, since it is practices that best reveal the social relations that are of interest to us. We see religious practices as creative solutions constructed by local residents who find themselves at the convergence of multiple influences. We are also highly attuned to the various discourses being constructed by participants in religious activity in the Russian North, the ways they represent their religion to themselves on an everyday basis, as well as how they represent it to those outside their practice. (about the CRP: *online*)

The Estonian research team is responsible for carrying out the individual project "Discourse of Religions, Mentalities and Languages in the Russian North". Our work team is constituted of seven researchers: Art Leete (principal investigator); Eva Toulouze and Aimar Ventsel (researchers); Laur Vallikivi, Liivo Niglas, Kaur Mägi (junior investigators), and Agrafena Pesikova-Sopochina (associated investigator).

Our research examines the worldview of Siberian indigenous peoples, analyzing the long-lasting stability of different mentalities (i.e. their adaptation to the Orthodox religion and later to Communist ideology) in conjunction with the restoration of the Orthodox Church and intensive growth of Evangelical missions in the Arctic. Discourse of Religions, Mentalities and Languages in the Russian North evaluates the strategies of northern groups as part of an 'in-between phenomenon': the religious mainstream being negotiated between indigenous peoples themselves, religious contacts

between indigenous groups and institutions, and with newcomers to this religious space. This multi-project study will investigate the worldviews of peoples of the Sakha Republic, Taimyr Peninsula, Western Siberia and the European part of the Russian North, and the ways in which these worldviews are altered by conversion strategies.

The Estonian team of the BOREAS has conducted fieldwork on the Kamchatka Peninsula, in Sakha Republic, Taimyr Peninsula, Western Siberia, the Nenets Autonomous Region and the Komi Republic.

We have presented papers at several international conferences. But the most prominent scholarly meeting in which the NEWREL project has been involved was the 6th International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS VI), held in Nuuk, Greenland, on 22–26 August 2008. For the ICASS VI, the NEWREL project prepared a panel “Creative Use of Religiosity in the North: Approaching Change among Russian (Sub-)Arctic Communities through Religion”.

The researchers, whose interests are related to the NEWREL project’s topic, presented preliminary results of their studies. Eight papers of the panel were dedicated to the following topics. Patty A. Gray and Alexandra S. Antohin discussed the emergence of alternative religious discourses in Magadan. Piret Koosa and Art Leete studied the relationship between the new Russian Orthodox priest and a local Komi community. Another paper which concentrated on the Russian Orthodox issues was delivered by Viktoria V. Petrasheva and David Koester (“Past and Present Forms of Religiosity in Itelmen History”). Issues of contemporary Siberian shamanism were touched upon by Tatiana Bulgakova, Anna-Leena Siikala and Piers Vitebsky.

Different approaches to the Protestant missions in the Russian North were demonstrated by Eva Toulouze, Tatiana Vagramenko, and Laur Vallikivi (using the Nenets example) and by Patrick Plattet and Virginie Vaté (discussing the Chukchi and the Koryak cases). Alexander Panchenko and Sergey Shtyrkov analyzed the relationship between knowledge and power, science and religion as it appears in the case of the Last Testament Church that has functioned in Siberia for almost twenty years (see Research Results: *online*).

On the bases of Nuuk Congress presentations, the NEWREL project plans to publish a collection of scholarly articles (with few changes in the list of contents). Actually, the topics of the ICASS VI panel reflect the research interests and developments of the whole NEWREL project rather adequately.

In addition, the NEWREL project has paid much attention to networking inside the CRP. We have already organized the NEWREL meetings in Tartu (2006), St Petersburg (2007), Helsinki (2008) and one more meeting will be arranged in Tartu in the near future.

Active and continuous communication between the NEWREL project’s partners has significantly tightened our cooperation. Established partnership between the NEWREL scholars will enable us to plan further cooperation in the study of recent religious changes in the northern areas of Russia.

Art Leete

References

- About the Collaborative Research Project.* In: NEWREL. Available at http://www.newrel.org/nrm/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=39, last accessed on 8 March 2009.
- Klein, Rüdiger; Claire Rustat-Flinton & Piers Vitebsky (eds.) 2007. *European Science Foundation. EUROCORES Programme. Histories from the North: Environments, Movements, Narratives (BOREAS)*. Strasbourg: European Science Foundation.
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