

# On the Religious Manuscript Tradition of the Upper Vychegda: The ‘Singers of the Good News’ as Part of Komi Religious Folklore

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**Abstract:** The Komi mystical sect known as the Burs'ylys'ians (Komi 'бурсылысьяс', the 'Singers of Good'), is a unique phenomenon in domestic religious culture that, at the same time, has parallels in a number of Russian mystical movements, such as Khlysty, Skoptsy, Dukhobors, etc. To date, the doctrine of the Burs'ylys'ians and their cult practices, which received a lively response among the Komi population of Verkhnevychegda volost, remain a mystery. This is due, first of all, to the limited study of the handwritten religious literature created by the Singers and the repertoire of spiritual songs. This article describes the Singers' monument of literature, a liturgical text outlining the basics of their faith, including what prospective followers of Burs'ylys'ians need to know about salvation, but above all about the path that leads to Communion with God, i.e. meeting God. The manuscript is called "Cathedral Rank" and is introduced into scientific circulation for the first time.

**Keywords:** Singers of Good, creed, religious literature, mysticism, conversation, inner cry, the heart's eye

In recent decades, the study of monuments of written religious folklore, concentrated in the manuscript collections of village believers, has gradually entered the circle of topical problems of folkloristics and ethnology. A fairly representative article by Y. M. Shevarenkova, which precedes the collection of texts, correctly outlines the boundaries of this topic, a brief historiography of which can be found here (Shevarenkova 2008: 5–29). Our article is about the religious manuscript tradition of the Upper Vychegda, a region where the mystical sect known as the Burs'ylys'ians, the 'Singers of Good,' operated from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until relatively recently. The phenomenon is to a certain extent unique because the followers of the Singers created a manuscript in the Upper Vychegda dialect of the Komi language even before the norms of the modern Komi literary language, which is based on the Prisyktyvkar dialect, were established. Aleksandr Chuviurov raised the question of the status of women in the sect (2001, 2002 2004), although this topic requires additional research. The task of my article, however, is the doctrine of the sect, i.e. more in the field of folk theology.

The Vologda diocesan office became aware of Stefan Artemyevich Ermolin as the founder of heretical doctrine, in contrast to the dogma of the Orthodox Church, at the very beginning of the twentieth century. The priest of the Myeldinskaya church in Ust-Sysolsky uyezd, of which Stefan Ermolin was a parishioner, reported to the authorities about the independent 'admiration' of spiritual teaching by the peasant Ermolin. Allegedly this peasant arranged spiritual conversations, distracting parishioners from church services. In 1905 the diocesan office forbade Ermolin from teaching, he was given a written instruction not to hold further

spiritual meetings, and a fine was imposed (Gagarin 1978: 219). However, diocesan sanctions led to nothing and Ermolin continued his activities. In 1912 a special mission was sent to Ust-Sysolsky uyezd to investigate the phenomenon of Ermolin. As a result an article was published in the “Vologda Diocesan Vedomosti”, the author of which did not specify his name, signing the article with the pseudonym Vologzhanin (Vologzhanin 1912, Nos. 19, 20, 21, 22).

Stefan Ermolin was born in the village of Myeldino and belonged to the peasant class. Having received his primary education in a parochial school, he was engaged in peasant labour until he made pilgrimages to the holy places of Russia including various monasteries. It is obvious that Ermolin was a religiously gifted man who spoke Russian well, knew the Holy Scriptures and had an understanding of liturgy. Ermolin’s knowledge of the Russian language suggests that for some time he lived in the Russian provinces, where he could familiarise himself with the activities of Russian mystical sects<sup>1</sup>.

By the time he began his independent religious activity in 1895, Ermolin had an idea of the liturgical gatherings of Russian sectarians, the so-called “conversations” (‘beseda’) and “passions” (‘rad-eniya’)<sup>2</sup>. This is why he called his gatherings *burkyvzöm*. This word, with the light hand of the very same Vologzhanin, is translated as “conversation” (Vologzhanin 1912 (19): 478), although this is not quite correct. The analogue of the Russian word conversation in the Komi language is the word *sörnï* ‘conversation’, ‘talk’ (буркывзöm). It is quite likely that Ermolin could not call his meetings using the neutral *sörnï*, so he invented the neologism *burkyvzöm* by combining two words, *bur* + *kyvzöm* (‘good’ + ‘listening’). This word combination is not used in the spoken Komi language, but in a religious context it acquires connotations unusual for neutral speech. *Burkyvzöm* literally translates as ‘good listening’, in other words ‘listening to the Good News’, i.e. the Gospel. Accordingly,

Ermolin calls himself *burvištalyś*, i.e. a ‘teller of the Good News’, an ‘evangelist’<sup>3</sup>. The same neologisms are used for Ermolin’s associates as a group, i.e. *bursylylyśyas*, literally ‘those who sing the Good News’, or ‘Singers of the Good News’, in addition to which Ermolin’s parishioners were *burkivzylyśyas*, ‘those who listen to the Good News’<sup>4</sup>.

Initially Ermolin helped local priest Savvati Sumarkov, translating his sermons into Komi to make them accessible to parishioners, although he soon began to preach on his own. Yuri Gagarin, who studied this issue, notes that Ermolin translates psalms, something from the Psalter into Komi, and also composes spiritual songs (Gagarin 1978: 218). The remark is important because translations and independent creativity in the Komi language later become a characteristic feature of the activity not only of Ermolin himself, but also of subsequent adherents to the doctrine of *Burs'ylys'ians*. Thus, the reason for Ermolin’s success among the peasants of Myyölda volost was the language factor: his sermons in the Zyryan language were understood by the parishioners. The fact is that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ancient class privileges of the Zyrian clergy were breaking down and Russian priests who did not know the Komi language began to be assigned to Zyrian parishes more and more often. While Zyrian priests could explain the words of the sermon to parishioners by translating it into the Komi language, Russian priest could not do so. Because of this, there was inevitably a language gap between priests and parishioners that could only be crossed by learning the Zyrian language. Against this background, Ermolin’s preaching in the parishioners’ native language became more acceptable than a temple service in incomprehensible Church Slavonic.

However, language was hardly the only factor. An important role was also played by the religious charisma of Stefan Ermolin himself, without which the success of his preaching would not have

been as comprehensive. Called to investigate the phenomenon of Ermolin, Vologzhanin writes:

Stephen has some special power that attracts people to him. As people are drawn to any sin or wine, so they are drawn to Stefan. Women leave their homes, their children, their cattle without any pity and spend time until midnight. Nothing is spared just to see and hear Stephen. One man said of his wife: "She is a literate woman. I have the Gospel, a prayer book and other books. Pray, I tell her, at home – so no, at home there is no diligence (Vologzhanin 1912 (19): 480).

Elsewhere in the same article Vologzhanin complains that the women of Myyolda prefer Ermolin's sermon to the liturgy, travelling twenty miles to the village of Ust-Nem to hear him, and the men who had been to church said: "The batiushka spoke well today, he must have learnt from our uncle Stephen!" (Vologzhanin 1912 (22): 558).

In 1912, the 'Stepan faith' embraced five Verkhnevychegodsk parishes in the villages of Myeldino, Ust-Nem, Pozheg, Bolshelug and Don. In terms of social composition, the adherents of the bursiylysyas were peasants, among whom women predominated.

Ermolin's religious authority was also supported by his gift of 'clairvoyance': it was as if he could hear the thoughts of others, could find out about events in a place far away from him, and could determine the degree of sinfulness of the person standing before him. The impact of Ermolin on ordinary people was enormous. Having joined his conversations, many stopped drinking alcohol and smoking, and began to lead decent lives. Answering Vologzhanin's questions, peasants noted that after Ermolin's sermons their lives changed. Thus, one of Ermolin's followers, A. D. Chistalyov, pointed out that before he led "a thin and sinful life", but after lis-

tening to Stephan, he completely changed and felt joy in his soul (Vologzhanin 1912 (20): 506).

Ermolin's authority was also supported by the parishioners' belief in his holiness, in the grace given to him by God. His holiness was confirmed by rumours that his clothes glowed, and that there were "luminous circles", i.e. halos, over the heads of his followers. A sign of Ermolin's holiness was also his visions. In his conversation with Vologzhanin he confessed that his ministry began after he was shown a vision of two crosses, one simple the other eight-pointed, a vision that gave him faith (Vologzhanin 1912(20): 511). The invisible cross can be seen only with what Vologzhanin calls "the heart's eye", i.e. spiritual sight, which ordinary ministers of the church do not have.

The concept of spiritual sight lies at the heart of Stefan Ermolin's teaching and is one of the most significant components of the mystical component of his Burkyvzõm discussions. It is a special grace, sent down by God to the most worthy *бурсьылысьяс* (*burs'ylys'ias*) adherents. With "heart eyes" one can see Jesus Christ and angels, invisible crosses that are given in the 'high world' to the organisers of discussions, halos over the heads of the most faithful of Ermolin's associates; in other words, one sees the true state of affairs with inner sight. To Vologzhanin's remark that his visions of the cross with his 'heart's eye' could be a delusion, Ermolin replied that the devil could appear to a person in various ways, but not in the form of a cross. The custom of Burs'ylys'ians to lower their eyes, not to look directly at a person when talking, and for women to cover their faces with a handkerchief – "If you look at a person, you will see neither Jesus nor angels" – is also connected with notions of spiritual sight.

According to Y. Gagarin, the Burs'ylys'ians were characterised by "deification" of their preachers (Gagarin: 220). It is not quite clear whether the Burs'ylys'ians recognised Ermolin as an incarnation of Jesus Christ. Gagarin notes that Ermolin's admirers called

him Christ and behaved as if they would drink the water in which he washed his feet (Gagarin 1978: 220). Vologzhanin also gives similar examples, with among Ermolin's sins the most prominent being the self-declaration of his teaching title. Most likely, we are talking about some signs of Ermolin's 'godlike' rather than divine incarnation, as is characteristic of Christovism. Nevertheless, the influence of Christovism can be detected in the idea of the possible incarnation of the Virgin Mary in any of the female Burs'ylys'ians. For example, Vologzhanin writes about a repentant woman who confessed that she was considered "the Mother of God" among the Burs'ylys'ians. She was allegedly mentally ill at that time and does not remember anything about it (Vologzhanin 1912 (21): 582). While Vologzhanin mentions only one such case, Gagarin writes that in the 1920s incarnations of "godmothers" were multiple (Gagarin 1978: 253). In an ecstatic state, which was explained by the descent of the Holy Spirit called *Duk pyr addzöm*<sup>6</sup>, women godmothers uttered prophecies. The strengthening of the 'god-bearer' prophetic aspect in the Burs'ylys'ians movement can be explained by the general eschatological mood of society in the post-revolutionary period, as well as by some changes in attitude towards ecstaticism in the ritual practices of the Burs'ylys'ians that took place after Ermolin's death. Thus, in the 1920s the rite of "dying and resurrection" appeared, when during prayer one of the participants suddenly "died" and was "resurrected" and would then tell others about his or her visions (Gagarin 1978: 253).

Initially, Ermolin's lectures were limited to reading and interpreting the Psalter and the Holy Scriptures translated into Komi. However, some time later, a certain structure of conversations known as *burkyvzöm* appeared, involving alternating reading and interpretation of liturgical texts, singing spiritual verses and preaching by Ermolin himself. Accordingly, the *burkyvzöm* stretched over the whole day, with small breaks for meals and rest for the preacher. The general schedule of conversations is known

from the records of diocesan missionaries: it was first presented, with some condescension and irony, by the same Vologzhanin (Vologzhanin 1912 (19): 479), but is considered in more detail in Gagarin's work: "general morning prayer, tea drinking, preaching and interpretation of the Scriptures, lunch, singing of spiritual songs, tea, conversation with the preacher, singing, tea and dinner, evening prayer, akathist" (Gagarin 1978: 25). Ermolin sat in the red corner on a cushion; next to him were his singers, actually Burs'ylys'ians. The interlocutors sat on benches facing the preacher and the icons. All those who wished to listen to Ermolin could not fit on the benches as according to the same Vologda missionary from thirty to sixty people gathered for these conversations. They all had to be fed, and a conversation was quite expensive for a peasant family, about three to five roubles. As a compensation for material expenses, the family acquired spiritual gifts. For example it was believed that the host who organised a conversation received an invisible copper cross, for organising a second a silver cross, and for the third a gold one. At the same time, the third conversation was equal to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and for this the sins of the whole family were cancelled. The conversation itself was equal to the Divine Liturgy.

It is important to note the ecstatic impact of the conversations. Vologzhanin writes that people during the conversation "lose their mental balance" and look crazy. This state of incomprehensible joy people call *Yen kodön kodalöm*, 'Drunkenness from God'. It is as if the Holy Spirit descends on them and they become drunk: "their mirth is in the name of Christ". From the looks of it these people gave the impression that they had been drinking alcohol (Vologzhanin 1912 (19): 481). Gagarin explains the religious ecstasy by the fact that during the conversation the believers were in complete detachment, made long "exhausting prayers" and listened to or indulged in "dreary singing" (Gagarin 1978: 219).

These components, of course, had an impact on the interlocutors, although they were hardly the main factors.

The nature of entering the ecstatic state is not clear, although according to the ethnographer I. N. Ilyina, in 1981 one of the informants reported that a female Bursylysys who came from Myeldino village in the early 1906s to Dzol village taught people to pray in circles, although nobody succeeded in doing this. This fact is eloquent evidence that the Bursylysys practised special actions similar to the circumambulation of Christovism (Panchenko 2002: 235–311).

It is obvious that Ermolin possessed some techniques for entering an ecstatic state: people interviewed by Vologzhanin pointed to his 'spiritual drunkenness' and his state of general communion with the Holy Spirit. As one witness to the conversations says, "a state of general joy" was more attractive to the peasants than a church dinner. In addition, peasants came to the conversations to listen to prophets from among the Burs'ylys'ians, who had access to certain channels of sacred information during conversation. Prophecy initially occupied an important place in the Burs'ylys'ians movement, but in the 1920s, apparently due to the increased eschatological moods in society after the revolution, prophets became especially numerous. A contemporary researcher Aleksandr Chuviurov writes that an OGPU report from 1925 reported that among the Burs'ylys'ians there were already about 80 women prophets (Chuviurov 2001: 78). The structure of the sect's prayer meetings also changed during the 1920s. As Gagarin notes, the conversations in the Komi language retained their importance, but along with them the rite of dying and resurrection appeared, during which one or more people fell to the floor during prayer and 'died', remaining in a state of complete insensibility for about two hours before being 'resurrected', i.e. coming to their senses. They were then blessed with the sign of the cross while repeating "Christ is risen!". The resurrected told of their meetings with God and

angels, but most often with the souls of the dead (Gagarin 1978: 253). This rite was practiced for quite a long time and certainly living witnesses were encountered during the field expeditions of the late 1990s and early 2000s in the Upper Vychegodsk villages. According to their stories, the rite was performed in a circle with those praying standing against each other singing spiritual songs while they waited for the Holy Spirit to descend. When the Spirit descended on someone, he or she ‘fell dead’, and when they awoke spoke about their visions. According to Evdokia Timovna Shakhova from the village of Pozheg, as a rule, prophets met with parents while ‘dead’. Pozheg had its own prophets, but the prophets from Myyoldino enjoyed the greatest authority. Between the 1930s and 1960s such a prophetess was Nasta poč (‘grandmother Nasta’), who, living in Myöldino, knew the news in Požega better than the Požega people themselves. She is believed to have predicted the beginning of the Second World War and its end. According to an informant, there was no radio in the village, and no one knew the news. But Nasta used to run around the village in the early morning on 9 May shouting “*Görd petuk vermis!*” (‘The red rooster has won!’), heralding the victory of the Red Army.

The religious practices of the Burs’ylys’ians came to an end during the repressions of the late 1930s, when the most prominent of the clergy were arrested. They never returned to the villages, so the tradition of clergy was interrupted. Nevertheless, religious life in the villages of Upper Vychegodsk did not cease, despite repression, direct prohibitions and active atheist propaganda. Throughout the Soviet years communities of believers took responsibility for ritual life in these villages. They held services on local feast days and on some major Orthodox holidays, but mainly performed baptism and burial rites. At present, these communities no longer consider themselves to be Burs’ylys’ians, although they perform the same spiritual songs and use (rewrite) their manuscripts, or create new ones based on the manuscript tradition of Burs’ylys’ians.

The content of the *burkyvzöm* ‘conversations’ corresponded mainly to the order of prayers, readings and hymns from the Service Book of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, a significant number of readings were in the Komi language, and the hymns included non-canonical spiritual songs in Russian and Komi. A joint meal held with the Singers and parishioners had the symbolic meaning of the connection of the gathered with God, functionally replacing the sacrament of the Eucharist. The interpretation of sacred texts by Ermolin himself and his sermons were important, although the information of missionaries and researchers does not contain information about special service texts that would systematically present his teachings.

The manuscript monuments of the Burs'ylys'ians, widespread in the Upper Vychegodsk villages, could shed light on the foundations of Ermolin's doctrine. However, they were of no interest to researchers of the Soviet period because of their religious content. Only in the late 1990s and early 2000s, thanks to the works of Aleksandr Chuviurov (2002: 62–69; 2004: 385–415) did they become interesting. The recent work of Ekaterina Prokuratova considers the Gospel stories in the manuscript tradition of the Upper Vychegodsk Komi (Prokuratova 2018: 458–481). The spiritual poems and prose published by these researchers are mainly translated from manuscript collections from the Russian tradition. Accordingly, their content does not reflect the theology of the Singers.

In 2000, 2004, and 2005 we conducted special field research in the villages of Pozheg, Myyöldino, Ust-Nem, and Pomozdino, villages where the Singers were particularly active. In the course of these expeditionary studies we obtained new materials that significantly expand our understanding of both the oral and manuscript tradition of the Upper Vychegda. First of all, it is a living tradition of singing songs with spiritual content in Komi and Russian (many were not translated from Russian). I was also

surprised by the composition of the collections, in which, along with the classical spiritual poems “About Alexei, the Man of God”, the apocryphal “Dream of the Virgin” and “The Walking of the Virgin in Torment” were found in the Komi language. Manuscript collections are compiled in ordinary notebooks of 12, 18, 36, 96 sheets. There can be from one to twenty or more such collections in a family, depending on the literacy of the owner or the degree of his or her immersion in the religious tradition. For example, in the family of Raisa Ivanovna Zaikova, a resident of the village of Myyöldino, we recorded about 12 manuscript collections in notebooks of various formats. The manuscript collections once belonged to her relative Tekusa Ivanovna Zaikova and her husband Efim Egorievich Zaikov, who led the local religious community between 1950 and 1970. These are mainly collections of akathists, songs, and prayers in Komi and Russian, with the Komi texts mainly being translations from Russian. Our attention was drawn to two notebooks that do not follow the general trend.

On notebook 1, with a blue cover and 24 pages, the cover reads, “*Söbirajtchöm rad*”. The text is written in cursive, in the Upper Vychegodsky dialect of the Komi language, using Russian church vocabulary. Notebook 2 consists of 30 sewn sheets under a cardboard cover. In the main part, the texts of both notebooks are identical, although notebook 1 lacks an introduction and spiritual songs, and there are also differences in the content of the text. Thus, the text of notebook 1 is incomplete in relation to notebook 2, and has some distortions. The title *Söbirajtchöm rad* consists of two Russian words adapted for the Komi language, so the meaning of the Komi version of the phrase differs from the Russian. In Komi it should be translated as *Soborny Chin* because the word *rad* (Rus. ‘row’) is used here as a synonym for the word ‘order’, ‘rank’. This service text is Burs'ylys'ians, most likely being composed to be read or sung at conversations. According to information from

informants, today *Söbiraitchöm rad* (hereinafter *Chin*) was read in the context of funeral and memorial rites.

The content of these notebooks, in our opinion, is the service of the Burs'ylys'ians. The discovery is important, because the information about the service of the Singers, as well as about the peculiarities of their doctrine, is rather vague. Meanwhile, the study of the foundations of the doctrine born in the folk environment actualises the question of the problem of folk theology. In fact, all religious folklore, including folk hagiography, as well as the religious manuscript tradition, are not folk (folklore) theology. This is especially true of such phenomena as the Burs'ylys'ians, where knowledge of the basics of Orthodox dogma was cultivated and other interpretations of it were born.

The aim of this paper is to translate and analyse the text of the *Cöbiraitchöm rad* “Soborny Chin” and to try to find from it some aspects of the folk theology of the Singers.

In terms of composition, *Söbiraitchöm rad* consists of an Introduction and a main section. The Introduction consists of three parts entitled “Songs” on 3 pages; the main text is a sequence of 37 separate Songs. Unlike the Introduction, the Songs of the main text are numbered: Song 1, Song 2, etc. The Songs also include several spiritual songs, labelled in the notebook as “Prayers”. Song in this case is opposed to the ordinary song, for this genre in the Komi language there is a word *sjylankyv* “song”, and the performance of spiritual songs is reflected in the self-name of the sect - Burs'ylys'ians. To all appearances, the *Söbiraitchöm rad* were sung by one or several readers during the divine service. The texts of the Songs are not syntactically arranged into sentences, dots and commas have no punctuation value, they, together with vertical dashes, divide the text into rhythmic pauses. For example:

“Rememberöy Gospoddliis. / Bordasasni kydchi i orolyas. Quitelya veritchei Gospod setas fortress aslasi yozli” (Remember the Lord. The patient will be changed and strengthened. / They

will soar like eagles. Have full faith, the Lord will give strength to his people” (l. 1).

The numerous insertions of the union “and” between words serve for the convenience of singing and also have no semantic meaning. In general, the author of the text had no idea about modern Komi grammar, including orthography. For example, he uses “ц” instead of “дж”, “дч” instead of “дз”, “е” instead of “э”, “и” instead of “ы”, does not know the separating properties of the soft sign. Such “mistakes” suggest that the author wrote this text before the adoption of grammatical norms of the Komi language in the 1920s. The imitation of printed semi-ustav, the use of the ъ sign at the end of words in some places of the main part also suggest that the text was rewritten from an earlier protograph. Among the peculiarities of the text are the multiple inclusions of words of Russian and Church Slavonic vocabulary in the structure of the text: “Blessed is Christos the God and our God, who very wisely sent them the Spirit and the Holy One” (Blessed is Christos the God and our God, who very wisely sent them the Spirit and the Holy One). 2) In this sentence there are six words of Church Slavonic vocabulary, even though these words can be found analogues in the Komi language. This inclusion of Church Slavonic words indicates the intention to bring the text closer to the church liturgical format. For the same purpose the author gives additional Christian religious shades of meaning to Komi words, for example, in the above sentence the word *kysysys* literally translates as “hunter”, but in this context it has the meaning “catcher”.

All these details allow us to presumably date the text to the beginning of the twentieth century, and its author could very likely be Stepan Ermolin himself. The text of the “Chin” reveals the key provisions of the Ermolin doctrine. These are, firstly, the notion that Ermolin received religious knowledge directly from God himself. Vologzhanin writes about it from the words of Ermolin himself: “Stephen receives knowledge from God, God reveals it

to him. God himself gave him the power to teach” (Vologzhanin, No. 20: 512). Secondly, it is the provision about the cross invisible to ordinary sight, which Vologzhanin calls “the basic doctrine of Stephen” (Vologzhanin, p. 511). (Ibid., p. 511). Thirdly, it is the provision about the inner sight – “heart eyes” (Ibid.) These three aspects of the doctrine of the Singers are known in the literature, but in the first three songs of the Introduction they are revealed in their entirety. The first song, for example, speaks of the necessity of directly perceiving the Law of the Lord through listening to the teaching of the Son:

*Remember the Lord. Those who are patient will be changed and strengthened, they will soar like eagles. Have full faith, the Lord will give strength to his people. The Lord will bless his people with peace. When you are strengthened by the Great Spirit, then your spirit will be embraced by long-awaited joy. People-loving Lord, Your Truth was and is the Verb. Easy for me, my son, and good. God is good to me (from) the Law from Thy mouth, better than thousands of gold pieces and silver pieces. On Tabor it was said, He is My beloved Son, listen to Him. That’s how Heavenly Father was pleased. May we listen to the teachings of the beloved Son. Through Him man will become pleasing to God.”*

Помните Господа. Терпеливые переменятся и окрепнут, окрылятся как орлы. Сполна веруйте, Господь даст крепость своим людям. Господь благословит своих людей покоем. Когда вы укрепитесь Великим Духом, тогда твой дух долгожданная радость обнимет. Людей любящий Господь, Истина же Твоя была и Глагол. Легко мне, сын мой, и хорошо. Хорошо же мне (от) Закона из Твоего рта, лучше тысяч золотников и серебряников. На Фаворе было сказано: Он есть Сын Мой возлюбленный, слушайте Его. Вот как было угодно Небесному Отцу.

Пусть, мы станем слушать учение возлюбленного Сына.  
Через Него человек станет приятным Богу (Vologzhanin  
1912: 1).

Here it is said that the comprehension of the Law requires a certain effort, so the author initially emphasises the concepts of patience and faith: only to the patient and “full” believers the gift of the Holy Spirit descends. Patience and faith make it possible to achieve what, from the theological point of view, is defined as joy – a spiritual uplift, a direct effect of divine grace, which makes it possible to go to the next level: to listen to the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is the covenant of the Heavenly Father, who transmits His wisdom to people through the Son. Listening to the teaching takes place during the conversations-*burkyvzöm*, and it is assumed that Jesus Christ mystically participates in the conversation, as if he himself were expounding his teaching to the listening Burs'ylys'ians, as he once did to the apostles who became prophets. In Song 5 this position receives a finalised form:

“Among us Christ himself, by His love and his grace, by his readiness to hear our prayer, our requests fulfils. It pleases and pleases the Lord God because we, with our love for him and our faith and hope in his mercy, gather with his holy name. As, for example, it is pleasing to the Father when children from different directions gather in his hut to celebrate his birthday – or some other holiday. During the conversation, the Lord God is close to us with his mercy, and we are close to him with our hearts and thoughts... Our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us. He said to them, “If anywhere you are gathered together in twos and threes and by My Name, then I am also among you.” But if so, then no doubt Christ Himself is also among us” (fol. 5 – 5 ob.).

It is assumed that Jesus is invisibly present at the conversation, but it is also obvious that his direct participation in the conversation through one of the most prepared adepts is assumed. Such was Stepan Ermolin himself - hence the indications of his godhood and his authority in interpreting the Scriptures. There were also bearers of the image of Christ: Vologzhanin mentions a woman-bursyls who called herself Christ (Vologzhanin 1912, No. 20: 482). But the most widespread was still the penetration of the Holy Spirit into some members of the sect, who acquired special gifts of clairvoyance, foresight of the future, and knowledge of the posthumous fates of relatives. It is these people that “Chin” calls “friends of God”, prophets, likening them to the apostles “catchers” to whom Christ sent the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the gift of prophecy is manifested as a consequence of patient and unceasing listening to Christ’s teachings during the conversations, and serves as an indicator of a person’s maximum closeness to God. The motif of hearing is supplemented by the image of spiritual sight - the sight of the heart. It is reported in the third Song of the Introit:

“Lord and Jesus Christ, open my eyes of the heart (komi – sin sjölöm). Your words to hear and understand. Try to live by them, for I am a wanderer on earth. Do not close Your commands from me, but open my eyes and I will understand the wonders of Your Law” (fol. 2 ob.).

The correct understanding and assimilation of Divine Wisdom is possible only with the vision of the heart. This inner vision, seeing with the eyes of the heart is contrasted with physical sight, as listening to the Truth, which presupposes a mystical hearing different from physical hearing. In this opposition of the semantic pair of true hearing and heart sight to the physical, hearing and sight, the opposition of the high spiritual life in the Law of God to the lowly worldly existence (cf.: “God has given them a spirit

of putting to sleep, eyes with which they do not see and ears with which they do not hear” (Rom. 11:8).

True hearing and sight are the gift of Jesus Christ, hence the appeal to him in the third Song: “Lord and Jesus Christ open my eyes of the heart...”. But this gift is not valuable in itself, it is nothing more than a tool to liberate the human mind to perceive the mind of Jesus Christ: “Glorify my mind and thoughts with Your bright mind, for You have also illuminated those in darkness who are in darkness. Every gift from You is good, every bestowal is good and full. Lord Jesus Christ, Feast and Light” (fol. 2). Glorification by the mind reveals the mind of man proper, his ability to perceive the teaching of the Son:

“Thy wise teaching help us to comprehend and understand, to savour sweetly. To rejoice and be glad with Your pure conversation, care and diligence, to change our own behaviour and behaviour according to this conversation. From nowhere else can we find such an easy and clear path. As from a shining mirror and from You, to the Holy Gospel incline my heart with Your testimony. Open my hearing from Thy mouth with conversation, turn my eyes that they may not see vanity” (l. 3).

True reason opens to the inner sight access to the Holy Gospel, but just reading the text is not enough, for an adequate understanding of it requires a living conversation with Jesus Christ Himself, His direct testimony to the correctness of understanding. Only in this way can one come to the Way of Jesus Christ, which leads to salvation.

The doctrine of the cross was an important aspect of the doctrine of the Burs'ylys'ians. The cross is spoken of in the second Song of the Introduction:

“Rejoice Russian Orthodox people: a deep, beautiful, priceless gift has been sent to you by God. Even the ancient fathers wandered in darkness, plunging deep into it from ignorance, and you have been appointed to keep the truth, you have been chosen to pray

to the cross. But do not forget the truth even for a time, (do not think) that there is a gift greater than this, you must (you) from the depths of your soul give thanks, use this (gift) wisely, endeavour more, and you must carefully guard this (gift). Carry worthily the banner of the cross of Christ, be a pure utensil of God's grace. Without sleep you must keep this gift. This song was taught by Andrew the First Called, put the cross before you – always be baptised" (fol. 1 ob.).

Contemplation of the cross, seeing the cross, praying to the cross is as much a gift as inner sight. Vologzhanin writes that Ermolin himself taught to constantly "imprint in the heart" the cross, He himself as if he constantly sees it "with his heart's eyes" in his heart and "in the air" (Vologzhanin, No. 20: 511). The author appeals to the authority of Andrew the First-Called, who allegedly approved the sign of the cross before the image of the cross that opens to the inner sight.

It should be noted that the Church accused Ermolin not of deviation from the Orthodox dogmas, but of "admiration" of the teaching title, of self-appointed, without blessing teaching. Of the eight points of the charges brought against Ermolin, his self-appointed teaching comes first, while "the beginnings of mysticism," as the same Vologzhanin calls them, come last (Vologzhanin, No. 22, p. 561). Meanwhile, the point of divergence between Ermolin's teaching and official Orthodoxy was precisely what the missionary called mysticism. The Vologian himself mentions more than once visions of Christ, the Virgin Mary and angels, as if they were available to Ermolin and other Burs'ylys'ians, but treats this fact with a degree of condescension. However, the essence of the doctrine was that it gave its followers the possibility of direct divine communication. This means that any of the followers of Burs'ylys'ians could receive a living response from God in answer to their prayers or requests. The way to this was through the meetings and conversations of the Burs'ylys'ians, at which the

text “Chin” was sung. Apparently, this text not only fulfilled an official function, but was also a guide for inner spiritual training.

If the Introduction is a representation of the main points of the Singers’ doctrine, the following 37 Songs set forth everything that a Christian should know about God and salvation, but most of all about the path that leads him to God-communion, to the meeting with God. The beginning of this way is to be found in a spiritual meeting, a conversation – this is stated in the first Song:

“Come, then, and assemble, to the great Divine – sitting. That all men may be saved, attain true knowledge. To turn round, to come alive, to be changed. And by your conversation, cheer and praise God, labour the Lord with gladness. Come to Him with joy” (l. 4).

The conversation Burs'ylys'ians corresponds to the heavenly original: the Law was handed down by the Heavenly Father to the Son, who in turn passed it on in the form of teaching to his apostles-prophets, so that the spiritual assembly inherits the pattern of the apostles’ conversations with Jesus Christ in Song 9:

“Mad worldly places of useless conversations. Help me much, Oh Lord, with heavenly conversation, shut my ears tightly, so that vanity’s talk may not be heard; from useless staggering both on the broad road and places of commerce” (l. 7).

In Song 9, spiritual conversations are contrasted with worldly conversations as impure conversations, and this opposition is conceptual: henceforth, the participants in proper, spiritual conversations seem to be cut off from the rest of the world, which is directed into darkness, while they, marked by light, walk on the thorny heavenly road to meet the Lord. Not all can move along this path, it is the path of asceticism, the majority prefers just the “broad road”, moreover, it is intolerant to those who have chosen the heavenly way: “To whom much has been bestowed, he must in this life often suffer, be afflicted and persecuted all the time” (l. 7). This is the path of prophetic ministry once travelled by the apostles – disciples of Jesus Christ; accordingly, the teaching of the

Burs'ylys'ians is justified by the highest examples. The singers are called to proclaim the teachings of the Saviour to the Zyryan people, hence the constant trips of Stefan Ermolin himself outside his volost, as well as the trips of his adherents to other volosts – they can be classified as missionary trips with good reason.

The following Songs contain instructions on how not to stray from the right path leading to the Heavenly Jerusalem. The adept must renounce “vanity ties” and various sinful thoughts. The mind needs self-control, and the soul needs uninterrupted communication with God, so a person must be in a state of constant prayer:

“Not only when you come to church, but also at other hours do not leave this endeavour: whether you are working or sleeping or walking along the road, eating or drinking or lying down - do not interrupt your prayer, because you do not know when your soul will be demanded, do not wait for the day of Resurrection or a holiday, do not choose separate places, but in different places pray with an inner cry - there is no place for sin” (fol. 13).

“Inner cry” is not just a figure of speech. The skill of inward crying or shouting is achieved through long spiritual work, or, if I may put it this way, long psycho-physical exercises. It means that the adept has completely abandoned his “earthly” sinful cravings that push him into darkness. “...A sacrifice pleasing to God is an inward cry. He who has sorrow for God, who presses away sins from himself, and breathes heavily, though he has lived his age without coping with his works, he will see grace on his last day” (l. 18). The soul of man, delivered from sins, becomes his “inner teacher” who unites him with God. The external manifestation of the inner cry is spiritual singing, which acquires meaning only in this connection: “Stronger than the inner cry of arms there is neither on earth nor in heaven. The inner cry will never be defeated by evil thoughts, spiritual singing is feared by demons” (l. 26). In the last, 37 Songs of the Chin, there is a return to the theme of spiritual conversation with which the story began. However, it is

no longer a spiritual meeting on earth, but a conversation with God himself, and it is the soul purified from earthly things that enters into this conversation:

“My soul, who loves God, nothing is so sweet as the thought of Divine conversation, to whom the time has come, to whom Divine conversation is sweet. If you surrender to God, you will see God. True love leads to a guarded wharf, it is accomplished with Christ. Where love is, there is simplicity; in simple hearts God rests. This will be fulfilled with Christ” (fol. 30).

Thus, the manuscript text “Söbiraitchöm rad” (Soborny chin) is an example of the theological literature of the Singers of Good. Its performance during the divine service at the “conversation” also had the function of edification, which outlined the main aspects of the doctrine of the followers of Stefan Ermolin. These are the idea of receiving true knowledge directly from God, the provisions about inner sight and spiritual crosses invisible to the ordinary eye. The main text is composed as a soteriological plot, in the course of the unfolding of which the soul of the adept seeking salvation passes from earthly conversation to heavenly conversation. On this path it acquires qualities such as the sight of the eyes, the inner cry – preparing it for the encounter with God. In addition to its theological value, the text of the Chin has value as an example of folk literature of a religious nature.

In some aspects the Bursyls are similar to the Pentecostals and others. Their uniqueness lies in the Komi language of preaching, as well as in some doctrinal points, which are discussed in the article, especially in its second part, which deals with a liturgical monument, the author of which is presumably Ermolin himself.

Preaching in the Komi language, mass compilation of religious literature in the Upper Vychegodsky dialect of the Komi language, including translations from Church Slavonic, Russian, as well as author’s texts – are evidence of ethnic and regional specificity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It cannot be excluded that Ermolin was familiar with the spiritual practices of the Old Believers of the neighbouring Kerchomskaya volost and the Old Believer villages of upper Pechora.

<sup>2</sup> By “rejoicing” is meant solemn prayers followed by ecstatic dances, as well as the whole totality of sectarian ceremonial (Panchenko 2002: 235).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the modern translation of the word Gospel is *Burvisitalöm*.

<sup>4</sup> In literature, as a rule, burvysyls is translated as “singers of good”.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed description of the composition of the collections is not included.

<sup>6</sup> Hereinafter the text of “Chin” according to the manuscript (FFIYALIR1205) translated from Komi by the author of this article. Hereinafter we give the texts in translation, the folios are given in brackets.

<sup>7</sup> The Komi peoples (Komi-Zyryans and Komi-Permyaks) belong to the Finno-Permian branch of the Finno-Ugric peoples. The Komi-Zyryans are the indigenous population of the Komi Republic. This article deals with the Komi-Zyryans inhabiting the areas of the upper reaches of the Vycheгда River. In the pre-revolutionary period, the ethnonym “Zyryans” was more common.

<sup>8</sup> In the Bursylsians movement women dominated quantitatively, but initially only men conducted worship services. After the death of Stefan Yermolin, from the mid-1920s women began to lead the congregations as well. Thus, in Myeldino village, in 1924 the community was led by Ustinya Fedorovna Parshukova, and in the 1960s and 1970s by Tekusa Ivanovna Zaikova. Not much is known about the ‘Virgin Marys’, only that they could fall into a religious trance and in this state were visited by visions of saints, deceased fellow villagers, and relatives.

<sup>9</sup> During this period, the doctrine of the coming of the Antichrist to the world was actively spread among the Bursylsians. The Soviet authorities were declared to be his power, the Soviet government to be the Antichrist’s helpers, and Soviet workers and communists to be his servants. Against this background, rumours were spread about the imminent end of the world, when all people on earth would perish,

and only true adherents among the Bursyls would be saved. In the mid-1920s, more than 400 families in Myelda volost abandoned their farms and moved to the upper reaches of the Nem River, waiting for the terrible judgement for a month and a half. Eschatological sentiments came to naught in the 1930s under the influence of collectivisation and repressions (Gagarin 1978: 254).

<sup>10</sup> Ermolin undertook missionary journeys to other volosts. As a rule, women predominated among those accompanying him. After the diocesan authorities banned Ermolin from making these trips, women prophetesses began to go on missions.

<sup>11</sup> A detailed description of the composition of the collections is not included.

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