SHIFTING BOUNDARIES: RETHINKING THE NATURE OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE AMONG MINORITY PEOPLES IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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The Volga-Kama region of nineteenth century Russia included a diversity of ethnic and religious groups, including followers of indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity. During the nineteenth century, many groups were reorienting their identities through establishing stronger connections to Christianity or Islam, or even by renovating their traditional practices and representing them in new ways. Many scholars, drawing from Russian sources, present minority peoples’ religious practices as being somewhat confused or syncretic. However, I will argue that it is necessary to use comparative perspectives from studies of Inner Asia and concepts from post-colonial theory in order to fully explore religious conceptions and practices in the Volga-Kama region. Even in a changing world, minority peoples attempted to keep their own communities in the center by reorienting the structure of sacred power so that it did not come from Russian intermediaries but rather directly to their own local communities.
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INTRODUCTION

The religious practices of the minority peoples of the Volga–Kama region of Russia are not a common subject of interest for those who study religion. Groups like the Mari or Chuvash with their small numbers seem an unlikely focus for investigation. However, exploring the nature of religious change and interaction among the diverse groups of this area reveals some of the deepest questions within religious studies. Are religious traditions separable entities? What is the significance of shared practices between traditions? What are the meanings of revivalism movements and conversion events among native peoples in the nineteenth century? Though it is not possible to fully answer these questions, the actions of minority groups in nineteenth century Russia give valuable insights into the relationship between sacrality, power, and religious creativity and the problems inherent in studying religions as separable entities.

If the history of Russia is complex and diverse, the Volga-Kama region is a concentrated example of this wider complexity. Robert Geraci writes that this area “was, in a sense, a microcosmic version of Russia’s hybrid identity and of the tension between nation and empire.”¹ The diverse ethnic groups living in this region, as well as the history of the Russian conquest, help create this multi-leveled complexity. Before its conquest by Ivan in 1552, Kazan and much of the surrounding area had been ruled by descendents of the Golden Horde. Colonization by Russians and Russian peasants took place after 1552, and over time minority groups moved further into the interior of the region. However, the area was very loosely connected to the centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg. By the nineteenth century, though, there was increased settlement by Russian peasants, new roads were being built, and local inhabitants were feeling more pressure from the heightened Russian presence.²

The groups living in the region at the time of the conquest may be divided into Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples. Traditional religious practices including animal sacrifice to local spirits called keremet and the centrality of ancestors were important to many of these groups. Islam has a very long history in the region, and what today are referred to as the Tatar and Bashkir peoples were mostly followers of Islam. The first Turkic people in the region were the Bulghars, who were settled in the Volga Ural region by the eighth century. When Ibn Fadlan visited the region in 922, he found that the Bulghar community and their leaders had espoused Islam.³ Rather than seeing themselves as simply ‘Muslim’ in a monolithic sense, Allen Frank argues the Muslims of the Volga Ural region had their own local Islamic identities, and even in the nineteenth century, though a more widespread sense of group cohesion was occurring, this was phrased in terms of a renewed Bulghar identity going back to the first Muslims in the region.⁴ Yet another

³ Allen Frank, Islamic Historiography and ‘Bulghar’ identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia (Boston: Brill, 1998).
⁴ Frank, Islamic Historiography, 9.
layer of complexity was added to the region’s mix of native religions and Islam with the Russian conquest in the sixteenth century and the gradual influx of Orthodox Christian Russian settlers.

Many of the actions taken by minority peoples and Orthodox missionaries in the region in the 1800s must be understood in terms of events that occurred in the mid-1700s. After Peter the Great’s policies in the earlier part of the century, a large and aggressive missionary campaign occurred in the 1740s. Over four hundred thousand people in the Volga-Kama region from various ethnic groups were baptized. These were the newly baptized, or novokreshchennye. The motivations behind and circumstances surrounding these conversions, however, were very questionable, and would continue to have repercussions for Russian missionaries throughout the 1800s. Werth records that according to Chuvash stories, some groups were ‘baptized’ by simply being herded into rivers or lakes. Whether or not this is true, the large numbers baptized in such a short time brings up questions as to whether there was personal agency involved, and incentives for conversion were given such as “freedom from the military draft, a three-year tax break instituted by Peter the Great, and even direct payment in money and goods.”

Non-Christians in the region sometimes took advantage of this situation. Because money and goods might be given as reward for baptism, some converts attempted to come back for repeated baptisms in order to gain more rewards. One missionary even wrote, “it is impossible for proselytizers to show up in non-Christian dwellings without any [money], for some of them, when they run out of money (which has been demanded from them by some of the newly baptized), have scarcely been able to save themselves.” Because many of these newly baptized did not have motivation from within for conversion, they and later generations often worked through petitions or protests to counteract the earlier baptisms. For certain groups who gradually accepted Christianity, it was not necessarily through the act of baptism but was rather through the integration of Christianity into their identities on their own terms.

In tsarist Russia, by law, practitioners of non-Christian traditions were allowed to maintain their religious commitments. Complications arose, however, because those who were baptized in the 1700s were considered part of the Orthodox Church and could not revoke their baptisms. By law in the Russian empire, those who were considered Orthodox Christians could not convert to another religion. The limited resources of the Orthodox Church and the remoteness of the Volga-Kama region made it impossible to maintain tight control over the actions of minority peoples. Between the conquest in the sixteenth century and the mass conversions in the 1740s, and after this wave of baptisms, the force of missionaries became weaker and ethnic groups in the region were usually able to maintain previous religious practices as long as they participated in some Orthodox practices or else bribed the local cleric in order to be relieved of their responsibilities. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the hold of the empire on the area tightened once again and missionary efforts increased. Most of these efforts

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5 Werth, At the Margins, 22.
6 Werth, At the Margins, 23.
7 Michael W. Johnson, “Imperial Commission or Orthodox Mission: Nikolai Il’minskii’s work among the Tatars of Kazan, 1862-1891” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2005), 113.
were only focused upon keeping the newly converted within the ranks of Orthodoxy, and not on gaining new converts.\(^8\)

Werth writes that this new wave of missionizing may have been due to a different conceptualization of religious affiliation on the part of Russians themselves. He writes that earlier the focus was upon “orthopraxy” rather than “orthodoxy” but that this focus was changing more rapidly in the 1800s.

Whereas imperial authorities had been largely indifferent to the nature of the baptisms that produced these very questionable Christians – the important matter was the fact of their baptism rather than how precisely it had occurred – later observers looked more deeply into this question, almost always concluding that the methods behind the original conversions were dubious, to say the least. But these methods were dubious – and this is the key point – only by the newer standards that were now being adopted.\(^9\)

Rather than the physical fact of going through baptism, it became more necessary for baptized minority peoples to also be able to explain and understand their faith in new ways, which reflect similar trends to those seen within western Europe in earlier centuries. In fact, the influence of western Europe and Enlightenment ideas can be seen in Peter the Great’s reforms and later in Catherine II’s reign during the eighteenth century. Catherine instituted new educational projects based upon European models. Robert L. Nichols, discussing Orthodoxy’s involvement in educational reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writes that the church was involved in the support of schools and that many important Russian thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had had seminary training. The secular and religious worlds were not necessarily separate, but rather both secular and religious thinkers “breathed much the same air.”\(^10\)

Reforms within the church not only affected educational systems, but also affected the lives of ordinary Russian Orthodox followers. Gregory L. Freeze dates these changes as beginning in the 1740s and explains that the church made significant efforts to standardize rituals and practices and tighten its authority over what was considered sacred and what was not. Freeze writes that before this time, the church was not a monolithic entity: “Russian Orthodoxy was Russian Heterodoxy – an aggregate of local Orthodoxies, each with its own cults, rituals, and customs.”\(^11\) The religiosity of most Russians was focused upon local concerns rather than a generalized philosophy. The church made efforts to institutionalize and control this variety. One interesting example reveals how local sacred sites were sometimes challenged by the church: in 1843 a tree was said to “resemble an icon” and drew many Orthodox followers to come and visit it in hopes of receiving healing. Authorities within the church asked state officials to have the tree cut down, but believers still came to the stump in

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\(^8\) Werth, *At the Margins*, 17-43, 144-45.

\(^9\) Werth, *At the Margins*, 145.


This reveals the reluctance of many Russians to obey the newer, tighter regulations. As will be discussed later in chapter two, this shift into more rationalized conceptions of what religion means can also be seen in the church’s renewed focus upon the ability of parishioners to explain and intellectually understand their religion. Of course, it is not as if a hierarchy of authority was absent in the church before this time, but the distribution of power changed with a tighter focus on a centralized institution.

This change in conceptualization also echoes a transition in the Russian political system. Werth argues that the Russian empire from the 1820s to the 1860s was moving from “tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity” to a more tightly assimilated “unitary national state.” While Werth asserts a temporal shift in emphasis in the Russian empire, Geraci points out a continuum in Russian ideology between differing policies of assimilation of non-Russian peoples that may have been occurring at the same time.

At one end of the continuum was a model of the empire as a culturally homogeneous nation-state – that is, one that sought to integrate minority peoples fully, making them wholly indistinguishable from other Russians…. At the other end was a resolutely nonnational, multicultural empire that imposed no change of identity on its subjects, and that might even endeavor to minimize contact among different groups.

This is one reason that Russia is so fascinating to discuss using concepts from post-colonial theory. The balance of power between the colonizer and the colonized fluctuates more frequently than we see in the history of colonization by western powers. To hold together such a diverse empire, the governing body of tsarist Russia often had to make large concessions to more marginal groups. Adeeb Khalid writes that using post-colonial theory “should rescue postcolonial studies from their basic Eurocentrism, which comes from having generated the vast bulk of the literature from the experience of just two empires.” Russia supplies a new theater in which to discuss post-colonial concepts.

It is necessary to take a moment to clarify the geographical regions discussed in this paper. The Volga-Kama or middle Volga region is the most specific region, specifying the area around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers in European Russia with the provinces of Viatka to the north, Kazan and Simbirsk centrally located, and Ufa and Orenburg to the east. This is the region in which most of the members of the Mari, Kriashen, and Chuvash groups discussed in this paper were located. The Volga Ural includes the Volga-Kama but also encompasses the area surrounding the Ural mountain chain to the east. Central Asia tends to refer to the modern countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Inner Asia, on the other hand, includes these former Soviet republics while also encompassing European Russia. A wide-ranging geographical term, it also stretches

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12 Freeze, “Institutionalizing Piety,” 227.
13 Werth, At the Margins, 7.
14 Geraci, Window, 9.
across Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang, and certain areas of Siberia.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, there is an incredible diversity of religious practice within this region, and it would be incorrect to say there is one form of religion for indigenous Inner Asian peoples. However, it provides a helpful wider context for research on the Volga-Kama, and many influences and aspects of religiosity are shared among Inner Asian groups.\textsuperscript{17}

The Kriashens, or baptized Tatars, typify some of the more interesting aspects of religiosity in the Volga-Kama region; they incorporate aspects of traditional religion, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam into their practices.\textsuperscript{18} A portion of Kriashens were baptized in the sixteenth century and were called the ‘old converts’ or \textit{starokreshchennye}, while others were baptized in the eighteenth century and called ‘new converts’ or \textit{novokreshchennye}. \textit{Starokreshchennye} often came from a traditional religious background, while \textit{novokreshchennye} were all of Muslim background. Some portions of the Kriashen community in the nineteenth century stayed within Christianity while others moved toward Islam.\textsuperscript{19} However, some Christian Kriashens worked to stay distinct from the Muslim Tatar community and even petitioned for a separate nationality status in the Soviet era.\textsuperscript{20}

The Mari (sometimes called Cheremise, the Russian term for this group), may not be a fully coherent entity, as often Highland and Meadow Maris reacted in varying ways to historical circumstances. By the 1800s, Highland Maris had become agriculturists (more like Russians in the region) while Meadow Maris traded forest products and practiced subsistence agriculture.\textsuperscript{21} The traditional religion of Maris included veneration and sacrifice to local \textit{keremets} spirits. Mari elders were known as \textit{karty}, and others, called \textit{muzhany}, were local healers.\textsuperscript{22} The Chuvash, another group in the region, held similar practices to the Mari. However, some speculate that they are a Turkic people whose religious conceptions draw from the dualistic theology of Zoroastrianism. The Chuvash often relocated themselves when Russian settlers encroached upon their lands.\textsuperscript{23}

Devin DeWeese explains that for Inner Asian peoples, appropriate terminologies for native practices have not yet been developed.

Labels ranging from ‘primitive religion’ and ‘animism’ to ‘natural’ or ‘archaic’ or ‘tribal’ religion have been proposed or suggested or simply used, but in the end found wanting; each conveys a set of assumptions or implications objectionable in some way, whether as excessively pejorative or as historically romanticizing,

\textsuperscript{17} DeWeese, \textit{Islamization}, 27-8.
\textsuperscript{18} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 33.
\textsuperscript{21} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 20.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{23} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 20; Geraci, \textit{Window}, 28, 35.
and none has been widely accepted as more ‘scientific’ or illuminating or useful… than older labels such as ‘paganism’.24

These labels reflect the developmental theories of human civilization possessed by early anthropologists and assume that native peoples are on a lower level or previous stage of development. DeWeese recommends using ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ to refer to these pre-Christian, pre-Islamic, and pre-Buddhist practices. I will be using these terms as well as ‘traditional’ to refer to minority people’s native religious practices. Rather than only referring to pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religiosity, these terms often can also be used in describing these groups after conversion. Rather than Islam or Christianity entirely remapping minority peoples’ conceptions of the world around them, traditional religious concepts often created the mode by which groups adopted a new tradition and shaped their worldview within it. Conversion was like a process of establishing relationship rather than a total reworking of religious norms. DeWeese expresses his perception of how one should analyze this process of religious change:

What we are concerned with is not to argue what was ‘indigenous’ and what reflects ‘outside’ influence or ‘borrowing’ in Inner Asian tradition in some historically absolutist fashion, but to explore a pattern of indigenous religious concepts, values, and practices that appear to have shaped not only the ‘native’ tradition as distinct from imported faiths, but the response to, and modes of assimilation of, those imported faiths as well.25

This perspective will be very valuable as we look at how minority peoples reshaped larger religious traditions in their own terms.

In order to explore the practices and conceptions of minority religious groups in late imperial Russia, it is necessary to look at their situation through several layers of interpretation. Rather than accepting aspects of nineteenth century Russian sources that make native practices seem confused or disjointed, it is necessary to relate the religiosiy of groups in the Volga Kama to the wider Inner Asian region. The centrality of ancestors, veneration of local spirits, and for certain groups the integration of Islamic and traditional practices should be taken into consideration. Added to this level of analysis, in discussing nineteenth century Russia, it is important to recognize the shifts in identities occurring in this era of change. Concepts from theorists Homi Bhabha and David Carrasco who do work on the colonized in areas dominated by western European powers can in fact shed new light on the actions of minority groups in nineteenth century Russia. Although Russian sources are essential in providing accounts of native groups and show the variety and richness of Russian perspectives of the nineteenth century, it is also important to question the underlying assumptions within them in order to pursue a better understanding of minority groups within the empire (chapter one). I will argue that minority groups, while establishing relationships with Christianity and Islam, also had strong local identities centered upon kinship, ancestors, and indigenous forms of religiosity (chapter two). In the nineteenth century, in response to a changing

25 DeWeese, Islamization, 29.
empire and Orthodox missionary emphases, these groups were shifting their identities through conversion to Islam, Christianity, or even a renewed ‘pagan’ religion. However, they attempted to keep their own communities in the center by reorienting the structure of sacred power so that it did not come from Russian intermediaries but rather directly from their own local communities (chapter three).

**Literature Review**

The literature discussing the minority peoples of imperial Russia can be divided into two larger categories; authors such as Robert Geraci, Paul Werth, and many others are Russian historians who study the minority groups of the empire, while others, such as Allan Frank and Devin DeWeese, are more in dialogue with Inner Asian studies. Many works within the Russian historical context primarily focus upon imperial Russia as an empire and utilize Russian primary sources. Other works, which emphasize the Inner Asian context, might also get into these issues but put the religious and cultural practices of Volga Ural peoples, especially those who follow Islam, into dialogue with practices and trends in other areas of Inner Asia. I would like to draw from the insights of those who work with Inner Asia while also using materials from Russian historians.

Allen Frank, in his two books and many articles, shows how Islamic histories and shrine catalogues helped to create a more unified Islamic identity in the Volga Ural region. Though he often utilizes Russian sources, he bases his work upon writings created by and circulated among Tatar and Bashkir Muslims. Frank also produced several articles on the Mari in both the imperial and Soviet eras which shed light on their religious practices and relation to neighboring Muslim Tatars. Devin DeWeese, working on Islam in Inner Asia, provides valuable concepts about how native religious concepts help shape the ways in which Inner Asian Muslims adopt and practice Islam.

Agnes Kefeli, researching the Volga-Kama region specifically, also comes from an Islamic studies perspective. She focuses upon everyday Islamic practice, education, and the spread of Islam among the Kriashens. Kefeli, especially emphasizing the role of women, discusses local, popular knowledge of Islam and how it was disseminated through Sufi Tatar literature and education.\(^{26}\) In her dissertation, she takes a very complex view of identity, showing that there were many competing identities for Kriashens at this time.\(^{27}\)

Robert Crews partially bridges the gap between those who work with Inner Asia and those who focus upon imperial Russian history. He uses some Tatar sources, but also depends heavily upon Russian perspectives and Tatar works meant for a Russian audience. He looks at how the Russian empire created a hierarchy and authoritative structure for Muslims in the empire and how certain groups of Muslims then utilized this


\(^{27}\) Kefeli, “Kräshen Apostasy.”
structure. At times, his work could certainly be bolstered by more of a dialogue with the works of Frank and DeWeese.

Paul Werth, a Russian historian, often focuses upon the shifting identities of minority peoples. Werth provides excellent discussions of the ability of minority groups to work within Russian systems and discourse to accomplish their own ends. He is interested in the actions of minority peoples in the later imperial era and in their contact with Russian missionaries. Many other works deal with Russian missionary activities, some covering the missionary Il’minskii and his creative methods, while others give a wider context of the tension between Russification and conversion in different regions of the empire. Robert Geraci’s work *Window on the East: National and imperial identities in late tsarist Russia* deals with a wide scope of Russian perceptions of minority peoples, missionary contact, and changes occurring in the late imperial period.

Although several anthropological works on minority peoples from both the imperial and Soviet periods exist, most are not translated, not easily available, and use very dated fieldwork methods. A more recent and accessible ethnography on the Mari has been written by Seppo Lallukka. Her discussion, giving a very detailed history of the conquest of the Mari by Russia and their subsequent migrations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has a very different focus from other sources. She paints a more violent picture of the conquest of the Mari than others and emphasizes their ‘ethnic tenacity.’ Overall, more interdisciplinary discussions among Russian historians and those who do work on Central and Inner Asia would help enrich the scholarship on minority religious groups in the Russian empire.

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CHAPTER 1: BOUNDARIES

Introduction

One of the first things that might strike a reader of books and articles dealing with minority groups in imperial Russia is the motley nature of their religious practices. There are descriptions of Kriashens praying to icons but refusing to cross themselves; Mari gathering from hundreds of miles around for festivals and offering livestock; and Chuvash reciting snippets of Arabic prayers and Russian Orthodox blessings. Many authors do not analyze these expressions of religious behavior but rather focus upon the Russian empire and its policies or missionary efforts in the region. Because of a dependence on Russian sources, modern authors also replicate problematic Russian perspectives on minority peoples’ religiosity. The problems arising from these sources originating in late imperial Russia are exacerbated by later Soviet ethnographies that downplay religion as well as the challenges that even modern scholars face when describing indigenous religious traditions. Giving native groups a somewhat confused identity and accepting a clear and distinct boundary between what constitutes Islam, Christianity, and ‘paganism’ is a problematic way to approach religion in the Volga-Kama region. This chapter will look at how some of the perspectives of minority groups’ religiosity in modern works may draw from the preconceptions of their Russian sources, and then discuss Russian perceptions of minority peoples in more depth. This will prepare us for chapters two and three, which will deal with challenges to some of these perspectives and will introduce possible models from other studies that can better deal with the nature of religion among minority groups.

Perspectives of local religious traditions

When faced with the religiosity of minority peoples of the Volga Ural region such as the Chuvash, Mari, or others, many authors use rather creative wording. When discussing one minority group’s Christianization, Geraci writes that “native and Christian elements had often mixed together into an idiosyncratic mélange.”34 Paul Werth uses the word ‘entangled,’ which makes the religiosity of the Mari seem confused and ambiguous: “The fact that some Maris understood Jesus Christ to be a iumo- the Mari term for god/spirit – suggests just how much ‘Christian truths’ could become entangled in indigenous frameworks and thus invested with profoundly different characteristics and functions.”35 Recognizing that elements of Christianity could be reinterpreted by minority peoples is very helpful, but this kind of statement makes it seem that the reinterpretation is confused and not serving any purpose. It also deemphasizes minority groups’ own agency in creating new meanings and ties to sacred power.

The struggle for concepts to identify and analyze forms of religious practice that do not neatly fit into accepted rubrics of religious boundaries is not limited to writing about minority peoples. Scholars working on Russian popular religion and peasant life also have begun to critique older models of popular religion. Stella Rock in Popular Religion in Russia: ‘Double belief’ and the making of an academic myth looks at the

34 Geraci, Window, 196.
35 Werth, At the Margins, 115.
uses of the term *dvoeverie*, or dual faith, in scholarship of the last one hundred years and in medieval Russian sources. She argues that nearly all of this term’s uses in the medieval period do not match modern scholars’ uses. It is also somewhat problematic that the medieval usage of the word often includes concepts of “uncertainty, doubt, hesitation, dissension, ambiguity, or insincerity.”

From the standpoints of some authors, *dvoeverie* and syncretism hold similar characteristics. Although some scholars see *dvoeverie* as a kind of double parallel belief system, others do see it as a creative blending of ‘pagan’ and Christian practices. However, the many varieties of usage of this word and its many connotations make it a problematic one for use in analyzing religious change.

Eve Levin also takes to task the term *dvoeverie*, explaining that scholars of religion in Russia should take guidance from those who work on religion in medieval Europe. The concept of *dvoeverie* asserts that Russian peasants maintained a pre-Christian religiosity disguised by superficially accepted Christianity. Levin critiques this on many levels. Perhaps most importantly, the concept as it has been used historically by writers makes it difficult to see fusion between pagan and Christian practices:

> The concept of *dvoeverie* demanded that scholars attempt to sort out what is pagan from what is Christian, leaving no room for overlap between the two systems, or for the development of beliefs that draw on both pagan and Christian concepts. The diversity within paganism and Christianity has been ignored.

*Dvoeverie* makes it seem that ‘paganism’ and Christianity are separable realities with clear-cut identities. Levin does not deal with the use of the term syncretism in depth, but seems to lean toward it in portions of her article. She writes that some of the problems inherent in *dvoeverie* are not found in syncretism which for Levin “emphasizes fusion.” However, other authors have found problems in using syncretism.

Researching a very different region, William B. Taylor discusses the shortcomings of this term in scholarship on eighteenth century Mexico. His main critique centers around how the use of ‘syncretism’ makes it seem that religions fuse together and then are somehow static and unchanging.

> As Barbara Tedlock has observed of the theorists of syncretism for Mesoamerica generally, the proponents of this view have used incompatible sets of mechanical and organic metaphors – welding, blending, fusion, synthesis, amalgamation, and hybridization – and have focused on an end state of completion and wholeness. Process is invoked, but there has been little examination of what it

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entails beyond the addition or fusion of Catholic elements into a native worldview, producing a stable, 'syncretic' religion.\textsuperscript{40}

For Taylor, religion practiced by native groups in Mexico was much more about reorientations of power. Writing about how críostos de cana, sculptures of Christ on the cross, were made from corn elements and inside included tax records, Taylor shows that Indians were bringing themselves into communication with Christian sources of power: “In this way, the image of Christ was both associated with the community (through the tax records) and bonded to a powerful new means of communication with the sacred (through the Spanish inscriptions about him).”\textsuperscript{41} David Carrasco perhaps creates the most vivid description of native religious practices in situations of colonialism as reorientations of power. For Carrasco, the religious rituals of colonized peoples are a working out of difference more than a simple fusion of religious identities.

They take the story of Christ's passion, crucifixion, and resurrection and reshape it, in part, in their terms.... The themes of... desire, opposition, and confrontation between Maximón and Jesus are reworked during Semana Santa, or Holy Week, which is not a Holy Week conquest or resistance to Holy Week, but a drama where the differences of these gods are activated and worked out.\textsuperscript{42}

Studies of minority religions in Russia often lack the depth of analysis embedded in Carrasco and Taylor’s perspectives. Even the more nuanced studies of popular religion in Russia often have trouble dealing with seemingly unorthodox religious practices, as discussed by Levin. As we will see in chapter three, hybridity may be a more effective concept in dealing with these situations. Overall, authors of recent works seem to struggle for words to adequately describe the religions of minority peoples.

Many recent authors also have trouble giving those minority peoples who follow traditional practices as much decisive ability as Russian Christians or Tatar Muslims. Seppo Lalluka, from an anthropological perspective, writes that the Mari “have shown a remarkable ethnic tenacity....Their living on the interface between the Slavic-Orthodox and Turkic-Muslim cultural worlds has facilitated this.”\textsuperscript{43} Though Mari are accorded ‘tenacity’ and agency, their being seems defined by surrounding invasive Islamic and Christian forces. Agnes Kefeli’s work emphasizes Kriashens’ own actions in determining their identities, but at times also makes Kriashens’ religiosity a battleground between Muslim and Christian ideology: “the frontier between the two world religions was continuously defined and redefined at the micro-level, either at the expense of Christianity or at the expense of Islam.”\textsuperscript{44} In many modern works, minority peoples are the blank and open ‘frontier’ on which the forces of Russian and Tatar missionary efforts and ideologies are battling.

\textsuperscript{41} Taylor, \textit{Magistrates}, 62.
\textsuperscript{43} Lalluka, \textit{From Fugitive Peasants}, 401.
\textsuperscript{44} Keffeli, “Kräshen Apostacy,” 177.
This perspective reflects a common nineteenth century Russian perception: that minority peoples are unable to decide their fates for themselves and do not have concrete ties to their identities. Werth discusses a common conception of these groups:

Moreover, because pagans were understood to have attained only a child-like stage of intellectual development, officials assumed that conversion could occur only as a result of the instigation of an external agent. As the ministry of Internal Affairs wrote in 1842: ‘[Pagans] cannot achieve consciousness concerning the advantage of one or another non-Christian faith, and... they must naturally be brought to this by the suggestions of others.’

Though modern works give much more agency to followers of traditional religion, native religion appears cloudy and confused to both earlier Russian observers and modern scholars. In fact, the perspectives of contemporary scholars tend to reflect the thoughts of nineteenth century Russians because of their dependence upon written Russian sources. Of course, these sources are often the only access scholars have to the actions and words of many non-Russians. Some exceptions can be found in local histories, especially circulated among Tatar and Bashkir Muslims of the Volga Ural region, which provide the main sources for many works by Allen Frank. Even popular written works, though, can be difficult for historians to utilize because they may be based upon forms of historical writing very different from the Russian historical sources with which they are familiar. A researcher needs specific training in Islamic studies and types of local history in Inner Asian communities in order to be able to fully access these kinds of writings. In addition, for those communities like the Mari who are less connected to the recording of events and ideas through writing, it can be very difficult to access their ideas and actions except through the perceptions of the Russian writers surrounding them. The phrase “idiosyncratic mélange” used by Geraci certainly reflects not only his own modern viewpoint but also the perception of Russian observers of the nineteenth century who wrote about these groups. It will be helpful to understand the kinds of religious boundaries drawn in late imperial Russia both in order to more fully explore what might be missing in accounts of minority peoples’ religious communities and to understand the context for some of the events we will explore in chapter three.

Islam and perceptions of minority peoples

It is impossible to understand Russian perceptions of ‘pagan’ minority peoples or Muslim minority peoples in isolation. Perceptions of both build one upon the other. Often, when one group differentiates itself from another, the ‘other’ takes on one (or sometimes both) of two faces. The other may be portrayed as innocent, naïve, confused, and feminine, while on the opposite end of the spectrum, the othered group may be aggressive, strong, threatening, and masculine. In some Russian perspectives of minority peoples during the nineteenth century, followers of traditional religions are placed in the role of innocent children, while Muslims are considered to be dangerous adults. There is a consistent fear that followers of Islam will steal away and convert

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45 Werth, Tsarist Categories, 389.
childlike ‘pagan’ groups. However, others, especially state authorities, saw Islam as a civilized religion that could serve to tame certain groups in the empire.

In the views of many Russian thinkers, missionaries, and church officials, there was a significant difference between peoples who were distinctly Muslim and those who primarily followed traditional religions. This kind of perspective may show a desire among Russian thinkers to clearly separate Muslims and non-Muslims. Shared practices between Muslims and non-Muslims may be ignored in order to keep ‘pagan’ peoples, at least in principle, distant from Muslims. If Islam is seen as stealing away these groups, it would be helpful to try to draw a clear line between Muslims and non-Muslims. Another reason for separating the religiosity of Muslims and non-Muslims for Russian missionaries was the kind of instruction they received at the Kazan Theological Academy. The information taught about Islam was based upon this religion as a textual phenomena, and much attention was paid to studies of the Qur’an’s grammar and arguments. Missionaries such as E. A. Malov had a greater grasp on Arabic and the Qur’an as a whole than did many Muslim Tatars. This kind of perspective of Islam, though, left out the reality of its practice. Islam was enacted in ways that built upon native forms expressions of the sacred and knowledge of the Qur’an was more often received through memorization of brief prayers and passages rather than literary studies of the text.

The situation among minority peoples who had adopted Islam or lived with Muslims was much more complex than a simple division between Muslim and non-Muslim. For example, as Kefeli writes, Krashen Tatar seasonal workers often adopted Islamic dress and practices while tailoring for their Tatar employers. In addition, sometimes ‘pagan’ practices can align with Islam. As we will see in chapter two, some Muslims in Central Asia combine ancestor veneration with more widespread Islamic practices. Though it is impossible to make a definitive statement about a certain group here, it could be that some local groups viewed as ‘pagan’ by Russian observers may have been connected to Islam. It is not impossible that Russians’ desire to separate their pagan peoples from Muslims may have skewed their perception of religious affiliation.

Most Russian observers believed that Islam was a more advanced (or at least a more complicated) religion than ‘paganism,’ but this could lead to several different perspectives. We might divide these into two main groups, one which sees Islam as a negative force, the other, Islam as a more positive influence. On the one hand, the sophistication of Islam could lead to traditional religious followers being ‘seduced’ by it; Werth explains, “Emperor Nicholas I in 1854 ordered the Orenburg and Samara Governor-General to take measures ‘for the protection of these pagans from seduction [to Islam].’”48 As Werth writes in this section of his article, minority peoples were thought to be less developed and incapable of making decisions of their own accord; so, anytime they wanted to become Muslim it must be because someone else put the idea into their heads.49 Sometimes Russian observers also considered minority peoples to

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be confused about their own histories and cultures, as Austin Jersild argues.\(^5\) It was very unfortunate for traditional religious followers to convert to Islam; as War Minister D. Milyutin wrote,

> In a political sense it is better for us that the population remains in paganism for the time being, than that they convert to Mohammedanism, since there remains hope to make a Christian out of an idolater, but a Mohammedan has already yielded irrevocably to the influence of Muslim fanaticism and will hardly go over to Christianity.\(^5\)

Although ‘pagan’ peoples were like children who needed to be led, Muslims were crafty adults who could lead these innocent peoples astray. Sometimes the religions of minority peoples were also seen as ‘pure’ and whole in contrast to the ‘foreign’ Arab influence of Islam.\(^5\) Portraying Islam as an imported, non-native religion helped to take away its legitimacy and importance in the region. Perhaps adding to this fear was the wider political situation of Russia, in constant conflict with the Ottoman Empire at this time.

On the other hand, however, the ministry of internal affairs had a quite different perspective, as Werth discusses in this excerpt from the ministry’s documents:

> The transition to Mohammedanism for idolaters constitutes a progressive movement, a step towards the comprehension of Christian truths, since Mohammedans believe in a single God and they recognize Christ the Savior as one of the prophets.\(^5\)

In this view, Islam can even be a step on the way toward Christianity, because it resembles Christian doctrine. Also, Islam is more advanced in a positive respect; one cannot blame native peoples for converting to this religion when it is much better than their previous worldview. An acceptance of Islam came with Catherine the Great in the late eighteenth century, who established governing bodies to bring Muslims into the institutional structure of the empire.

In *For Prophet and Tsar*, Robert Crews writes that historians who see the relationship between Muslims and Christians in imperial Russia as one of only strife, antagonism, and resistance are not seeing the total picture. In fact, he asserts that one of the reasons for the relatively stable governing of Muslim populations in the tsarist empire is that the authorities were able to use Islam as part of a structure of authority. The Orenburg Spiritual Assembly, created by Catherine in the eighteenth century, and other regional governing bodies inducted Muslims into a hierarchical religious system that helped the Russian empire keep control on the ground. Crews goes even further to state that Muslims themselves took advantage of this system and used it to achieve their own goals in situations such as rivalries among village mullahs. He states that the

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\(^5\) Jersild, 519.

creation of Muslim institutions within the Russian authority structure made Muslims themselves see the empire as a protector of Islam. However, Crews also writes that Muslims could manipulate the language of the Russian authorities to gain what they wanted. They could use Orthodox Christian terms such as ‘liturgy’ and ‘schismatic’ to help prove their points. It is difficult for scholars to be able to access the ways in which all groups of Muslims responded to these institutions. For every petition from a Muslim who desired to control the religiosity of his neighbor, there was another who was doing something deemed ‘heretical’ by his accuser. However, Crews certainly does show that the Orenburg Assembly and the institutionalization of Islam had important effects in the region. His argument can in fact be bolstered more securely by Allen Frank’s work.

Frank points out that though the Orenburg Assembly was rejected by some groups, it was adopted by most ulama (Islamic religious scholars). Frank writes that the position of the Russian empire as the ruling power did fit into Muslim conceptions of the role of law: “Therefore, from the ulama’s perspective, by supporting the Spiritual Assembly, the Russian authorities took upon themselves the traditional role of the Islamic state: the enforcement of the sharia.” Frank’s general thesis of the importance of Bulghar identity also confirms that the integration of Islam into an authoritative structure connected to the empire affected Muslims’ own perspectives of their identity. Though the conception of Bulghar as an important part of community identity precedes the institution of the Assembly, it was renewed and helped create the idea of a more unified Muslim community in the Volga Ural region. This kind of analysis is an important addition to Crew’s interesting work with petitions and court cases, because it provides a look into how Muslims saw themselves and continuity with past forms of community identification.

The institution of the Orenburg Assembly also shows a key difference between the perceptions of Russian state authorities and those working with the Orthodox Church. For Orthodox missionaries, the primary goal was most often to convert minority peoples to Christianity, while for state authorities, bringing all the diverse groups of the empire into administrative order was the main interest. This at times created an important split between missionaries and state authorities. Adding to this complexity in the Russian relation to minority groups is the concept of ‘Russification.’ For some missionaries, converting to Orthodoxy was connected to becoming Russian, while for others, these two processes remained distinct.

**Missionary views: Russification or Conversion?**

As with other Russian conceptions of minority peoples, a missionary viewpoint cannot be put into a clearly delineated box. Sergei Kan, contrasting Russian missionary approaches in Siberia and Alaska, shows that diverse methods were used in imperial Russia for spreading the faith and points to a spectrum of relations between the church and the state. He explains how Russian missionaries were more aligned with Alaskan peoples than with the fur traders who brought the first Russian contact to the region. In

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54 Crews, *For Prophet*, 21.
55 Crews, *For Prophet*, 128.
57 Frank, *Islamic Historiography*, 39, 42.
fact, Iosaf Bolotov, leading an early group of missionaries to the region in the late 1700s, became an outspoken critic of the abuses of what would become the Russian-American Company. Father Ioann Veniaminov (1797-1871) followed in the footsteps of Iosaf and worked to create an Aleut alphabet and translated Christian texts into this and other native languages. Instead of baptisms encouraged by gifts and completed without preparation, Veniaminov encouraged missionaries to have several talks with native families who expressed desire for baptism before performing this rite. Veniaminov’s methods also differed from many western approaches to Christianization which entailed the alteration of native economies: “Veniaminov did not equate Christianization with the imposition of European culture, arguing that it did not make any sense for Native Alaskans to abandon their traditional subsistence activities.” This more open approach as well as inducting native clergy may have helped nurture strong roots in Orthodoxy that last even in present-day Alaska. This approach contrasts to missionary actions in Siberia, where the Russian government had more control and the church aligned with the interests of the empire. The situation in the nineteenth century Volga-Kama region might be seen as fitting somewhere in between these two examples. Among some missionaries, Russification was connected to conversion, while for others, the promotion of native expressions of Orthodoxy was considered the most effective way to bring these groups into the church.

One of the most important missionary figures of the nineteenth century, Nikolai Il’minskii (1822-1891), active especially in the central Volga Kama area, tried to disconnect the idea of conversion to Christianity from the process of becoming Russian. Il’minskii, the child of a priest, excelled in his seminary studies and continued to study in the Kazan Theological Academy. He became interested in the missionary division and learned Tatar and Arabic, even receiving a grant to leave Russia and study in the Middle East for two and a half years. Il’minskii thoroughly believed in living with those he sought to understand and work among as a missionary, and requested that his students go during school vacations to visit Tatar communities. Interestingly enough, Il’minskii was even called a “propagandist for Islam” by one of his opponents. He often came under criticism, especially for his dedication to fostering native clergy. Though the Academy had been producing liturgical literature in some native languages before Il’minskii began to work, he was instrumental in retranslating these texts and making them accessible to everyday speakers of these languages. Il’minskii was dedicated to creating schools for minority peoples and translating Christian liturgy and scripture into local languages. This kind of approach, in Johnson’s view, is representative of a tradition in Orthodoxy that goes all the way back to Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine Christians who converted Slavic peoples in the ninth century through an approach emphasizing native language. They engineered an alphabet and created Old Church Slavonic, translating the Bible, other Christian texts, and the liturgy. Il’minskii followed in

58 Kan, “Russian Orthodox,” 183.
60 Kan, “Russian Orthodox,” 187.
61 Kan, “Russian Orthodox,” 175.
64 Johnson, “Imperial Commission,” 250-1.
65 Johnson, “Imperial Commission,” v.
their footsteps by espousing the use of native languages and clergy to help spread Christianity.

For some clergy and missionaries, local religious practices could be combined with Christianity as a transition into the Orthodox Church. Agnes Kefeli states that an account from Mamadysh district shows that a Russian observer had an interesting perspective of keremet worship using icons: “For the Orthodox commentator who recorded the event, the Krâshens’ use of icons to worship spirits was already a positive step toward Christianity that contrasted favorably with the local Cheremis’ abandonment of their gods in favor of Islam.” Kefeli also points out that this view contrasted sharply with the teaching in Il’minskii’s schools that keremet or house spirits did not exist. However, Il’minskii himself seemed to see Islamic practices as much more dangerous to the development of minority peoples than native or ‘pagan’ leanings. It is likely that a hard line between Orthodox and traditional religious practices did not find a place in every area of the Volga Ural region.

Some stories and legends among minority peoples helped to incorporate Russian priests or missionaries into their religious worldview. Although Christianization is usually considered an entirely different sort of phenomenon from Islamization (which came much earlier) and traditional religious practice, there were instances in which Christianity was included in a native religiosity. As Kefeli records,

Legends involving spirits and priests or Christian believers echoed Tatar popular tales involving spirits and mullahs. In one of them the priest played an interesting role as mediator between the spirits’ and the humans’ worlds. He reminded a woman who suffered terribly during labor of a promise that she had made earlier that she would rather call the water spirit (su khujasi) to help her deliver the baby, than her grandmother. Thanks to the priest who intervened for her, the water spirit came and delivered the baby successfully. The priest then prayed and named the child, after which the water spirit returned to the lake. In that story, the priest, as well as the mullah in Tatar tales, acknowledge the presence of the spirits’ world.

This story reveals a working out of the power relationships between native practices and Christianity. The priest seems to take the place of an intermediary between the woman and the water spirit, who delivers the baby. This story does not necessarily place the actions of spirits or the role of the priest one above the other. Rather, it shows an interaction and a back and forth relationship. It is also interesting that the priest’s prayer and naming of the child may also have helped to create the situation in which the water spirit returns to the lake. This organic fusing of Christianity and native traditions and working out of difference shows that this group of Kriashens was taking aspects of Christianity and making it their own, within their own framework. This may foreshadow the fact that a significant community of Kriashens did not adopt Islam in the nineteenth century.

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66 Kefeli, “Krâshen Apostasy,” 244.
69 Kefeli, “Krâshen Apostasy,” 244.
century and instead built upon their Christian identity, separating themselves from surrounding Muslim Tatars, even into the Soviet era. In other cases, however, minority peoples did not readily adopt Christianity. Many of the more extensive writings of better-known missionaries show a harder line between Orthodoxy and native religion, and may idealize or criticize native religion. Often, the split between idealization and harsh criticism goes along with creating a separation between native religion and Islam. Missionaries strove diligently to separate the two in their writings. Il'minskii sometimes assigns childlike qualities to followers of traditional religions. In a positive perception of this quality, minority peoples might be seen as bringing back the lost innocence of Russia, which had perhaps been corrupted by contact with the West.

Views of native groups following traditional religions as childlike is not only limited to perspectives in Russia; native Christians in the New World, as discussed by Taylor, were also perceived with childlike qualities.

By viewing Indian parishioners as child-Catholics with an instrumentalist, literal-minded view of devotion, children who easily lost their way on a variety of doctrinal points, the parish priests both acknowledged and narrowed the gap between them.

In the Russian context, those following 'pagan' traditions also seem childlike, while Muslims are seen differently. Robert Geraci analyzes Il'minskii and his followers' use of the word 'inorodtsy,' which means 'of non-Russian ethnicity':

In their exemplary innocence, they provided a window to an ideal yet still essentially Russian world. This sense of promise accounts for the frequent appearance in the Il'minskiians’ rhetoric of such seemingly oxymoronic phrases as 'our inorodtsy' and 'the Russian [russkie] inorodtsy,' and for their implied exclusion of the less assimilable Muslim peoples from the category (making it necessary sometimes to refer to 'the Tatars and the inorodtsy' or 'Muslims and inorodtsy').

Since 'russkie' refers to Russian ethnicity, Geraci seems quite correct in noting that these phrases seem almost nonsensical. Muslims, as he notes, are separated from other minority peoples through this kind of phrasing. Showing a connection to some of the prevalent perceptions of Islam in the nineteenth century, Il'minskii believed that the dangers of Islamization threatened minority peoples; he writes:

If from fear of separate national identities we do not allow the native languages in native schools and churches on a sufficient scale to ensure a solid, convinced

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70 Werth, "From 'pagan' Muslims."
71 Geraci, Window, 73.
72 Taylor, Magistrates, 62.
73 Geraci, Window, 75.
adoption of the Christian faith, then all non-Russians will be fused into a single race by language and faith – the Tatar and Muhammedan.\textsuperscript{74}

Il'minskii here was seeing the use of native languages and education as a means to bring indigenous groups into Orthodoxy. Followers of Islam are perceived as possible competitors with Orthodoxy for adherents. For Russians speaking from this perspective in the nineteenth century, it would seem to be impossible to say something like 'our Muslims.' This kind of statement shows the gap discussed earlier between missionaries' conceptions and state policies, which incorporated Muslims into the structure of the empire.

It would be a great mistake not to see variety, even opposition, between the conceptions of missionaries themselves. The fact that Il'minskii's program of using native clergy and languages caused controversy shows that there were strong opinions against it. Some missionaries saw the process of conversion as also a process of becoming Russian. In a letter written to Il’minskii from Bishop Veniamin in Irkutsk cited by Geraci, the bishop makes conversion synonymous to Russification:

\begin{quote}
We give [each convert] a Russian first name and a Russian last name (the godfather's), we cut off the long hair, and if there are means, we dress him in Russian clothing. Our convert becomes not a 'newly baptized Buriat' [novokreshchennye buriat] but a Russian! He is ashamed to be called a Buriat, avoids the Buriats with their long hair, and joins the Russians. He can speak Russian, though poorly. We teach him prayers in Russian. A translation is made for clarification, nothing more.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Some observers thought it entirely possible for small minority peoples to in effect become fully Russian, and they saw adopting Orthodoxy as an important step in that direction. This is very different from Il'minskii's perspective. Here, it is interesting to note the aspects picked out as markers of Russian identity. Hair length and clothing, one's appearance, seems very important. Living among Russians and avoiding one's native community, and speaking Russian, are other qualifications.\textsuperscript{76}

Religious and ethnic boundaries also often converged in Russian views of the Mari. In Russian and Mari interaction, even language can be seen as a religious marker. One missionary who had talked with Maris who had become fluent in Russian and who could speak "eloquently" about their traditional faith, wrote that "considering the good manners of the residents and their use of pure Russian language, who would think that these Russians by speech are pagans."\textsuperscript{77} The difficulty in accepting religious and ethnic

\textsuperscript{74} Johnson, "Imperial Commission," 6.
\textsuperscript{75} Geraci, \textit{Window}, 73.
\textsuperscript{76} Decisions about physical appearance also played a large role in communities of baptized Tatars’ apostasies to Islam. As Keffeli writes, before their petitions to convert to Islam came back from the authorities, they might cut their hair, wear caps, and don clothing deemed to be proper for Muslims (\textit{Krâşhen Apostasy} 47-8). How much of this was done because of their own conceptions of identity, and how much because they knew that it would solidify their identity as Muslim in the eyes of the Russian authorities is hard to tell, but surely a motivation must have been to appear properly Muslim in the eyes of the Russians.
\textsuperscript{77} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 102.
boundaries crossing one another can also be seen in reluctance to accept a native monastic movement among the Mari in 1861.

In fact, religious identity was tied to group identity for native peoples of the Volga Ural region as well. In Inner Asia, Allen Frank writes that group identity was very much tied to religious affiliation:

> The religious affiliation of a community was in a sense the ultimate expression of its identity, since besides a legal relationship with the Russian government, religious affiliation also necessitated a kinship relation with the community’s ancestors. Thus, these sorts of religious and kinship bonds, as legal bonds, were among the most meaningful elements holding communities together, and defining their identity. ⁷⁸

Even more than speaking the same language, religious affiliation can be the defining characteristic of community. To illustrate this, Frank uses the example of a group of Mari who began speaking Tatar in the nineteenth century but continued to think of themselves as separate from the Tatar Muslims, instead considering themselves Mari following traditional religious practices. ⁷⁹ Both Russians and minority groups often saw religion as a defining aspect of self and other. In the nineteenth century, however, for some minority peoples and Russians, views of religiosity and its connection to group identity were changing.

**Conclusion**

By the nineteenth century, several competing views of the religiosity of minority peoples existed among Russian observers. Many saw the practices of followers of local traditional religions as underdeveloped and built upon unstable foundations. This might also be combined with a perception of these groups as innocent and even having a kind of purity that Russians lacked. While missionaries often saw Islam as a threat, some state authorities and policies of the empire strove more to harness the power of Islam within state structures. Among Russian missionaries, there were many opinions as to how to bring minority peoples into the Orthodox Church. Some emphasized total assimilation through Russification, while others like Il’minskii saw promise in promoting conversion to Orthodoxy through use of indigenous languages and clergy. Russian perceptions tended to place a clear-cut dividing line between Muslims and non-Muslims, and wanted to separate ‘pagan’ groups from Muslim influence. The idea of a strict division and classification of minority groups as well as the portrayal of native practices as confused or naïve is not limited to the Russian sources, but also finds its way into the writings of some modern scholars because of their dependence on Russian sources. The next two chapters will question these boundary lines, the first focusing upon the nature of local religious traditions in the Volga Ural region and the second looking at specific changes occurring in the nineteenth century. This is not to argue that there were no boundaries between groups, but instead that the boundaries are different than those portrayed in Russian and sometimes modern sources.

⁷⁸ Frank, *Islamic Historiography*, 41.
⁷⁹ Frank, *Islamic Historiography*, 41.
CHAPTER 2: CHALLENGING BOUNDARIES

Introduction

While not ignoring boundaries between group identities, it is necessary to see the complexity involved in religious affiliation in this region. Rather than making the nature of religious actions marginal by trying to fit them into our own perspective, calling them an 'idiosyncratic mélange,' it might be better to ask why we demand categorization. Talal Asad writes that the process of translation (speaking about translation of languages, but in a wider context about the process of translation in anthropological studies) should not always be focused upon demanding that other ideas be fitted into the strictures of one’s own outlook. Rather, “the good translator does not immediately assume that unusual difficulty in conveying the sense of an alien discourse denotes a fault in the latter, but instead critically examines the normal state of his or her own language.”

It will be helpful to take a viewpoint that can include the characteristics of the traditions of minority peoples without forcing it into a narrow mold.

One of our roadblocks to looking at religion in the Volga Ural region is our dependence on a narrative which emphasizes the essences of religions. Writing about the concept of religion itself, Asad states:

According to this view, medieval religion, pervading or encompassing other categories, is nevertheless analytically identifiable. It is this fact that makes it possible to say that religion has the same essence today as it had in the Middle Ages, although its social extension and function were different in the two epochs. Yet the insistence that religion has an autonomous essence – not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense – invites us to define religion (like any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.

The key words about essence, ‘transhistorical’ and ‘transcultural,’ help in looking at the kinds of structures in which we would like to fit separate religions. Thus, a practice called Islamic that does not conform to whatever concepts we hold about Islam, we may take to be false or a ‘survival’ from previous religious practices. We assume that throughout history, Islam has certain core concepts or practices that are always consistent, and that these hold for any Muslim group, no matter where they are. When writing about Islam in Central Asia, Adeeb Khalid brings up this same problem with defining essences of religious traditions.

The apologetic and ‘two faces’ arguments share a fundamental problem with the views of Islam espoused by its most hostile critics: these views all take for granted that a ‘real’ Islam exists about which one can make such generalizations.

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81 Asad, Genealogies, 28.
Traditional religion and Christianity also have ‘essences’ we feel that we can identify. If we hold this model of reality, any mixing of these religious systems would seem to throw people into confusion. Essences do not easily mix and glide into one another. Even conceptualizing of the process as a mixing may be problematic, since the very idea implies two separable identities that are then blended in some way.

This chapter will discuss three challenges to the perspectives of minority peoples’ religiosity brought out in chapter one. First, local groups’ own concepts of their religious practices do not seem to be confused or disorderly, and sometimes local practices are even compared favorably to the wider Christian or Islamic traditions. Second, larger religious traditions were often molded by local communities to fit their native religious conceptions and practices. The kind of separation between Islam and ‘paganism’ that many Russian observers created may be incorrect. As scholarship on Central Asian Islam shows, many practices are considered by followers to be both about Islam and their local ancestors. Third, minority peoples’ religious worldviews in fact bare some similarities to those of Russian peasants.

**Strong local identities**

While some Russian observers may have painted a picture of traditional religious identity as weak, nebulous, and its followers as childlike, localized religious practices could in fact be conceptualized as quite powerful by their adherents, and some religious acts even cut across the seemingly concrete boundaries between Muslims, ‘pagans’, and in some cases Christians. Stories shared among minority groups help reveal conceptions of religious identity. Sometimes, a Russian priest or a Muslim healer might appear in a story and be able to perform a miracle or intercede on behalf of a follower of native religion. In one story recorded by Kefeli, however, the Kriashens reaffirm the superiority of their native practices: “Finally, one Krashen anecdote triumphantly reported that neither the prayers of the priest or the mullah were able to chase the pari from the house they haunted.”

Though we do not see whether this story ends with a successful chasing away of the pari by a native religious authority, the story’s depiction of the lack of power of the representatives of Christianity and Islam show that there are certain aspects of the world over which these religions did not have control.

Some observers saw groups like the Mari as soon to disappear into the dominant Russian society through assimilation and intermarriage. In most views, the power of cultural dominance lay on the Russian side. Geraci writes of an ethnographer, I.N. Smirnov, who conceptualized the process of Russification using aspects of Tylor’s evolutionary theory:

The evolution of the Finns, in other words, was the history of Russian influence, and its telos was complete Russification… Inevitably, Smirnov thought, the process would culminate in the mixing of the inorodtsy with the Russians by means of intermarriage. New generations would be racially hybrid, but their culture would be thoroughly Russian.

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84 Geraci, Window, 175-6.
However, the picture of assimilation Smirnov presents does not match the accounts of missionaries who dealt with minority peoples. Groups like the Mari and Udmurts were not simply blank canvases waiting for Russian intervention, but rather had their own strongly held identities. Werth records a common approach used by minority groups to resist Orthodox missionary efforts.

Drawing on the model of parishioners in Makarovo, many Maris simply yelled ‘old faith!’ or ‘ogem, ogem, ogem!’ (I don't want [to convert]), while Udmurts shouted ‘udlo’ (it is impossible [to convert]). In some cases missionaries were confronted with ‘such words that cannot be written.’

Another way in which these groups were able to maintain traditional ways was through appeal to a collective sense of identity: “With some isolated exceptions, novokreshchennye were willing to agree to missionary propositions only collectively, 'when every one of them to the last person decides on this.'” Smirnov's perspective that minority peoples would inevitably become Russian with intermarriage assumes that traditional religious identities would fade out in the process. In marriage to Russians, it was also possible that previous connections to traditional practices would remain. Werth writes that when a missionary “found an Udmurt settlement in which the male members of ten households had Russian wives in 1831, he was nevertheless forced to report that they still do pagan prayers called kurbany.” Unlike many depictions of minority peoples, these stories show that these groups in fact had strongly held local identities, and that the influence of Russians was not like an indelible ink that would blot out previously held religious conceptions.

There was not an impassable wall between ‘pagan’ minority peoples and Tatar and Bashkir Muslims and Russian Christians. Instead of combating the traditional religious rituals espoused by baptized Tatars, or Kriashens, Kefeli writes that Russian peasants sometimes joined Kriashen rain ceremonies. The rain ceremony also draws into question separation between Islam and local religious traditions. According to Allan Frank, rain ceremonies were performed by Muslim communities and in 1898 a Daghestani Sufi in the area was asked to perform a rain ritual. When done in the situations Frank describes, the ceremonies were considered by participants to be very Islamic and included recitations from the Qur'an. A shrine in the Volga Ural region at Khojalar Tawi included saints visited by Tatar Muslims, unbaptized Chuvash, and Chuvash, Mordvin, and Russian Christians. Frank has also shown that some shrines were visited by both Mari and Tatars in the region. The Mari claim the shrines as those of their ancestor-saints, while Muslim Tatars claim them as tombs of the founders of Sufism in the region. However, as Frank argues, the ritual aspects of shrine visitation are very similar for Mari and Tatars:

85 Werth, At the Margins, 107.
86 Werth, At the Margins, 107.
87 Werth, At the Margins, 110.
89 Allen Frank, Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic world of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780-1910 (Boston: Brill, 2001), 261-2.
90 Frank, Islamic Historiography, 76.
Both Maris and Tatars share similar terminology and common rituals, such as the making of vows, the performance of sacrifices, as well as communal and personal prayers. Most importantly, the willingness to share access to the shrines, and the saints’ power, both groups appear willing to separate the discursive aspects of the shrines from the ritualistic.\(^{91}\)

Traveling Sufis, or dervishes, were consulted for healing even by followers of traditional religions.\(^2\) Local Russians were not necessarily pitted against the interests of other ethnic communities. Important to the cultivation of many religious practices of minority groups was the continuance of certain forested areas. These “sacred groves” were sometimes not only taken care of by minority peoples but also by local Russians. Werth writes that a missionary “discovered, ‘to the shame of Christians’ that Russians were on occasion the stewards of sacred groves and tents.”\(^{93}\) This is also interesting in that it shows the way that sacred spaces can sometimes transcend religious boundaries, being important to those in the local area, perhaps in different ways, but the same sacred space.

This is not to say, of course, that all religions of the region were the same, or even that different groups got along well or approved of their neighbors’ religions. Suspicion of a Finnic group, the Votiaks’, took the shape of rumors about their supposed human sacrifice rituals among Russian peasants.\(^{94}\) Sometimes, when many villagers in an area wanted to embrace an Islamic identity, those who did not agree were ostracized or called unclean.\(^{95}\) However, the boundaries between groups are not impermeable and not necessary stable over time.

**Islam and native religious traditions: perspectives from scholarship on Central Asian Islam**

Although there are examples of Muslims and non-Muslims clearly differentiating themselves from one another, as in the cases of Muslim Tatars pressuring other local Tatars to convert, Inner Asian cultures often incorporate native practices into Islam and provide room for a gradual conversions. Though clothing and outward appearance could mark one as Muslim, this was sometimes a permeable boundary. Kefeli explains that some Kräshens hired themselves out as tailors in Tatar Muslim communities. While living among the Tatars, they would wear Tatar Muslim clothing styles and conform to the Islamic practices of their surroundings such as daily prayer, ablutions, and even fasting during Ramadan.\(^{96}\) Hints of a gradual conversion rather than an all-or-nothing event occur in many legendary histories of conversion in Inner Asia. For example, the *Tazkiratu’l Bughra*, circulated in the 16th or 17th centuries in Turkistan but likely compiled

\(^{92}\) Kefeli, “Kräshen Apostasy,” 187.
\(^{93}\) Werth, *At the Margins*, 110.
\(^{94}\) Geraci, *Window*, 196.
from earlier oral sources, has the Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan converting but then hiding his religion from his father for some time. His conversion as well as the conversion of his kingdom is gradual.\(^97\) Sometimes, in these histories, it almost seems that multiple conversions occur. A character will convert, go back to his old ways, and then reconvert once again. This may mirror the movement toward Islam in Inner Asian regions as having a gradual and less clear-cut nature. This gradual conversion process is likely due to the earlier time period of the spread of Islam in Central Asia. Although there is not enough room here to adequately deal with changes in Islam in Inner Asia during the 1800s, many Muslims were changing their views of adherence to Islam, and gradual conversions which incorporated aspects of native practices were becoming less acceptable among some groups in the Volga-Kama region.

However, the large majority of Muslims in the Volga-Kama region during the nineteenth century still had strong ties to local practices. The long-term presence of Islam in the area may have contributed to its ability to meld with local traditions. Russian missionaries like Evfimii A. Malov, a contemporary of Il”minskii, found that Islam on the ground did not match the expectations of Islam they had gained from their intense education at the Kazan Theological Academy. Malov was well-versed in the Qur’an and Islamic literature and desired to convert Muslims in the Volga Kama region through rational argument.\(^98\) He was to find this very difficult, especially as the religiosity of many Tatars did not center around rational understanding of the Qur’an’s meaning, but might instead be based upon local variations on stories of conversion by Sufi figures and recitation of portions of the Qur’an without exact knowledge of the meaning. Kefeli writes that Malov “offended an old woman of Elyshevo [village] when he pointed out her inability to comprehend the second Sura he was reading.” She answered, “maybe so, but I know that it’s the Word of the Qur’an.”\(^99\) Unlike this Russian missionary’s perception of Islam, the practice of the religion did not require Arabic ability and scholarly knowledge. Islam could be integrated into everyday life and even traditional religious cosmologies. A missionary recorded a story from a Tatar woman that for him showed that she did not know Islam properly and was simply a follower of ‘pagan’ concepts. However, she in fact reveals that she was combining ideas from an Islamic source and indigenous concepts.

A Tatar woman… after reading a passage from The Book of Baqyrgan (an anthology of Sufi poetry) about the necessity of saying ‘Bismillah’ before meals, explained that if one failed to say ‘Bismillah,’ the päri (house spirits) would steal the food…Among the Tatars and other Middle Volga peoples, päri were known for living in abandoned houses or baths. For this woman, any action was incomplete without praising God; such incomplete actions attracted the päri who chose to live in empty places.\(^100\)

The same accommodation to local practices can be seen in the practices of many groups of Muslims in Inner Asia. For example, Bruce Privratsky discusses how Islam is

\(^97\) Jarring Gunnar, *Uzbek texts from Afghan Turkistan* (Lunds Universitets Arsskrift 1938), 325-333.  
\(^100\) Kefeli, “The Role,” 262.
connected to ancestor spirits in his ethnography of Kazak Muslims. Privratsky argues that Kazak practices surrounding ancestors are closely intertwined with their obligations to Islam. Perhaps the most vivid explanation of this perspective is when Privratsky describes what is happening in ziyarat, or shrine visitation, for a Kazak woman. For a Kazak woman of Turkistan the same ziyarat that is characterized as superstitious animism by Muslim reformers, or as a synthesis of Turkic shamanism and Yasawian Sufism by Pan-Turkist revivalists, is nothing less than the pure religion of her Kazak ancestors and the Arab ancestors of her Qoja neighbors. She knows nothing of Sufism, nor of shamanism.\textsuperscript{101}

Privratsky delves deeply into the complex intertwining of the Kazak ancestor cult and Islamic religious practices. He points out that in Kazak, “the term ārūaq makes the ancestors into Muslims whether they like it or not.”\textsuperscript{102} The Kazak ancestors are conceptualized as having been good Muslims. The same day of the week, Thursday, that is important for visits to saints’ shrines, is also the day when pastry is fried and the ancestor spirits (who visit the home on this day) will consume the smell.\textsuperscript{103} For Privratsky, the participation of the ancestors in the lives of Kazak believers is very much connected to their Islamic commitments. They are a part of a seamless whole.

There may have been more fluidity between Muslims and non-Muslims than Russian observers would have liked to think. Though there were boundaries drawn between followers of traditional religions and followers of Islam, these were not the strict boundaries drawn by those with a more textual knowledge of Islam. Putting Islam and indigenous religions into separate categories leaves out many shared conceptions between followers of these traditions. Recognizing similarities also helps in understanding how some groups could seemingly so suddenly come out and convert to Islam in the nineteenth century. For those with only nominal baptisms, Islam was an attractive option that meshed successfully with their traditional practices.

\textbf{Russian peasants and minority peoples}

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of looking at religion in late Imperial Russia is that some of the very same kind of language that was used to discuss minority peoples was also used by Russians to talk about other Russians. Parallels can be found between descriptions of the religiosity of minority peoples and Russian peasants. In addition, Russian peasant and minority peoples shared an aspect of their protest against Russian authorities. Both groups often conceptualized the tsar as their ally and friend, while considering the local authorities to be corrupt and misinterpreting the tsar’s orders.\textsuperscript{104}

Along with accusations of improper behavior, the writings of church officials and certain missionaries and clergy very often critique the interior knowledge of minority

\textsuperscript{101} Bruce G. Privratsky, \textit{Muslim Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory} (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), 190.
\textsuperscript{102} Privratsky, \textit{Muslim Turkistan}, 150.
\textsuperscript{103} Privratsky, \textit{Muslim Turkistan}, 130.
\textsuperscript{104} In the case of Russian peasants, see Daniel Field, \textit{Rebels in the Name of the Tsar} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 1-9.
peoples and peasants about Christian rituals in the nineteenth century. Baptized minority peoples and Russian peasants do not seem to grasp the significance of what they do, and they cannot explain the meaning of their rituals. In discussing Russian Orthodox Church’s critique of peasant religiosity, Gregory L. Freeze gives some interesting excerpts from writings in the 1800s:

As the bishop of Penza wrote in his annual report in 1855, the peasantry showed greater knowledge of the faith and prayers, but ‘the understanding of the truths of the faith and of prayers, among the common people, was of course more literal than something consciously grasped’…. In his annual report for 1855, the bishop of Vladimir similarly emphasized the geographic factor behind rural ignorance: ‘As for rural inhabitants, because they are virtually all illiterate and because they live so far from their churches (which they therefore cannot visit so frequently), and because of their infrequent encounters with the parish priests (their sole teachers), they remain entirely ignorant of the basic matters of their faith, or they know it inadequately or fuzzily.’

This ‘fuzzy,’ ‘literal’ knowledge is problematic for these nineteenth century church officials. Knowledge of why rituals are done, the meaning behind them, is an important aspect of Orthodox religiosity in their view. It could certainly be argued that minority peoples, many of them baptized in groups or in circumstances which did not exactly favor fostering a Christian identity, were much more loosely connected to Orthodoxy than were Russian peasants. At least from a more literate Russian perspective, though, some of the same sorts of analysis are made of both parties regarding their insufficient knowledge. Agnes Kefeli writes that the Russian clergy was trying to get rid of ‘pagan vestiges’ among both Kriashens and rural Russians in the nineteenth century. As Il’minskii and colleague G.S. Sablukov write, lack of knowledge among the baptized Chuvash made them “without an internal transformation,” and “without a full conviction of the truth and salvation of the Christian faith, and even without a sufficient study of its dogmas.” To be fully Christian, these Chuvash need to have intellectual understanding of the religion and its precepts.

It is interesting to explore the words used in the excerpts above; peasants did not have knowledge ‘consciously grasped,’ they had ‘fuzzy’ knowledge, or even are ‘entirely ignorant’ of ‘basic matters of their faith.’ The Chuvash also receive a similar criticism; they have not had ‘sufficient study of [Christian] dogmas.’ What does it mean ‘to know?’ What exactly were both Russian peasants and baptized minority peoples lacking? As discussed earlier, Paul Werth argues that the church was moving from a structure based more upon orthopraxy to one of orthodoxy in the 1800s. This shift helped to create both the renewed attention to the religiosity of baptized minority peoples as well as the significant church efforts at reeducating Russian peasants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Freeze calls this more educated Orthodoxy a “new virtuoso religiosity” and writes that “an ‘enlightened Orthodoxy’ radically redefined its institutional

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objectives (from liturgical to instructional duties). Eugene Clay argues that Orthodox missionaries embodied a dedication to reason and logic, while some groups considered heretical in the nineteenth century focused more upon direct experience of the sacred. Although missionaries may embody more varied expressions of religiosity than Clay characterizes them to possess here, he shows that there was a certain emphasis on standardizing sacred knowledge and taking a rationalistic standpoint at this time, so much so that these heretical groups counterpoised themselves to the dominant institutional church.

Neither Werth nor Freeze go into detail about what created this shift in the understanding of the church, but the change seems to fall into place with concepts about religion that had shifted after the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment in Europe. Certainly, it would make no sense to say that the Orthodox Church was becoming Protestant; but, certain modern ways of thinking about the world seem to have come into being by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were significantly shaping the discourse surrounding the religiosity of peasants and minority peoples. An interesting quote included by Freeze reveals a key disjuncture between the religious conceptions of a priest and those of the peasants in his parish during this time of change.

After his first enthusiastic homily, he queried the parishioners on what they had understood. ‘We are dark people,’ they replied, ‘how are we to know what you read?’ When the priest then dared speak without notes and even extemporaneously, the results were the same: ‘You speak and look at the listeners, and on their face you see complete incomprehension, while the women cry and wail at those points of the speech when there is no cause for it.’

The priest was attempting to instruct the parishioners on doctrine, rather than performing liturgical duties. In the parishioners’ first reply, they point out one of the differences between themselves and the priest: this priest is probably much more literate than they. A basis in religious texts and ability to explain one’s beliefs rationally shows again some of the trends that had also occurred in western Europe.

Talal Asad explains how seeing religion as a mental process came about in the modern era within western Christian discourse. For many other groups around the world, ritual and religious practices do not fit into this model. Asad reveals key faults in Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, showing that defining ‘proper’ religion as something that must be tied to theological reflection has a significantly Christian history.

Discourse involved in practice is not the same as that involved in speaking about practice. It is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.

111 Asad, Genealogies, 36.
It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion.\textsuperscript{112}

Orthodoxy was moving toward a more ‘verbalizable’ religion in the nineteenth century. Not only Orthodox Christianity, but also certain portions of the Islamic community were moving toward this more verbalizable concept of religiosity in the later 1800s. Members of the Jadid movement criticized aspects of the region’s older models of religiosity, aiming to change traditional methods of schooling and finding fault with ‘superstition.’\textsuperscript{113} They questioned earlier schooling methods, emphasized knowledge of the Qur’an, and saw visits to saints’ shrines as outside the realm of proper Islamic practice. It was not only Christianity that was going through changes in the nineteenth century. The Jadids, though, did not have the ability to reach the vast majority of Muslims in the Volga-Kama region, and reforms occurred more slowly than many of them would have desired.

\textit{Conclusion}

While recognizing the important shift that the process of conversion to Christianity or Islam entailed, it is also necessary to recognize the many shared practices among Volga Ural Muslims, Christians, and followers of traditional religions. Taking an approach which does not assume that religions are easily separable entities can account for shared cultural norms and helps in analyzing the phenomena observed among those residing in this area. The veneration of keremet spirits, significance of the local landscape, and centrality of ancestors were important practices which crossed over commonly accepted religious boundaries. Though Russian peasants did not share in all of the characteristics of Inner Asian religious practices, their religiosity was also rooted in local, practical concerns in ways that drew similar criticism and reeducation efforts from the Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{112} Asad, Genealogies, 48.
\textsuperscript{113} Adeeb Khalid gives an extensive discussion of Jadidism and their educational methods in Adeeb Khalid, The Politics of Muslim cultural reform: Jadidism in Central Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Other authors sometimes critique Adeeb’s work, however. Robert Crews writes that Khalid’s view may be skewed because there was not such a strict division between ‘reformers’ and ‘traditionalists’ (246).

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CHAPTER 3: REDRAWING BOUNDARIES

Introduction

We have seen from the discussion in chapters one and two that several factors complicate common views of minority religious traditions in late Imperial Russia. When looking at local traditions in Russia in the nineteenth century, though, yet another level of complexity needs to be built onto these points. The religious practices and conceptions of minority peoples were changing at this time. Using perspectives from the theorists Homi Bhabha (drawing from Lacan) and David Carrasco in this chapter will help to give new insights into how minority peoples in nineteenth century Russia adapted to their situation by redefining religious boundaries. Stories, in both reinterpretations of recent events and a new mapping of histories, played an important role in how minority peoples rethought their place in a changing world. Through stories/histories, the lines of power relationships can be redrawn and groups can place their community in the center once again. Hybrid practices were not an example of confusion or idiosyncrasy, but were in fact part of the ways in which minority peoples were reorienting power structures and redefining their identities in the nineteenth century.

Understanding religions of the Volga Ural region through the concept of hybridity

It is necessary to first explore whether the relationship between the Russian empire and its minority peoples could be called one of colonial encounter. According to Marie Louis Pratt, a contact zone between cultures is defined as:

The space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict… often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.\textsuperscript{114}

It is clear that this definition derives from studies focused mainly upon the western European context of colonialism. European powers created colonies that were quite far from the home country. Russia, however, in its conquest of the Kazan region, was taking more concrete control of a place where it had long had trade relations and of course, an area that was geographically bordering its own territory. Additionally, “radically asymmetrical relations of power” does not describe all examples of minority peoples’ interactions with the Russian Empire. Even though there was certainly a relation of power between Russia and minority groups, the empire did not have enough resources to always enforce strict rule upon minority peoples in remote areas. Additionally, situations of different groups within the empire could be quite varied. Tatar Muslims, at certain periods, could hold Russian serfs while Russians could not hold Tatars. Groups seen as Muslim by the Russian authorities often were given some leeway, perhaps because of the fear of Russian authorities that they would rebel or appeal to the Ottoman Empire.

\textsuperscript{114} Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.
However, there are also key aspects of the relation between Russians and minority peoples that do echo a colonial encounter. First, the situation of peoples considered as Muslim and those labeled as pagan by the empire usually differed considerably. As discussed in chapter one, it was often assumed that smaller groups following traditional religions would eventually be absorbed into the surrounding Russian population. Although this shows a certain amount of equality in that groups could be ‘real’ Russians in a sense, it also reveals preconceptions that the Russian culture was dominant and would easily overrun weaker minority peoples, who are assumed to lack a strong sense of identity. Lack of participation in legal systems by minority groups such as the Mari and the Votiaks (another minority group in the region) also show marginalization of ‘pagan’ peoples in the empire. In the court case against the Votiak people in a (false) allegation of human sacrifice, the Votiaks did not even know that they needed to recruit a lawyer and only learned of this just before the trial. The fact that after several trials the group of Votiaks was acquitted does not erase the guilty verdicts of earlier rulings and the exile of some of the group’s members to Siberia.

The situation of Tatar and Bashkir Muslims was somewhat different. Tatar Muslims were able to send petitions to governing bodies and had the higher levels of literacy required for this kind of participation in the legal system. It should not be ignored, however, that though Tatars and Bashkirs seemed to have more access to power, they also suffered from restrictions. Although peoples historically declared to be followers of Islam had the right to practice their religion, prosecution could follow attempts at spreading Islam among Russians or minority peoples. Even institutions like the Orenburg Assembly which seem on the surface to be empowering to Muslims also include aspects of asymmetrical power relationships. The ways in which Muslims utilized the system, while sometimes achieving legal victories, also entailed the marginalization of those Tatars who were accused of improper religious practices and those who did not utilize the institutional structures as aptly.

In addition, for both Muslim Tatars and groups like the Mari following local religions in the middle Volga, colonization by Russian settlers occurred over time. Seppo Lalluka writes that the history of colonization from the sixteenth up to the beginning of the nineteenth century often pushed Mari off of more arable lands. Though many Mari do have important religious connections to forested areas, Lalluka writes that in fact the rhetoric portraying the Mari as ‘lovers of the forest’ might have helped to create an excuse to push them further and further into marginal areas and created an inaccurate stereotype: “a picture of a ‘self-isolating savage’ that seeks to avoid inhabited territories became implanted in the common imagination.” Overall, there was an unequal power dynamic between the ruling empire and minority peoples.

The Russian case does not conform to all aspects of traditional conceptions of colonialism, but a great deal of the work on western European cases can shed light on the Russian situation. The Russian empire, in fact, was a dynamic entity that changed through time. In the modern era, postcolonial theory becomes more applicable than at earlier dates. Indeed, Werth argues:

115 Jersild, “Faith, Custom, and Ritual.”
116 Geraci, Window, 200.
117 Lalluka, From Fugitive Peasants, 22-3.
The period from the late 1820s to the reform era of the 1860s initiated a transition—never completed under the old regime—from an imperial model featuring tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity and emphasizing dynastic loyalty above all else, to one of a unitary national state, which aspired to a higher degree of integration of its diverse population.\textsuperscript{118}

As in the Ottoman Empire, policies toward minority groups can change over time, and the modern era can bring large shifts in how participation in the empire is conceptualized.

The contact between Russians and minority peoples by the nineteenth century involves interesting complexities stemming from this asymmetrical power relationship. In looking at the religious practices of colonized peoples, new theoretical viewpoints can help to shed light on events and actions that seem difficult to explain or understand. As discussed earlier in exploring the possible limitations of the term syncretism, David Carrasco states that seeing religious practices among colonized peoples as only resistance to the dominant culture, or, on the opposite end, as adoption of the religion of the dominating culture, are not adequate. In discussing the practices of the Maya, he advocates a third approach which does not ignore the power relationships involved but does allow room for native groups to articulate their relationship to the sacred in new ways.

This ritual improvisation is a good example of the indigenous peoples seeking the spiritual knowledge of the Spaniards while keeping their own religious habits alive, taking control of what the outsiders brought in and making use of it in their own terms. I call this a ‘camouflaged vision of place’ that allows, for some people, a false vision of conquest to remain in focus.\textsuperscript{119}

According to Carrasco, the Maya do not simply copy the Catholicism of the Spanish conquerors. They also do not just conceal their own practices behind the curtain of Catholicism. Rather, the relationship between native religion and Christianity is worked out in ritual contexts: “They take the story of Christ’s passion, crucifixion, and resurrection and reshape it, in part, in their terms…. In this reshaping, the powers of Jesus are taken into the indigenous narratives and transformed by local categories and myth.”\textsuperscript{120} The ideas of ‘reshaping’ and ‘transformation’ are important here and differentiate Carrasco’s perspective from one that simply posits that native peoples combine their previous religion and Christianity, as if the two were puzzle pieces. Rather, there is not a clear division between native practices and Christianity, and their relationship is not unchangeable but is continually rethought in every year’s rituals.

In the lives of old convert Kriashens, religious objects also played an important part in the negotiation of native forms of sacred power and Christian embodiments of sacredness. Agnes Kefeli writes of interesting ways in which old convert Kriashens used Christian icons:

\textsuperscript{118} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 7.
\textsuperscript{119} Carrasco, “Jaguar Christians,” 135.
\textsuperscript{120} Carrasco, “Jaguar Christians,” 136.
The *starokreshchennye* of Kazan province brought offerings to the spirit of the house (öy khujası), and murmured prayers in front of their icons, not to the Christian God, but to the spirit itself. They also made sure not to cross themselves.... After the harvest, they lighted a candle in front of an icon in honor of Tängri babay, who had blessed them with a good harvest and a good stock.121

Why would the group described want to utilize icons in this way? It is not as if the Kriashens are confused and do not know how to practice Christianity or their traditional religion; their actions instead show a very purposeful use of Christian objects in a native context. This is certainly an example of "taking control of what the outsiders brought in and making use of it in their own terms" as Carrasco writes of the Maya. Deciding to direct prayers to a local spirit utilizes the power of the icon but does not subscribe to a worldview that would lock out traditional conceptions. In this particular example, by bringing icons into their traditional practices, it is as if they encompass the Christian elements within a total worldview that is very much oriented toward native conceptions. They are able to use Christian objects in a way that does not necessitate giving over sacred power to outside conceptions of God. Something new and different is occurring in the interface between native religion and Christianity.

To describe what occurs in this situation of transformation in which a new reality emerges, different from both previous native conceptions and from the dominant culture, Homi Bhabha’s framework of “hybridity” creates richer possibilities in understanding shifts in power relationships than does the commonly used term syncretism. Bhabha analyzes colonial relationships and discusses the ambivalence and complications that occur in the act of communication. For Bhabha, there is not a simple pre-packaged meaning that is passed along through speech and action:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space.122

In any act of communication, a “third space” is involved which may undermine the intentions of the speaker but also allow for new possibilities to emerge in the understanding of the listener.

Bhabha applies many of Jacques Lacan’s ideas about language to interactions in the colonial context. For Lacan, the process of language and communication is an alienating reality. Though the details of how he connects his ideas about language to the stages of human growth do not need to be covered here, Lacan sees language development in children as a process in which the human subject becomes de-centered through the use of language. When language enters the child’s life, objects can be named and difference arises. Lacan calls this the ‘symbolic realm.’ Terry Eagleton writes of this difference: “Language is ‘empty’ because it is just an endless process of

121 Keffeli, “Krâshen Apostacy,” 243. Tangri babay, as Keffeli explains, was a sky god in the indigenous tradition of the Kriashens. He was “a long-bearded old man” who could use the powers of nature to reward or punish human beings.

122 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 53.
difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite. Language is not a list of simple correspondences between signified and signifier for Lacan. Instead, there is slippage between words. Lacan writes that there are multiple possible paths for this slippage to take: the signifiers are like “rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings.” The signified itself is elusive and cannot be fully grasped. This chain of signifiers, slipping from one to the other, creates a metonymy where the passage of meaning is not a clear-cut passage of communication from one party to the other, but allows for possible confusions and reinterpretations of meaning.

Bhabha looks at the reinterpretations and use of the Bible in colonial India to help show how the indeterminacy of meaning can allow the colonized to rework power relationships. A conversation is discussed in which a group of Indians asserts that the Bible they are using must have come as a direct gift from God rather than from the English. The group asserts that they wear white to show their purity from sin, but assert that they will not take the sacrament and cannot be baptized because they must go work in the fields. In Bhabha’s analysis, these sorts of assertions and the natives’ questions are hybrid in nature and question the authority of the colonizer. He explains, “in this sense, then, it may be said that the presence of the book has acceded to the logic of the signifier and has been ‘separated,’ in Lacan’s use of the term, from ‘itself’…. Doubling repeats the fixed and empty presence of authority.” Because the signifier is never fully centered with the signified, this ambiguity allows for reinterpretation in the act of communication. There is never a settled determined meaning behind a word, and this allows for complex transformations in colonial contexts.

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.

Instead of seeing the group of Indians studying the Bible as a sign of the dominance of the colonizer into the lives of natives, Bhabha looks deeper and sees instead how Indians could flip around the original intentions of the colonizer and reorient the dynamics of power.

However, some authors do not see ‘hybridity’ as significantly different from previous conceptions. Asad critiques the concept of hybridity:

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125 Bhabha, *The Location*, 147.
126 Bhabha, *The Location*, 160.
127 Bhabha, *The Location*, 170-1.
Let us be clear: to speak of cultural syncretism or cultural hybrids presupposes a conceptual distinction between preexisting ('pure') cultures. Of course, all apparent cultural unities are the outcomes of diverse origins.... But the term *hybridity* (like *amalgam* or *composite*) does not seem to me very useful in thinking about this problem.\(^{128}\)

Asad, in equating hybridity to ‘amalgam’ and ‘composite’ shows that his concept of the term may not include the same ‘third space’ framework that Bhabha uses. Bhabha’s aim in describing hybridity is to create a more adequate way to look at colonial encounters, one in which the idea of mixing is challenged and a more complex framework of power relationships is revealed. Hybridity is not simply the combination of elements, but rather the creation of a new thing in the ambiguous space between colonizer and colonized. With these ideas in mind, it will be possible to gain new insights into some of the actions of minority peoples in nineteenth century Russia.

**The true faith of Abraham: revaluing traditional practices**

One of the most interesting ways in which minority peoples were able to subvert the dominant discourse about their religious practices was to represent their religion as the “faith of Abraham.”

In the 1850s a Ministry of State Domains official made the mistake of telling Chuvash that their faith was the most ancient and that they, in doing *chuki* (a form of sacrifice), were doing what Abraham and other “saints” had done. As a result, even two decades later, ‘This idea firmly established itself in Chuvash heads and at present is often presented by Chuvash as a most forceful argument.’ Thus clergy in this parish found themselves with the difficult task of explaining the theological differences between Chuvash and Old-Testament sacrifices. In general, as *novokreshchenye* became more familiar with biblical history, they presented their own animist practices as Old-Testament traditions, calling them ‘faith of Adam’ or ‘faith of Abraham.’\(^{129}\)

The Chuvash took the official’s statement and ran with it, in an unexpected way that challenged those who wanted to draw them toward Orthodoxy. Chuvash are able to place their traditional practices in a position of authority by showing that their own faith is associated with the same texts which support the history and power of Christianity. Not only do they see their practices as more valid because they seem similar to those within the Old Testament, but they also establish a connection between themselves and key figures of these texts. By calling their tradition “faith of Adam” or “faith of Abraham,” they may even be creating a genealogical link with Adam or Abraham as their ancestors. This reflects a common perception among many groups within Inner Asia of establishing their identities through links to certain ancestors. For example, many conversion stories to Islam among Turkic peoples include Sufi figures as both bringers

\(^{128}\) Asad, *Genealogies*, 263-4.

\(^{129}\) Werth, *At the Margins*, 105.
of Islam and progenitors. The Chuvash are thought to be a Turkic group, but claims that traditional practices were the “faith of Abraham” or “old faith” also spread to other local minority peoples. Though there are significant differences between some Finno-Ugric and Turkic groups in Inner Asia, Werth notes that ancestors also played a very important role in the understandings of the Mari. Placing one’s ancestors into close relationship with Biblical characters through kinship even allows the Chuvash and other groups to claim a connection to sacred power that is stronger than that of Christianity. While the missionaries have Abraham in a book, with this story, the Chuvash have him in an actual blood relationship.

It is no wonder that local clergy found it difficult to argue with the Chuvash about the “faith of Abraham.” The meanings behind the Old Testament texts and the local Russian official’s explanation are not set or determined concretely. Rather, as Lacan found with the very act of language itself, the signifier and signified do not align neatly. The Chuvash take the words and texts down a different chain of signifiers which leads to new possibilities of meaning. Because meaning is inherently ambivalent, this kind of reinterpretation by minority peoples can be difficult to disprove by others who would like to argue against it. As Bhabha writes for his study of reinterpretation of the Bible, authority can be restructured in the interaction between colonizer and colonized: “Deprived of their full presence, the knowledges of cultural authority may be articulated with forms of ‘native’ knowledges…. This may lead… to questions of authority that the authorities – the Bible included – cannot answer.” The Chuvash’s questions pose a significant challenge, and the local clergy have trouble trying to disprove their assertions of kinship with the figures of the Bible.

Mari monastic movement

The reestablishing of connections to sacred power not only occurred through representations of indigenous beliefs and practices as more valid than Christianity, but also through the adoption of Christianity in a way that connected minority groups to the sacred without Russian intermediaries. The founding of a monastery by a dedicated group of Mari men seems very different from resistance to missionary efforts but also reveals a reorientation of identity that creates a more direct access to power for these Mari.

Russian observers sometimes seem baffled by the religious fervor of the Mari, and at others frustrated by their lack of adherence to Christian norms. Some highland Maris actively accepted Orthodoxy, and one ethnographer wrote that these Maris “are more religious even than Russians.” However, more usually, there was criticism of the religiosity of Maris. They were critiqued for making sacrifices to keremet spirits,

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132 Bhabha, *The Location*, 164.
133 Werth, *At the Margins*, 203.
being “inclined to heavy drinking,” “almost never” going to church, not having children baptized, and allowing couples to live in “debauched cohabitation” without the proper Orthodox sanctification of their marriages.134

Confusion and skepticism about the religiosity of Maris would continue to be shown in reactions to a Mari movement to establish a native monastery in 1861. As was often the case with Mari leaders who took action in times of change, at the head of the monastic movement was a Mari who had been inspired to act by a dream “calling on him to proselytize.”135 Mostly in the western part of Kazan province, many highland Maris had begun to espouse Orthodoxy and were working for the conversion of others. Werth writes that accounts state that thousands of highland Maris became Christians at this time. Some of the most active Mari Christians, lead by Mikhail Gerasimov (the dreamer), created a place to live in the forest along the Sura river and “cultivated a garden and bee-hives, took vows of celibacy… and rejected the use of wine, beer, meat, and even butter.”136 Choosing to build their community in the forest near the Sura river seems important. Sacrifice and prayer to the keremet spirits were performed in forested areas near villages, and one account states that “a highland Mari retains in his soul love for the forest and always goes to the Sura river with great satisfaction.”137 Although the tradition of creating isolated monasteries was a long-established tradition in Russian Orthodoxy, and the source has to be treated with some skepticism, it is possible to see how Mari may have been creatively joining aspects of Christianity and previous sacred values of the forest and local landscape. As discussed earlier, Bhabha’s statement that “the production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space” is helpful in understanding the process these reformers were going through.138 The creation of meaning was a process of reorientation of past religious spaces into something that could become a hybrid reality, a way that Mari identity could become both Mari and Christian. Just as the Indians discussing the Bible in Bhabha’s analysis “resist the miraculous equivalence of God and the English,” the Mari by creating their own Christian monastic movement are able to reroute connections to the sacred that do not include Russian intermediaries.139

The activists petitioned the emperor to allow them to establish a monastery, but soon ran into criticism of their movement. It is interesting that much of the criticism comes from Russians who thought that the movement was not motivated from within the Mari community.

Sergei Nurmenskii…in 1862… contended that the activists’ emphasis on seclusion, based on Gerasimov’s claim that married people could not attain the heavenly kingdom, had caused many activists to abandon their families entirely. The source of this view on marriage, according to Nurminskii, was almost surely local Skoptsy, religious sectarians whose deep commitment to sexual abstinence took the form of self-castration.140

134 Werth, At the Margins, 97-8.
135 Ibid., 204. Unfortunately, there is not any more detailed discussion of this dream.
136 Werth, At the Margins, 204.
137 Werth, At the Margins, 29, 211.
138 Bhabha, The Location, 53.
139 Bhabha, The Location, 168.
140 Werth, At the Margins, 204.
The Ministry of State Domains... contended that a local priest had disingenuously convinced a group of Maris that seclusion was necessary for salvation in order to have someone look after beehives that he had set up in the forest.... These hermits settled in cells that they constructed out of trees cut down illegally in state forests.141

It seems that Russian observers had a very hard time understanding that Maris could take decisive actions, or that their actions could be based upon a sincere religious conviction. The first account blames the movement on sectarians who must have adversely influenced the Maris; the second blames the movement on a corrupt and greedy local priest and points out that Mari are stealing state resources. There is very little that gives Maris any possibility of internally motivated action, unless that action is tied up in the stealing of material goods. Most revealing might be the statement from the Ministry of State Domains that the creation of a Mari monastery should be discouraged because Maris wanted to create a monastery in order "to entrust their supervision to someone from among themselves."142 The Synod ruled that the monastery would not be established at that time. Perhaps such a great deal of criticism from Russian clerics and officials shows that the Mari movement had very successfully challenged certain assumptions about power, religion, and ethnicity in the Russian context. Finally, in 1868, after years of advocacy by some Maris, persuasion from a more supportive archbishop in Kazan, and a warning from the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod that the apostasy to Islam of baptized Tatars might influence Mari, state officials agreed to the monastery. The dedication of the monastery has some interesting aspects. An icon transported to the new monastery went in ceremonial procession through many villages, and Werth includes one missionary's description of the procession.

Big groups of pilgrims walked behind the icon: some hurried to kiss the icon; others fell before the icon as it was being carried – they fell not individually, as in sometimes the case in our region, but by many scores, thus forming along the road one long row, which lay down on the ground beforehand; the people flocked even more when the procession stopped, for example, in the field for performance of a service.143

Instead of individual religious observance, the Maris are acting in community. Maris emphasize community through many of their actions; even among those who were continuing in their native religious practices, the nineteenth century was a time in which larger gatherings were occurring and religious leaders were having visions that pertained not only to themselves but to the entire group.144 In the monastic movement, Maris are making Christianity into something that has meaning for their community, not something that is only based on individual prayer and conversion.

141 Werth, At the Margins, 205.
142 Werth, At the Margins, 205.
143 Werth, At the Margins, 207.
144 Werth, At the Margins, 57, 31.
Mari women were also an important part of the Christian movement. Around thirty-five women started a religious commune in the 1870s and then began a convent with the sanction of the Synod and Emperor in 1877. In the commune, “the local priest provided religious instruction, while an elderly Mari woman taught [the members] literacy, needlework, and arithmetic” and in the later convent “the women were to perfect their knowledge of Christianity, learn needlework and other handicrafts ‘intelligible to women,’ and spread this knowledge to Mari girls through a school.”

It seems important that the commune incorporated not only leadership from the priest but also from an elderly Mari woman. In nineteenth century Russia, these Mari women were not alone in establishing a convent. In fact, religious communities of women sprung up frequently among Russians at this time in grassroots movements. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of information on the creation of this convent among Mari women, but Werth does note that the women were famous for their singing. One visitor even stated, “You will hardly believe that you are listening to the singing of Cheremis girls.” Again, people outside the Mari community seem to find it difficult to recognize that in fact, Maris can be responsible for these achievements. The tenacity of the men involved in the monastic movement and their ability to weather all of the criticisms through time, as well as the internally motivated women’s movement, show that many Maris were undergoing an important reorientation of their identities.

Though more rarely mentioned in official sources, women played a very central role in religious movements in the Volga-Kama region. Agnes Kefeli, in her article “The Role of Tatar and Kriashen Women in the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge, 1800-1870,” discusses how Kriashen women were active in both the domestic and the more public realms in spreading and deepening Islam in their communities. Women played a key role in the transmission of Sufi stories, religious education of children, and formed a link by marriage and family with many of the more famous male Islamic activists and petitioners. We can assume that women were also playing an important part in the events under discussion among the Mari, but unfortunately they appear very infrequently in Werth’s analysis, likely because they only rarely appear in official documents. However, there is some discussion of women and their centrality to religious conversion. A Viatka bishop wrote:

Newly converted Cheremis of the male sex, who are not yet sufficiently consolidated in Orthodoxy, hearing each day harmful advice and requests about the old faith from their wives, and heeding the suggestions, orders, and even curses of their mothers, could easily return to their earlier paganism.

Werth states that women might have been more attached to traditional religion because of the church’s assumption of the authority of male heads of household and because

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145 Werth, *At the Margins*, 207.
147 Werth, *At the Margins*, 207.
150 Werth, *At the Margins*, 98.
women were less likely to know Russian. It appears that women could be on the cutting edge of both aspects of conversion, however, because they were also sometimes the most ardent followers of Orthodox Christianity.\textsuperscript{151}

\textit{‘Kugu-Sorta’ or Big Candle revivalist movement}

Possibly one of the most creative ways in which Mari responded to their situation in the late nineteenth century was in the “Kugu-Sorta” or “Big Candle” movement. This was not a conversion to Christianity or simply a return to previous traditional practices, but was rather a revivalist movement which reshaped native Mari conceptions and practices into a very new and unique form. Werth writes that this movement is an example of a “rationalized” paganism that differs greatly from past religious forms. He uses Max Weber’s concepts of “traditional” and “rationalized” religion to argue that the Mari revivalist movement participates in the discourse of Orthodox Christianity, even though its followers represent it as being the true Mari religion originating in the distant past. In Weber’s view, the characteristics of rationalized religion include a more distant God requiring theological explanation, while traditional religions are “intertwined with the concrete details of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{152} Werth argues that the movement is in fact an example of “internal conversion.” He explains that he is following Geertz’s work here; internal conversion is a way in which a native group can significantly change their native practices without converting to an outside tradition that has had a negative relationship with the indigenous group. The group can in fact draw from an outside tradition, such as Christianity, while framing the changes in terms of an imagined ‘pure’ native past.\textsuperscript{153} The movement certainly was not a return to primordial religious conceptions, but the words and actions of these Mari also use the dominant discourse to attempt to place themselves in a position of equal authority with Orthodox Christianity in creative ways.

Werth writes that in the Iaransk district of Viatka province the Mari were facing increased economic difficulties, deforestation, and the building of new roads in the 1880s and 90s.\textsuperscript{154} According to Werth, the connection between conversion to Christianity and Russification was perceived as especially strong in this particular region because Il’minskii’s program of native education, translation of religious texts into indigenous languages, and native clergy had not reached this area.\textsuperscript{155} The situation seems to have been especially conducive to a native revivalist movement.

A group of Mari in this district decided that blood sacrifice (a common Mari religious action was to sacrifice animals, sometimes in significant numbers at large-scale gatherings to ensure good harvests) was “unpleasing to God” and decided to create a new group. Instead of simply wanting to promote native religion in contrast to Orthodoxy, they wanted to make important changes to their traditional practices in order to return to an earlier time thought to be more pure.

\textsuperscript{151} Werth, \textit{At the Margins}, 98-9. 
\textsuperscript{152} Werth, “Big Candles,” 146. 
\textsuperscript{153} Werth, “Big Candles,” 150. 
\textsuperscript{154} Werth, “Big Candles,” 157-8. 
\textsuperscript{155} Werth, “Big Candles,” 163-4.
As one observer noted in 1866, ‘Cheremis are convinced that their present faith is not at all the one that was before, when people were righteous; today, in their opinion, the faith has already lost its purity and has become the kind [of faith] that one finds among sinful people.’

Although one might find similarities between the group’s new conceptions of religious commitment and Christianity, from the viewpoint of these Mari, they were returning to a previous state of goodness and purity that had become corrupted. This kind of mindset helps to put religious power into the hands of the Mari. They argued that “their ancestors had been baptized through force and deceit, and that ‘our fathers [and] we were Pure Cheremis, and not Orthodox.’” They saw the influence of Christianity as a polluting force, and connected it to ‘blackness’ while they used the color white and terms of purity when discussing what they saw as their own religious tradition. In a petition in 1892, they wrote that they “will never be untrue to our Faith and religion and blacken our conscience, as other Cheremis have done.” The idea of returning to a former state of purity allows this group of Mari to effect change within their religious tradition without feeling that they are drawing from Russian Orthodoxy. While some of the changes they espoused show the influence of their Russian neighbors, they disassociate themselves from Christianity by looking to an imagined pure past. This kind of reasoning contrasts with common Mari perceptions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Many (baptized) Mari conformed to the minimum requirements that the church had established at the time while still taking part in keremet veneration and other traditional practices. When confronted by a local missionary, a community of Mari in Urzhum district argued that “they did not reject the church, but that ‘they cannot abandon these ancient pagan rituals.’” However, as we can see, by the late nineteenth century Mari in the Iaransk district were forming a more explicit rejection of Orthodoxy and a systematic representation of their traditional religion.

One of the most important clues to exploring this movement is the title that the group adopted. Other Mari referred to them as Kugu Sorta, or Big Candle, because their ceremonies included the use of a large candle. However, the members of the movement called themselves “our white-cheremis-oral-pagan community” and the faith “customary ancient white-cheremis-oral-pagan faith and ritual.” These titles come from petitions to Russian authorities, showing that they were constructed in the act of communication and interaction between Mari and Russians. Werth argues that the terms ‘faith’ and ‘religion,’ often used by reformers when portraying their group, show how the Mari were “rationalizing” their religious perspectives: “[they] openly asserted that their beliefs constituted ‘faith,’ in the sense of internal conviction and a concrete set of propositions about the relationship between humans and the spiritual world, as opposed to a set of ritual sacrifices demanded by the keremet’ and similar spirits.” Though it would be useful to question the concept of ‘rationalization’ here, it is clear that

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156 Werth, “Big Candles,” 150.
159 Werth, At the Margins, 60.
the Mari want to show the equality of their religion by defining it in ways comparable to
nineteenth century Orthodox discourse. The term religia, Werth writes, “implied
institutions and official recognition, structure, and coherence.” This kind of definition
helps to bring Mari religion to the same level as Orthodoxy. These Mari saw a need for
religious change but centered it around what they saw as their own Mari traditions,
rejecting Christianity, which they associated with Russification. Importantly, these Mari
also wanted to differentiate their faith from that of Christianity. The word ‘oral’ specifies
a way in which they set themselves apart from Orthodoxy. They seem to have
perceived the emphasis on understanding and education which was growing in
Orthodoxy in the nineteenth century, and they responded by pointing out the oral nature
of their own tradition. In addition, Werth notes the use of the term ‘ritual’ in their self-
definitions:

It was as if they wanted to elevate their beliefs to the level of ‘faith’ and ‘religion,’
by the Russian understandings of these words, while at the same time retaining
the ritualistic conception that made their beliefs unique and indigenous. They
were trying, it would seem, to have it both ways.

‘Ritual,’ as Werth notes, would help to identify the aspects of Mari religion which were
more based on a traditional model, with (reformed) sacrifices and ceremonies. As
people reforming their traditional religion and living in a situation on the edges of
Russian and Mari religious norms, they could ‘have it both ways.’ This reform movement
allowed them to recreate their own faith, represent it to the Russians, and yet maintain
what they see as the central, pure, and ancient truths of traditional Mari religion.

Although Mari in the earlier 1800s were more reluctant to speak about their
religious practices and did not actively send petitions as much as their Tatar neighbors,
by the later 1800s the Kugu Sorta community was taking action to represent their
religion as valid and possessing as sound a theology as Orthodoxy. These Mari went so
far as to present their faith at the Kazan Scientific and Industrial Exhibition of 1890.
Andrei Iakmanov, the Mari leader of the movement, stated, “there is nothing secret in
our faith; everyone can come and ask whatever he wants; we conceal nothing.”
“Concealing nothing” is a way for the Mari to gain recognition for their religious
movement. It is as if by systematizing and representing their religious practices, they
can put themselves on an equal footing with Orthodoxy, and put down any arguments
against the validity of their religion. Interestingly enough, there was another added level
of complexity to their display of Mari faith. The badges and papers which the Mari at the
exhibition received for their successful presentation were reinterpreted with new layers
of significance once they returned home.

They referred to these ‘papers of approval and badges’ in their petitions to the
emperor, and used them to further their cause within the village. The clergy
reported that one Mari had received a medal at the exhibition and was now
wearing it on his chest and explaining to villages that is was given to him ‘for

pagan faith.’ Others displayed the certificate on their gate a few days before Easter and explained ‘that although there were many people at the exhibition, the authorities recognized only their faith as correct.’

These material signifiers were used in ways out of the control of the original intentions of those who had given them to the Mari participants. As Bhabha writes, there is room for reinterpretation in the act of communication because there is no concrete meaning inherent in the signifier. In this case, instead of words, the signifiers as physical objects are imbued with meaning; they make the Mari religion not only as important, but more important, than other faiths.

Materiality also played an important role in other ways for the members of Kugu Sorta. One example reveals the clear distinctions that Kugu Sorta members found between their movement and Christianity, and between their group and the contemporary version of Mari tradition that they felt had gone into decline. Werth writes, “in 1888-89, members of Kugu Sorta buried various Christian and old pagan religious objects (icons, crosses, etc.). This burial signified the death of these religions, while Kugu Sorta itself was believed to remain alive and vibrant.”

The movement was not only limited to a new concept of religious rituals, without blood sacrifice, but was also focused upon the objects they used in their everyday lives. While Werth is correct in saying that they bought into the modern discourse in certain ways, they also made important steps in an attempt to reject recent changes in the sources of their goods and clothing. They advocated the use of local materials to create everyday objects such as tables and buckets and even “rejected… matches and kerosene.” When explaining their actions, Mari pointed out the need for locally known materials in their goods, and also explained the actions of their ancestors as being a source of motivation: “Imbued with strong respect for nature, the reformers firmly opposed the use of factory-made goods, above all in their religious ceremonies…. ‘we do not know what they are made of, and besides our ancestors avoided factory goods.’”

The Kugu Sorta took practical measures to enact their convictions, which showed their very real challenge to the power structures in place but also resulted in the authorities taking measures against them. Even though their community’s previous baptisms made it impossible for them to leave the Orthodox Church by law, the group petitioned the tsar to ask for permission to be officially recognized as followers of their ‘pagan’ religion and also stopped paying for the services of local Christian clergy. The bishop of Viatka at the time ruled that their actions constituted apostasy, and eight of their leaders were exiled in 1893 to Siberia and were only able to come back to their home villages in 1906.

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166 Werth, “Big Candles,” 155.
167 Werth, “Big Candles,” 159.
was no unified opposition to the bishop’s ruling. Although the Kugu Sorta proved to be short-lived, it was a creative and effective way for a certain group of Mari to reorient themselves in a changing world. It allowed Mari to make significant changes in their traditional religious practices while simultaneously drawing a distinct line between Mari and Russian identity.

**Conclusion**

On the surface, situations discussed here seem almost contradictory. Chuvash reworked the concept of ‘Abraham’s faith’ in order to lend power to their native practices; Maris worked to establish Orthodox Christian communities of their own; and another group of Mari began a pagan revivalist movement. The first and last look like rejections of Christianity, while the Mari monastic movement seems like an enthusiastic embracing of this religion. However, rather than being antithetical to one another, it seems to me that each example reveals how minority peoples were reorienting themselves in response to a situation where the impetus to become assimilated to the wider society and the depth of Orthodox missionary intervention had been increasing. Although minority groups in late imperial Russia may be seen as being on the borders of what might be called ‘colonialism,’ their actions show a powerful, pervasive reorientation to their traditional religion during the nineteenth century. The Kriashens utilize Christian icons in specific ways in their veneration of keremet spirits, and Chuvash reinterpret the history of the Old Testament to establish links of kinship with Biblical characters. In the 1860s, certain Maris retreated into the forest, where they emphasized asceticism and formed their own Christian community. These groups are reworking their relationships to the Russian society around them and creating a renewed, concrete identity. They have restructured meaning in the world in response to a changing landscape and a changing empire.
CONCLUSION

Describing the religions of minority peoples in the late Russian empire requires the application of new interpretive lenses. Rather than seeing minority groups who incorporate elements of other traditions into native practices as confused or lacking a concrete identity, it is important to challenge preconceptions about what constitutes religious boundaries. In fact, the religious groupings of Islam, Christianity, and ‘paganism’ do not have a steadfast reality that is essential or unchanging over time. In fact, among Volga-Kama groups, shared practices show that there was a similarity of religious discourse in the region. Placing minority peoples’ conceptions and practices into the wider context of Inner Asian traditions sheds new light on their religiosity. As DeWeese argues, native forms of religiosity shape how indigenous groups respond to and rework aspects of traditions such as Islam and Christianity with which they come into contact. The importance of ancestors, sacred landscapes, and stories of conversion for many groups in this region reveal important continuities. Terms like ‘animism’ do not help to usefully describe these native traditions, but placing them within a wider comparative context can provide insight into their approaches to the sacred. More interdisciplinary work is needed which crosses the boundaries of Russian historical studies, Islamic studies, and work on the indigenous traditions of both the Volga-Kama region and other Inner Asian areas.

The deep continuities between the religiosity of minority groups in the region shows that it may be more fruitful to study all religions of a certain region rather than to focus upon a tradition considered distinct such as Christianity or Islam. Perhaps rather than organizing analyses or even academic courses in terms of ‘Islam’ or ‘Christianity,’ it is better to look at ‘religions of Russia’ or ‘religions of the Middle East.’ This is not to say that there are not divisions or rivalries among religious groups, but rather that there is much to be gained from recognizing shared characteristics within regions. For example, if one wants to research sacred sites in the Volga-Kama region, it does not make sense to focus only upon Tatars’ descriptions of Sufi saints thought to be buried in certain locations. It is also important to recognize the interactions with these spaces of other groups in the region who also consider these sites sacred, such as the Mari, and to look at the ways in which indigenous concepts about the ancestors and sacred places was integrated with Islam or Christianity.

By the nineteenth century, several groups in the Volga-Kama region were feeling more pressure from Russian settlement and presence in the region. Though many groups had previously established relationships with neighboring traditions through adapting certain practices, by the last half of the nineteenth century many minority peoples were reworking their religious identities. They were able to significantly alter their religious practices and conceptions while also maintaining their communities as centers of religious power. A Mari group made Christianity their own through an internally motivated and governed monastic movement. They were creating a direct path to sacred power that did not involve Russian intermediaries. Others were rethinking or re-representing their indigenous practices. The Chuvash, in the act of communication with Russians about the Old Testament, developed ties of kinship to

170 DeWeese, Islamization, 29.
‘Abraham’s Faith’ which lent validity and power to their own native practices. Another group of Mari led a revival of native religion called the ‘Kugu Sorta’ which substantially altered Mari practice but was represented as being the pure religion of their ancestors. Though the movement was small-scale and ended in the exile of several members, it also shows a very innovative response to the situation of this group. Without resorting to adopting Christianity which they saw as connected to Russian identity, these Mari were able to reinvent their own tradition to fit with their needs during the late 1800s.

Concepts from studies of western European colonialism can greatly enrich the discussion of religious change among minority groups in late imperial Russia. More dialogue and debate between those who work within the Russian context and those within western European studies can help to stretch and question aspects of post-colonial theory while also shedding new light on situations that developed in Russia. Studies of Russia sometimes seem isolated from work on Western Europe, and terms like ‘syncretism’ and ‘animism,’ while they are questioned in some historical studies of Russia, do not often receive the same level of scrutiny as they do when brought up in research of other world regions. Questioning the assumptions of Russian primary sources about the religiosity of minority peoples can allow scholars to gain better insight into the nature of traditional religions in the region as well as the profound reorientations occurring in the nineteenth century.
Bibliography


