About missionary studies today

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About missionary studies today: new approaches on the study of Christianisation among the Khanty and the Nenets

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The historiography of the Christianisation of the Russian North is very peculiar and probably more dependent on strong ideologies than other fields of research. The fact is that there are roughly two kinds of materials, to which we may add some late research, which is certainly due to expand.

Historiography

The first categories of materials, which are undoubtedly most precious, are those who come from the missionaries themselves or from missionary reviews and publications, i.e the published diaries or reports of missionary activity. Actually the first ever missionary to have worked in Western Siberia at the beginning of the 18th century, Filofey Leshchinski, hasn't left personally any texts, but he had with him, at the beginning of his experience, a chronicler, Grigori Novitski, whose book gives the reader an interesting account of the first contact with the natives (Novitski 1973). Unfortunately, Novitski was killed in a skirmish and we have no other witness of later periods of Filofey's work. But his followers, as Archimandrite Veniamin in the tundras of the European Russian North, published themselves accounts of their work: they had anyhow to report to the ecclesiastic authorities and these reports were later published. A shorter kind of diary was published in two parts (Veniamin 1850, 1851), as well as a comprehensive study of the population Veniamin worked with, the Western Nenets (Veniamin 1855). Among the published materials, we should not omit the numerous articles written by the last leader of the Obdorsk mission, Irinarh Shemanovski, in the central missionary journals of the Orthodox Church (see Shemanovski 2005, Toulouze 2005). These are extremely interesting texts, reflecting the daily concerns and the reflexive thoughts of a fascinating personality.

Other data in this first category come from another kind of Orthodox sources. They are useful to the researcher, as collections of data (Svedenie 1851; Abramov 1846, 1854, 1854a; Kratki ocherk 1892, 1893, 1893a; Missionerskoe 1893; Nosilov 1898, 1898a), especially about the background of the person involved in this activity and the main results of missionary work. Their point of view is logically biased: the "apostles" of the North are presented as quasi-saints, as heroes of the crusade in spreading the Christian faith, which is both spiritually and politically a task whose appropriateness is never questioned, both from the Church's and from the overall political point of view.

So the first series of sources is directly connected with the Orthodox Church and precedes the Revolution, which put practically an end to the missionaries' activities towards the peoples of the North.

The second is very limited: it is the small amount of comments that were published during the Soviet era, which lasted for long decades. We may assert that for the studies on Christianity this period is a very poor one. On the one hand there are very few studies on religion as a whole, and, moreover, what has been published is very clearly ideologically hostile to the slightest manifestation of religiosity. Actually, the Soviet writings in which missionary work towards the aborigines of the North is mentioned, are those published in the first period of the Soviet rule. Let me mention Bazanov's books, which are dedicated to Education in the tsarist era (1936, 1939) as well as Ogryzko's monograph (1941), which concentrates on the 18th century. True, in the 1970ies, a dissertation by Kononenko has been defended in Leningrad, emphasising the synchretic features of the Western Siberian's Christianity (for example; Kononenko 1970).

We may thus distinguish in the Soviet era two periods. The first one, in the 1930ies, is the most active, for it is still important to demonstrate the bad influence of religion on the people. The authors are all very clearly hostile to the Church and all that the priests could do was analysed as intrinsically bad. Still they use for their demonstration sources which are often to be taken seriously. They are not interested in the Natives' spiritual life, for the spiritual aspect is considered as non relevant from the Soviet point of view, but they mention the missionaries' deeds in connection with two domains: education and the creation of written languages (Efirov 1933, 1934, 1948). They could not deny that the first attempts to open schools for the indigenous peoples were initiated by the missionaries. Bazanov's book presents these schools as places comparable to hell. I understand these statements as proceeding from a selection of information: the authors look for any statement that confirms their prejudice and they use as an expression of the overall truth, often omitting to take into account the period to which they refer. Anachronism is regularly used. This kind of propaganda may not be based on invented facts: I do not doubt of the veracity of most data, there has certainly been abuses in the schools and undoubtedly their aims were not to train an intellectual local elite, but to confirm Christians in their faith. Therefore, they could not correspond to what was accepted by the Soviet dominant ideology.

Later on during the Soviet period the deeds of the missionaries in connection with the indigenous peoples are no more an issue: the official position is repeated but has no more to be proved. Therefore the later studies just ignore the issue: there are lots of studies focusing on the traditional religion, but Christianity is almost completely ignored. Usually, the conclusion is that whatever the missionaries attempted to do, there were absolutely no results and all the achievements in terms of literacy and education were exclusively due to the Soviet power and its policy in favour of the indigenous peoples.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old taboos were undoubtedly lifted. It was certainly possible to fill the gaps in research, but this was not attempted for long years: the subject continued to be ignored by academic circles. The ecclesiastic circles started earlier for rehabilitation: the web-sites of the Orthodox Church are active and have been dealing with historical studies, filling the gap of the 70 years of Soviet rule and republishing old Church studies (i.e. Makari 1845). The missionaries' lives, like those of the Saints, have been written as pages of the history of the Church. In the last years however the trend towards a more serious scientific approach is to be noticed.

In the procedure of rehabilitating some of the important personalities of the Church, a major attention has been devoted to Irinarh Shemanovski, who led the Obdorsk mission from 1898 to 1917. His name had already been given in the Soviet period to the Salehard's Library and Museum, which had been founded by the Irinarh himself. At the beginning of the 2000s the museum and the library were rebuilt and inserted in a huge cultural centre called "Irinarh Shemanovski". Several books have been published in Tyumen, collections of texts by Irinarh himself as diaries and reports by the missionaries of the Obdorsk mission (Putevye 2002, I

zdes' 2003, Iz istorii 2004). These materials are most precious. They reflect very different issues. On the one hand, they reveal how the mission was organised, how the people attended the different tasks they were in charge of. They also reveal the very human conflicts and tensions between the missionaries, who are shown as ordinary persons thrown in a quite difficult position, preaching the Gospel about people they are not familiar with, with the only company of other missionaries, in difficult material position, with very few support and much control from their hierarchy. These materials reflect also the different characters of the personalities, and their approach to the missionary work.

They allow research to be developed at a larger scale. I would like to concentrate on two new directions of "missionary studies", which seem to be dominant at the moment, focusing on the preliminary results of my own research.

Some new questions in "missionary studies"

Why, at the beginning of the 21st century, is it of some importance to reflect on what happened in the encounter between Natives and missionaries in the 19th century? On the one hand, there is a gap to be filled and the need to understand history more precisely: as I said, this domain is still widely unexplored. But there are more reasons to plunge into the Christian encounter of the 19th century than one might suppose: in the last decade, Protestant missionaries have been most successful in converting the Native's population – both the Nenets in Bolshezemelskaya tundra and in the Yamal Peninsula and the Khantys for example on the Yugan (to mention only regions in the Western part of Siberia, but this phenomenon appears all over Eurasia). The encounter with them has changed their lives: the banishment of spirits, which were formerly a compulsory element of lifestyle, the attention for the fate beyond the grave, the serious involvement of the Natives with the Protestant form of Christianity, the preference of marrying within the community of the Believers, are new phenomena in the aborigines' experience and represent cultural changes that must be taken into account. As it is not the first encounter with Christianity, it is interesting and revealing to compare both encounters with different forms of Christianity at different periods, and to try to explain the difference in results.

I shall not here develop this analysis, which is just at the beginning and is the object of a collaborative research by three scholars[1]. I just intended here to make some general remarks on the possible perspectives in a domain that has remained on the margins of anthropological research until the very last years. Let me point out two particularly promising directions.

The first aspect I have been interested in is the personality of the missionaries: in prior research, the missionaries were seen as tools, either working for the Church or as a support of the State's exploiting system, as its allies in oppressing the minorities. I am interested in the anthropology of the missionaries themselves as personalities, in connection with the period they have been working in, in their choices and their tactics (Toulouze 2005; 2005a). Secondly, in collaboration with other scholars, I have been paying attention to indigenous agency in the encounter with Orthodox missionaries.

[1] Within the framework of the NEWREL project (New religious movements in the Russian North : competitive use of religiousness in post-socialist Russia), in the BOREAS project (ESF 2006-2009), Laur Vallikivi (Tartu/Cambridge), Tatiana Vagramenko (St. Petersburg) and Eva Toulouze (Tartu/Paris) have started to gather data and to put them together in order to achieve a comparative study of the encounter. I develop the historical experience with Orthodoxy, and it will be compared with Laur Vallikivi's fieldwork data from Bolshezemelskaya tundra (Vallikivi 2003, 2005) and Tatjana Vagramenko's fieldwork data from the Yamal peninsula.

Personalities and Zeitgeist

The Orthodox missionaries' strategy has been changing in time. Although the orthodox missionaries seem to have mainly one focus, one main aim, which is to have indigenous people baptised, the perception of baptism has been undergoing a deep transformation between the 18th and the 19th century. The Apostle of Western Siberia, Filofey Leshchinski, who was the first ever missionary to have systematically attempted to spread Christianity among the indigenous peoples of the North, achieved a large number of baptisms (around 40 000, according to the official figures) among the Khanty and the Mansi in Western Siberia. While he travelled alone, he did not achieve any result; but as he was granted by the governor of Siberia in 1713 extensive means – a boat, money and protection by soldiers – he achieved a huge amount of conversions, although at some times the encounter might degenerate into physical skirmishes. Filofey's methods seem not to have been mild, and violence has been certainly used of, from symbolical to physical violence. According to the understandings of his time, he does not seem to have spoken much: his conviction means were not so much arguments, as deeds, like a powerful and magnificent appearance, the performance of baptism and the destruction of idols. He intended to prove the Natives that his God, the God of the Russians, was the strongest, as their own Gods let themselves be destroyed without any reaction… This emphasis on competition contributed certainly to the idea that the Russian God was not different, but more powerful and violent that the indigenous ones and that his worship was of the same nature. Dialogue and speech are in this phase almost worthless: baptism has still a magical power and seems to be stronger than the person's awareness of Christianity. The emphasis on the number of baptism achieved is not a proof of the superficiality of the missionary's goals, but of a certain understanding of baptism as a rite through which the Holy Spirit is meant to act and to transform the baptised into a Christian, independently of his or her consciousness of the spiritual processes at work.

When archimandrite Veniamin, one century later, in 1825, starts his mission among the European Nenets, Christianity has been present in this region for some time through both the Russians and the Komis, the latter being very influent among the reindeer herders, for the Izhma Komis by that time had already huge herds and were often the masters of Nenets herders. During the five years Veniamin's mission lasted, the main tools had shifted from deeds to words: Veniamin destroys idols as Filofey had done, but this is not his main argument. He uses abundantly speech and conviction in order to get the Nenets baptised, through an interpreter as well as, in the last years, by himself. His reports narrate how, while meeting the Nenets, he speaks to them until they accept (or definitely refuse) baptism. The simple fact that Veniamin has felt the necessity of learning to communicate in Nenets shows the importance he accords to speech and conviction, and this is new. Conviction through speech is the main tool, the active one, although Veniamin uses other means too, as the example of a miraculous healing: a Nenets who had not the use of his arms became able to make the sign of the cross and is the living proof of God's power… Also we may assume that the presence of representatives of the police force accompanying the missionary has certainly been an enforcement of conviction. But speech is now at the centre of missionary activity.

It remains so: after Veniamin, the abundant reports we have are from the second half of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century. Christianity has become so much a part of the indigenous world that in their expeditions the missionaries meet both Christianised and non Christian Natives, often living together. This shows that Christianisation has not provoked any split in the Nenets or Khanty communities. Now the missionaries insist, in their dialogue with the Natives, on the preparation to baptism, which was already an issue for Veniamin. Moreover, they try to convince the non-baptised to ASK for baptism: they require

the decisive initiative to come from the future Christian him- or herself. Moreover, in the last decades, especially under Irinarh's rule, the function of the mission seems to shift towards social and educative action, for Irinarh is very much interested in issues that are connected with life in this world – improving the indigenous peoples' life and health conditions, give the orphans' education, improve knowledge about them etc (Toulouze 2004). This is probably the reason why it has been possible, during the Soviet rule, to have a museum called after Irinarh Shemanovski…

Indigenous agency

In their reports, the missionaries describe their interaction with the Natives. A thorough reading of these texts allows drawing some model of interaction. What we discover is surprising, especially for those who are familiar with the Soviet-era clichés. We had the impression that Christianity was introduced by force and imposed to natives who were not able to deploy their own agency in this concern. Repeating what the 19th century travellers reported, we were convinced that the indigenous population accepted passively the Christians and Christianity but continued nevertheless to adore their own idols: thus, baptism was seen as a formal acceptance of the ruler's game without any fundamental relevance.

We have no reasons to doubt of the veracity of the missionaries' detailed reports on the encounters with the Natives. They are naturally written from their point of view, but the facts they report are most probably to be taken into account as real facts. We discover that the indigenous peoples, Khanty or Nenets, were actually the ones who decided indeed how to act towards the possibility of becoming Christians, and that accepting, or asking for baptism was a most conscious and deliberate decision, not a way of complying with the missionaries' entreaties. Christianity meant for the Natives the choice of worship the Russian God. Whenever they considered this choice to be useful to them, they did not hesitate in making it. Therefore we may read quite often that people went on their own initiative to the missionaries and asked for baptism. Even in Veniamin's time, this happened indeed, especially with people working for Russians or for Komi, either individually or collectively. Later on, in the second half of the 19th century, these cases became more and more frequent. The missionaries report the reasons alleged for asking for baptism: the most widespread is a promise. A person is in danger of death – either being lost in a storm, or being ill or his or her children are in danger – and promises to be baptised in case of survival. They go to the missionary in order to fulfil their promise. This explains how, in some families, not all members are baptised: in one case, the only baptised member of a large Khanty family was a nine years old child. There are other motivations, usually even more practical: one of the main reasons for baptism is the wish to be married to a Christian person. Actually the same reason may work the other way round: Christian parents refuse to baptise their daughters, alleging that this would possibly hinder their marriage with a non Christian.

What we discover while reading the missionaries' own reports is interesting, because it gives us a more precise understanding of the indigenous agency in the 19th century. We discover that the Nenets and the Khanty were not at all passive in the encounter with Christianity and they kept a very thorough control over their lives. I am sure that further research on the basis of the existing materials will lead to other fascinating discoveries.

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