WAYS OF ADAPTATION TO THE ANTI-RELIGIOUS ATTACK OF THE SOVIET REGIME AND THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN OLONETS KARELIA AT PRESENT

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of Karelians – by Karelia I mean Russian Karelia, or the Republic of Karelia, which always has been part of Russia – there were some major events in the 1920s and 1930s which posed a serious threat to their own ethnic culture. These were, first, the attack of the Soviet regime on the Orthodox religion, which started effectively at the end of 1920s, in connection with the period of collectivization, and second, the ethnic persecution of Karelians, which in practice meant the destruction of families, because most Karelian working age men were imprisoned and expelled to Siberia or executed at the end of 1930s. These disasters were only intensified by the sufferings of the Second World War, widespread liquidation of villages which were accused of having "no perspective", as it was called by the central government, between the 1960s and the 1980s (VIRTARANTA 1995: 339), and the settlement of a new population (Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, etc.) in Karelia, which led to the present situation, in which Karelians number only 10% (about 80 000) of the population of the Republic.

In this paper I concentrate on analysing some of the consequences brought about by the attack of the Soviet regime on the Orthodox religion in Russian Karelia after the end of 1920s. I also point out how the Karelians reacted to it, what happened on the grass root level, and in what ways people tried to adapt to the new situation in which religion was a forbidden subject.

I discuss three major issues: 1) How women became specialists in religion, 2) how rituals of the dead gained importance and became a way to express religious feelings, and 3) how oral narratives were used to draw the line between believers and non-believers. Finally, I discuss what the religious situation looks like in Karelia at present, after the new law of 1990 which guarantees freedom of religion in Russia. I want to stress that much of what we know about these things is oral history or people's history, something that people did not dare to speak about to the outsiders before 1990s, before the collapse of the Soviet regime. My examples are essentially drawn from the information we have collected during the fieldwork carried out by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Olonets Karelia between 1991 and 1996.

BACKGROUND: THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN KARELIA

The Orthodox Church has had a long history in Karelia. In fact, the earliest contacts with Christianity in the Finnish-Karelian culture area were those via trade routes with Byzantium; this has been proven by the fact that important Christian concepts in the Finnish language are based on Old Slavonic (risti "cross", pappi "priest", pakana "pagan", for example), and by early discoveries of Christian symbols in Karelian graves of the 12th and the 13th centuries (KIRKINEN 1963: 70–74). In 1227 the Orthodox Church began its regular work in Karelia, and the monastery of Valamo was probably established as early as the middle of the 12th century; by the end of the 16th century, the number of monasteries in Karelia was about sixty. Missionary work used the monasteries as its base of operation, and has been characterized as non-violent (KIRKINEN 1995: 245). During centuries, a syncretistic religion, which combined elements of Karelian ethnic folk religion and of the Orthodox faith, was formed. People's religious knowledge about the dogma of the Christian faith was not very clear – I am referring to the accounts of some Finnish scholars who travelled and collected folk poetry in Karelia in the 19th century (Lönnrot, Genetz). This is due to the fact that people generally could not read, and the religious education of the Church was poor. The priests used Church Slavonic in services, and there were very few Karelian-speaking priests in the villages. But the Orthodox religion had become a meaningful part of people's lives, and Christian ethics were taught in families, if not through books, then by means of oral narratives, sacred legends, which taught proper moral behaviour by presenting concrete examples. The holy icons were revered not only in the village chapels and churches, but also in the holy corners of Karelian homes.

THE ATTACKS BEGIN

The attack on religion in Russia, as in Karelia, did not effectively begin until the very end of the 1920s. Strict legislation against religious activities was passed in 1929. The reason was the intensification of collectivization: the clergy and the "kulaks", the well-to-do peasants, were regarded as the worst obstacles to collectivization, and thus had to be eliminated (LAITILA 1999). One of our Karelian informants gave us an ironic emic definition, based on life experience, of the term "kulak". According to her, "Those who worked, were called kulaks, and those who just sat and drank alcohol, were non-kulaks" (SKSÄ 1994. Fieldtape 12: 3). In Karelia, it was a double burden to be both a Karelian man and a so called kulak ; it meant certain death in the 1930s.

Anti-religious propaganda was spread in Karelia by the League of the Godless; it has been estimated that the number of propagandists, in most cases teachers and Komsomols, was about 6 500 in the entire Soviet Karelia at the end of the 1930s (LAITILA 1999). As a result, numerous churches and village chapels were either destroyed or closed and changed into clubs, stores, museums, hospitals, factories, henhouses, whatever. Only in remote places were some small village chapels able to survive. Equally, in one of the villages in which we have conducted fieldwork, the small chapel still exists, in

protection of the forest, but the large church that was situated in the middle of the village was destroyed. Karelians usually opposed the destruction of the churches, but they could do nothing, just stand and stare from a distance. Sometimes they managed to save some of the icons and take them home.

Reports about people's actual feelings about these events are very scarce, because people were afraid of speaking about these things, and in fact, it was not until 1990s that it was possible to visit Russian Karelian villages. Thus I want to read a rare passage from the memoirs written by a Finnish schoolteacher, Siina Taulamo, in Olonets Karelia during the Finnish occupation of the area in 1941–44. She tells of her Karelian friend Palaga, who told her in 1941 the following about the destruction of the village church when the Komsomols had arrived:

> "They took everything, my Ziina, what I had, but they could not take one thing: God who is in the heaven, and in my heart. – I had two good friends, who were sisters, unmarried. We used to go to church together. And then started the period of terror. Lists were carried from one village to another, and you could sign – voluntarily, as they said – in favour of abolishing the churches. Because we did not sign, we were threatened with all kinds of punishments. The sisters took off on a long journey to Moscow in order to appeal to the rulers there that we could keep our church. This did not bring any help, and then we just had to watch, crying, how the godless came and climbed the belltower and unattached the bells, which fell down and broke. The same happened to the icons. We rushed to the church in the morning to save the icons, and then we turned back with our loads, the village chief arrived and began to scold us. We were going to go on, but he took our loads and cut the icons in half with his axe. Then one of the sisters, Tatjana, hit the man on the ear with her full strength and said that there will be God's picture in one place where nobody can rob it, and pointed to her heart. The village chief became furious and shouted that we would pay a high price for this."

Palaga went on to tell that these two sisters were persecuted after this and finally sent to prison, and they never returned (TAULAMO 1985: 48–50). This kind of open opposition was possible only in the beginning and it did not occur later. The Karelians soon had other problems to think of when the ethnic persecution began at the end of 1930s.

So it followed from the persecution of not only the priests but also of local people that religion became a private matter, a secret that was kept inside the walls of the home. Martti Haavio wrote in his diary during the war in 1941, when he was staying in Olonets Karelia during the Finnish occupation (HAAVIO 1969: 150–151):

> "People still lament at the graves. And they carry food for the deceased. When the village chapels were taken into new use, the religious exercises were brought into homes. I have visited homes in which there are twenty icons in the holy corner: Mother of God with the child on her arm, St. Ilya, Saints Sergei and Herman, Alexander Svirskoi, the patron saint of Karelia. I have seen how people light home made candles in front of them." – "The Orthodox church is the

church of the forefathers in Olonets. It is a church of martyrs. People have cherished its sacraments in secrecy during these years. When the last priest was expelled, old women baptised the children and read the memorial services for their dead in desolate chapels."

There was some pressure in the Finnish Lutheran church, at the beginning of the Finnish occupation, to start baptizing the Russian Karelian population into Lutheranism. This was because some right-wing Lutheran ministers could not understand that the Karelians had their own popular version of the Orthodox practice, which was carried out by the laity. These Lutheran ministers considered Karelian Orthodoxy to be a form of paganism and "Russian barbarism". The baptisms were stopped by General Mannerheim after a few months (LAITILA 1999). In any case, this period of baptisms can be viewed as a thoughtless procedure against the very essence of Karelian culture, one more effort to force people to give up their own religion which was very much part of their identity as Karelians.

WOMEN AS PRIESTS

When religion was forcefully removed from the public sector of people's lives and it became private, it also became part of the women's sphere because it was brought into the home. In the village of Yläleh where we have been doing our fieldwork, the ritual specialist and greatest authority in religious matters was a 90-year old woman Katja Nikitina. She had learnt religious songs in Church Slavonic while she was staying in Siberia, and had been living there in the family of an Orthodox priest who also had been expelled. She brought religion with her to this village, which was her former home village. It was not a new phenomenon that ordinary people could act as priests; we heard about a man in a nearby village who had acted as a priest before the war. They did not, however, perform the sacraments, with the exception of emergency baptisms. During the post-war decades the persons who did this were women. Katja Nikitina had also chosen a younger woman, a relative of hers, as her disciple who was to go on after her, and who also became a trusted religious specialist among the women of this village. She was a person who was invited to sit at the wake for the three nights after a deathcase, and she knew the songs that had to be sung on those occasions. In some cases the songs had been handwritten in notebooks, which were passed from one house to another.

This phenomenon was not unusual in the former Soviet Union. There are very similar reports from other Finno-Ugrian peoples. For example, Kaija Heikkinen, a Finnish ethnologist, has reported that in Vepsian villages (the Veps people are another Baltic-Finnic group living southeast of the Karelian area) groups of women, with some ritual specialists as their leaders, organize religious festivals called "zavetan prazdnikad" (avowed feasts), in which some women act in the role of the priest (HEIKKINEN 1992, 1996). Also a Komi folklorist Valerij SARAPOV (1995) has written about the religious festival organized each year for the miracle-working icon of Paraskeva Pjatnitsa in the village of Krivoje in Komi. The organizers are local women, who have kept the tradition alive throughout the difficult years of religious persecution. Their leader is

Darja Kirillovna Jakovlevna, who also acts as a priest and religious authority in the village.

These groups of women, whether in Karelia or in Komi, also take care of village chapels. In the village of Yläleh, the women made icons out of calendar pictures, framed them and brought to the chapel, because all the valuable icons had been stolen. The key to the chapel is kept by the leader, and she is also responsible for the money donated to the chapel.

RITUALS FOR THE DEAD

Karelian women have always been specialists in rituals for the dead, centuries before the Soviet Era (see for example KONKKA 1985). They knew the laments, and they were the ones who observed the memorial days of the dead by visiting the graves with ritual foods. But before the attack on religion, the Orthodox priests also used to take part in the funerals, they read the prayers and sang the liturgical songs. Folk rituals and the religious customs of the Church were performed side by side. According to ethnographic reports, the priests did not oppose to the folk customs, but the priests cooperated with the people, and performed the services (see HAAVIO 1934, 1937).

The key idea in Karelian death rituals was to keep the family together: one's family consisted of not only living members but also the deceased members as well. In memorial rituals the deceased relatives were and are taken into account nine generations backwards. It was utterly important to the well-being of the family that all the necessary death rituals were carried out in the proper manner, and equally important that the needs of the dead members of the family "in the other air" were carefully observed. If this was not done, the dead would come to the living in their dreams and make their complaints (JÄRVINEN 1995). Our informants pointed out that the dead can eat only if food is provided for them by the living: this takes place either during the memorial festivals organised for the dead, or by ritual visits to the graves when food is brought to the graveyard. Keeping this specific feature of Karelian culture – that the dead must be well taken care of – in mind, it is not difficult to imagine, how personally painful and culturally debilitating it was, when at the end of 1930s Karelian men simply began to disappear at night, and never returned. Nobody knew what had happened to them; if there had been news right away that these people have died, it would have been possible to organize the necessary death rituals for them in order to secure their better life beyond and thus peace for the living, too. Our informant Nina Sergejeva told us that each time her mother and mother-in-law met they started to cry together – both of them were widows of disappeared men. It was not until the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s that in many cases the fate of these people was finally discovered in mass graves. The denial of public sorrow is one of the painful weapons used by those holding the power. The same happened after the Finnish Civil War in 1918, when the losers of the war, the Reds, were denied the proper burial and public mourning of their dead (PELTONEN 1996: 220–222).

In fact the funeral and memorial customs were the only religious rites that could still exist in Orthodox Karelia – now without the priest but organised and carried out by vil-

lage women. Our field group also documented a memorial ritual in the village of Yläleh, where the leader of the ritual was 90-year old Katja, who performed the songs of the priest.

It also seems that the dead have gained importance in people's minds in other ways. Our informants, elderly Karelian women, used to tell that they can pray to their dead relatives and ask them for help. Could it be that in the present Karelian folk religion, the dead have partly occupied the role of the Christian saints? It is clear that people's knowledge of Orthodox saints has deteriorated. For example, the saints' legends that our Folklore Archive collected in Orthodox Karelia even in the 1930s do not exist in oral narration any more. The only Christian saint that is still appealed to in the village where we have been working is St. Nicholaos, who has traditionally been an important saint in Orthodox Karelia. One reason for his fame might be that the village chapel is dedicated to St. Nicholaos.

THE USE OF WARNING LEGENDS IN ORAL NARRATION: BELIEVERS AND NON-BELIEVERS

In the summer of 1992 when our group of field researchers visited the village for a second time, the elderly people of the village were very upset. Their old cemetery, which had not been used since end of 1930s, but was still a holy place for the villagers, had been ploughed up and turned into a potato field. This had been done by a newcomer, a Russian man from the city of Petrozavodsk, who had built his summer cottage nearby. The land had been given to him by the Karelian village chief who was classified as a non-believer by the women. The issue of religion, and especially believing in God or not, was a very hot topic in the village at the beginning of 1990s. In this context, the Karelian women of the village, who were believers themselves, told several warning legends about God's revenge. These were legends about the bad consequences of cemetery or church sacrilege: the result would be an illness or death.

After having studied the archived texts about cemetery sacrilege – most of the texts are from the 1930s – I can state that the emphasis of these legends has certainly changed (JÄRVINEN, forthcoming, 1998). In the old days, the Karelians were very careful not to harm the cemetery in any way, because it was feared that the dead had a special power, and an illness caused by dead would infect people; whereas today the Karelians would rather speak of God's revenge, not the revenge of the dead. It seemed to be very important for these women, to do the morally right thing, and this was the distinctive line drawn between them and the newcomer (STARK et al. 1996: 254–256). They did not seem to care much that he happened to be a Russian, but his deed certainly concretized the lack of respect towards the dead and the lack of morals of those who were outsiders and totally unaware of or indifferent to Karelian traditional behaviour and norms. The village chief was a Karelian, who had achieved his position in the village during the Soviet era, and he was condemned, too. Thus the dispute did not have an ethnic but a religious and moral quality, in which the crucial question was: do you believe in God or not?

CONCLUSIONS

From the examples given above, I have tried to show in what ways religious life in Karelian villages has adapted, and how it still survived; what is left of the former religion, and how the interpretation and practice of religion have changed.

And what about the present day in 1998? The social circumstances in the Republic of Karelia have gone from bad to worse – the capitalist economy of Russia has forgotten the people of lower income, i.e. the retired and the jobless. In this situation, and as freedom of religion now exists, new religious movements have gained support. Various religious groups – for example, the Pentacostalists, Jehova's Witnesses, and Lutherans, bring humanitarian aid, food, clothes, and tools, to Russian Karelia, and thus gain support among the people. They are often more effective in their work and more tempting in their offerings than the Orthodox church, which also has started to build up a new congregational life in Russian Karelia; by the end of 1994 there were 23 active Orthodox congregations in the diocese of Petrozavodsk and Olonets (HUURINAINEN 1995: 105).

Also in the villages in Olonets where we started to do fieldwork in the beginning of 1990s, the religious situation is changing rapidly. In the autumn of 1997, a Lutheran congregation with one hundred baptized members has been established in this area which has been Russian Orthodox since the 13th century. The changes are very rapid right now, and constant observation and documentation are needed, because we are now witnessing radical changes in Karelian religious life and culture as a whole.

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