

**MODERN PROTESTANT IDEOLOGY AND
DENATIONALIZATION OF
NORTH CAUCASIAN PEOPLES
(CASE STUDIES OF
NORTH OSSETIA AND ADYGEI)**

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Irina BABICH

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Chief Researcher,
Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

ABSTRACT

The article aims to compare the religious/ethnic situation in two North Caucasian republics—North Ossetia and Adygei; the place of Protestantism in the regional context, the growing number of Protestant communities (Baptist, Pentecostals, Adventists) in these republics, the emergence of new ideologies of North Caucasian highlanders and the roots of their increasing popularity. The field ethnographic

materials gathered in 2009-2019 confirm that the process of denationalization is ongoing despite the efforts of the local public figures to revive and expand the sphere of folk traditions up to and including neo-paganism. A comparison of Protestantism in North Ossetia-Alania and Adygei revealed that the trend towards a new foundation remains the same, while the paths, forms and methods may vary.

KEYWORDS: *Protestantism, Ossetians, Adyghe, neo-paganism, mountain ideologies, Orthodoxy, Islam, republican authorities.*

Introduction

Religious revival in Russia is especially apparent in the North Caucasian republics, where Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Protestant Christian trends are on the rise. They have been inherited from the pre-revolutionary period, when Baptists and Molokans, in particular, resettled in North Ossetia and drew local Ossetians into their communities. In 1925, Baptists translated the Gospel into

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Ossetic.¹ In the 1990s–2010s, Protestant movements (Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.) demonstrated quick numerical growth. As could be expected, these Christian churches addressed the republics' Russian residents and gradually attracted the autochthonous population. Today, there are religious/ethnic groups in North Ossetia and Adygei that belong to various branches of Protestantism.

This article is based on the latest field ethnographic materials collected in the republics of North Ossetia-Alania and Adygei in 2015–2019 and analyzes the process of de-nationalization of mountain dweller societies in the context of rising Protestantism and proliferation of its ideology. These two republics and their autochthonous populations (Ossetians and Adyghe) with different combinations of “religious” and ethnic components were selected as subjects for this research study. In North Ossetia, the republic where Christian Orthodoxy and Islam are also present, the so-called ethnic traditionalism constitutes an important part of contemporary ideology. Adygei is living through a period of Islamic resurrection. The results of field studies were used to answer the question of whether the apparent expansion of Protestantism influences the new ideology that has been taking shape in the region over the last decade and the contemporary ethical systems of North Caucasian highlanders.

The Protestant discourse has moved to the fore in contemporary studies of the Northern Caucasus and religious issues.² Today a field of scholarly research, namely, contemporary Protestantism in Russia, is taking shape, while the processes of Islamic resurrection and ethnic traditionalism in the region attract significantly greater attention than in the past.³ The authors of numerous publications on the subject analyze the attempts to transform local deities into objects of worship by all Ossetians. The role of Protestantism in North Ossetia is covered by Olga Oleynikova and in Adygei—by Irina Babich.⁴

The Place of Protestantism in the Northern Caucasus

In the 1990–2000s, the North Ossetian society experienced a resurrection of all sorts of religious trends—Orthodoxy, Islam and a considerable increase in the number of Protestant communities. The following figures for the city of Alagir provide a more or less authentic picture: approximately 30% are Orthodox Christians; 30% percent are so-called traditionalists, who worship the Ossetian Gods; 5% are Muslims (including Mesheti Turks); 5% are Protestants (including South Ossetians); and 30% remained undecided.⁵ In the same period, the number of Jehovah's Witness communities (banned in Russia since 2017) considerably increased their numerical strength in Ossetia as a whole and in its capital Vladikavkaz in particular: 30.4% of the followers are Ossetians.⁶

¹ See: A.V. Isaenko, *Ekstremisty—baptisty i ikh posledovateli*, Orjonikidze, 1968.

² See: R.N. Lunkin, *Rol khristianskikh tserkvey Evropy v razreshenii sotsialno-politicheskikh krizisov*. Doctorate Thesis, Moscow, 2018, 431 pp.

³ See: E.V. Fedosova, “Konfessionalnaia identichnost i religioznye ustanovki molodezhi Severnoy Osetii,” *Izvestia SOIGSI*, No. 2, 2013, pp. 86–91; S.A. Shtyrkov, “Traditsianolistskie dvizhenia v sovremennom severo-osetinskom obshchestve i logika religioznogo natsionalizma,” in: *Kavkazskiy gorod: potentsial etnokulturnykh svyazey v urbanisticheskoy srede*, ed. by Iu.M. Botiakov, MAE RAS, St. Petersburg, 2013, pp. 331–362.

⁴ See: O.A. Oleynikova, *Problemy sektanstva v Severnoy Osetii*, 2001, Scientific Archive of SOIGSI. Planned Works Record Group, No. 468; Idem., *Konfessionalnaia situatsia v RSO-Alania: vzaimodeystvie razlichnykh konfessiy i verovaniy*, Vladikavkaz, 2000, Planned Works Record Group, No. 446; I.L. Babich, “Protestantskoe dvizhenie v Adygee,” in: *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze: istoria i sovremennost*, ed. by I.L. Babich, L.T. Solovyeva, IEA RAS, Moscow, 2011, pp. 162–185.

⁵ Field materials collected by the author (FMA). North Ossetia-2019.

⁶ See: O.A. Oleynikova, *Konfessionalnaia situatsia v RSO-Alania: vzaimodeystvie konfessiy i verovaniy*, pp. 32–33.

Olga Oleynikova relies on her 2000 poll among the believers to explain the popularity of Protestantism and Jehovah's Witnesses in North Ossetia: 81% of the polled were convinced that they provided answers to existential questions; 76% pointed to the very simple religious rites; 63% acquired the feeling of belonging; 42% appreciated the moral and material support offered to those who needed it. Baptists engage in social aid (in Alagir Baptists help drug addicts).⁷ There is a great number of former Orthodox Christians among the Baptists whom they joined "because the atmosphere is very different and they work with people."⁸ Protestants promoted their religion among those traumatized by the Beslan tragedy, also among South Ossetians, Tbilisi Ossetians and those who had come to North Ossetia in the 2000s.⁹ According to Oleynikova, the Protestants owe much of their popularity to very skillful missionary efforts (40%); socioeconomic and spiritual crisis (60%); support of the West (51%), and their affluence (45.4%).¹⁰

There are "purely Ossetian" churches among the Baptist churches of North Ossetia with Ossetian parishes, where church services are conducted in Ossetic; there are mixed (Russian, Ossetian and other, Armenian in particular) parishes where the services are conducted in Russian. Earlier, all churches were hybrid and services were conducted in Russian and Ossetic on different days or at different times on the same days: i.e., from 9 to 11 a.m. the services were conducted in Russian; from 12 to 2 p.m.—in Ossetic and from 5 p.m. on—in Russian.¹¹

About 150 people (all of them Ossetians) belong to the oldest Baptist church located in the same building since the pre-revolutionary times (51 Kosta Prospect, Vladikavkaz).¹² In June 2019, the Sunday service in this church was attended by about one hundred people: 20 men and 80 women (most of them are older; young families with children are few and far between). The service (sermons, prayers and psalms) was conducted in Ossetic with small inclusions in Russian. Ossetians are the leaders of the local community.¹³ The Baptist community Nadezhda (Hope) (71 Nikolaev Str., Vladikavkaz) has about 200 members: Ossetians and Russians (who are in the majority). Services are conducted in Russian, prayers and psalms are read in Ossetic. The community has its own Christian Radio, very popular among the Protestants of the Northern Caucasus.¹⁴ Many members of Baptist communities came from the families of those who had attended the church during Soviet times. On the whole, there are approximately one thousand Baptists in Vladikavkaz.¹⁵ There are Baptist communities in the villages of Mizur, Gizel and the city of Alagir. The village communities are not big—some with only 30 to 40 members. Pastors of North Ossetian Baptist churches frequently share their time with other regions of the Northern Caucasus. Baptists of North Ossetia maintain close contacts with the Baptists of Kabarda, Stavropol, Krasnodar and Rostov-on-Don. The Biblical Institute in the village of Prokhladnoe (Kabardino-Balkaria) is very popular among Baptists.¹⁶

There are Pentecostal communities in Vladikavkaz; many of them Ossetian; such is the Pentecostal community headed by Ossetian Sosiev¹⁷ with about 80 members; half of them Ossetians. The

⁷ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ For example, one of my informers, Ossetian R. who had moved from Tbilisi (where he was born) to Vladikavkaz in 2003 and later attended the Adventists of the Seventh Day community; today he belongs to the community of Evangelical Christian-Baptists. Pastor of the Baptist Church of Vladikavkaz Ossetian T. lost four of his children in Beslan; today he lives with his daughter who also attends the Baptist church, FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

¹⁰ See: O.A. Oleynikova, *Problemy sektanstva v Severnoy Osetii*.

¹¹ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ As it turned out later some of the young members had gone to the Baptist community in Alagir.

¹⁴ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Every Saturday the members study the Bible in the club of the wagon-repair plant; on Sundays services are organized in the House of Cinema in 5 Batoev Str.

services are conducted in Russian. There are Pentecostal communities with the predominantly South Ossetian membership.¹⁸ The Pentecostal community Slovo zhizni (The Word of Life) has about 100 members.¹⁹ Its chief pastor is an Armenian, others are Ossetians. It was previously headed by an Ossetian who became the Pastor of the South of Russia. The community is mixed: there are Ossetians (from South Ossetia and Tbilisi among them), Russians and Armenians among its members. Services are in Russian, in the past services were conducted in Armenian with Russian translation. The Ossetian members prefer praying and singing psalms in Ossetic.²⁰

The Seventh-Day Adventists are less popular in Ossetia; the community comprises approximately 70-80 members, both Russians and Ossetians. The services are in Russian, prayers and psalms are frequently read in Ossetic. The Bible is taught separately in Russian and in Ossetic. The Adventist community is not popular because it does not extend social aid to those who need it. Money is gathered, but nobody knows how it is spent. In Baptist communities, the church council distributes the collected money among the poor. Jehovah's Witnesses preserved some of its followers in North Ossetia even if they are more discreet than before and pray in private houses; the share of Ossetians among them is fairly large.²¹

On the whole, Ossetians do not baptize their children either in the Molokan community or in the Armenian Gregorian church in Vladikavkaz.²²

In Adygei, the share of Adyghe among the Protestants is much lower than among the Ossetians (there are few of them in the republic compared with Russians). In the 2000s-2010s, all Protestant communities acquired Adyghe members mostly from among urban dwellers. Those who live in auls (mountain villages) are much more susceptible to public opinion and criticism of relatives, neighbors and friends. Initially, Adyghe Protestants lived in Adyghe auls; in the 2000s they started moving to the places populated by Russians and Cossacks, where there were Christian communities. Some of the Adyghe Protestants remained in their auls behind closed doors and kept away from their Adyghe neighbors.

The biggest Adyghe Baptist community is located in the city of Adygensk. In June 2016, I attended the service in honor of Holy Trinity organized in a private house in the city's outskirts. The service attracted 15 people (5 of them male; the rest—female, three of whom were girls between the ages of 15 to 20.) The majority of those present were Adyghe, yet the service was conducted in Russian. At the end all those present prayed together in the Adyghe tongue (several people remained silent). Adyghe from the neighboring auls (Gabukay, Ponezhukay, Assokolay) attend services at this church. On the whole, the Baptist community in Adygensk attracts several scores of Adyghe.²³

According to at least some members of Adyghe intelligentsia, in the 2010s about 100 Adyghe attended and continue attending Protestant communities in Maykop today,²⁴ specifically the Nadezhda Church that belongs to the Adyghe Eparchy of the Evangelical Christians (there are about 1,000 members, 200 of them are permanent (including 25 Adyghe); the Maykop Bethany Evangelical Church (including 5 Adyghe women); the Maykop Church of Seventh Day Adventists (including an Adyghe woman); the Maykop community of Jehovah's Witnesses.²⁵ Members of the communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Pentecostals are scattered across the republic (they live in the auls of Koshekhabl, Jerokay, the village of Khanskaia, the city of Adygensk, etc.).²⁶

¹⁸ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

¹⁹ Services are conducted in the National Scientific Library, 43 Kostoev Str.

²⁰ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ FMA. Adygei-2009; FMA. Adygei-2016.

²⁴ FMA. Adygei-2009.

²⁵ FMA. Adygei-2016.

²⁶ FMA. Adygei-2009.

Some of the deeply convinced Protestants from among the Adyghe became heads of their communities and counselors. For example, Adyghe N. heads a community of Pentecostals in a village in the Krasnodar Territory; in his pastor capacity he has already baptized 130 Russians and Adyghe.²⁷

Adyghe become Protestants for different reasons.²⁸ It should be said that throughout the 1990s the Adyghe found themselves an object of foreigners' missionary efforts to a much greater extent than other peoples of the Northern Caucasus. This refers, in particular, to Leon Martenson who learned the Adyghe tongue, translated *The Bible* into it and actively popularized it in the Northwest Caucasus. In the early 2000s, the law and order structures put an end to his activities by rejecting his entry visa application. The results of his efforts, however, survived: those Adyghe who found themselves outside Muslim influence and the Adyghe traditions (Adyghe Habze) joined Protestant communities of all sorts, including Jehovah's Witnesses.²⁹ Those who promoted Christian (or, more precisely, Protestant) ideas among the Adyghe relied on a historical fact that in the past (in the 5th-15th centuries) they had been Christians and that many of their cultural values are similar to Christian ethics.³⁰

According to the words of one of the Adyghe Pentecostals, it can be inferred that some of the Adyghe auls had embraced Protestantism prior to Islam. Islamic revival was unfolding at a slow pace: it started from scratch since the Soviet administration had managed to undermine the fairly weak positions of Islam among the Adyghe; Protestant missionaries spared no effort to promote their faith in auls. At the initial stage, Islamic missionaries demonstrated extreme zeal that frightened people of all ages, including young people.

For certain reasons some of the Adyghe are not attracted by Islam because,

- first of all, in the distant and Soviet past Islam was not as popular among the Adyghe as in the Northeast Caucasus;
- secondly, Islam, which is called the religion of ancestors and which requires the knowledge of Arabic, is viewed as an elitist religion.

The majority does not know Arabic and refuses to learn the prayers in Arabic, which sound strange to them, by heart. Islam is viewed as a *nominal* religion. Many members of the Islamic clergy (imams and mullahs, especially in auls) are poorly educated and do not possess a relatively decent knowledge of Arabic.³¹ The radical wing of Islam, which emerged in the latter half of the 1990s, did nothing good for Islam. Peace-loving Adyghe are repulsed by the fact that in the 1990s-2000s part of the younger generation joined the Wahhabi movements and that terrorist acts were accompanied by the words Allah Akbar. They say that "This kind of Islam is not Islam; the Adyghe Muslims have not cognized God and are following a false road that cannot bring them to Christ."³²

Despite the different extent and, partly, different reasons of popularity of Protestantism among the Ossetians and Adyghe, the interest of highlanders in Protestant ideology is rooted in the crisis of their own "mountain" ideology and identity.³³

²⁷ FMA. Adygei-2017.

²⁸ See: S. Lyausheva, V. Nekhai, R. Khunagov, B. Shkhachemukova, "The Traditional Adyghe Culture in the Context of Globalization: Social Integration as a Factor of Defusing Ethnic Tension in the Caucasus," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3, 2016, pp. 113-121; S.B. Filatov, R.N. Lunkin, "Respublika Adygeia. Osobennosti istoricheskogo razvitiia religii," in: *Religiozno-obshchestvennaia zhizn' rossiyskikh regionov*, ed. by S.B. Filatova, Letniy sad, Moscow, 2014, pp. 7-32.

²⁹ See: I.L. Babich, op. cit., pp. 162-185.

³⁰ See: A.A. Muzalev, M.S. Shorova, "Khristianstvo v Adygee: istoria i sovremennost'," *Vestnik Adygeyskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, No. 1, 2006, pp. 54-56; *Severnyy Kavkaz v sostave Rossiyskoy imperii*, ed. by V.O. Bobrovnikov, I.L. Babich, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Moscow, 2007, pp. 88-111.

³¹ FMA. Adygei-2016.

³² Ibidem.

³³ See: I.L. Babich, "Vzaimosviaz sovremennykh gorskikh ideologii i natsionalnykh interesov Rossii na Severnom Kavkaze," in: *Severnyy Kavkaz v natsionalnoy strategii Rossii*, ed. by V.A. Tishkov, FSSU Rosinformagrotekh, Moscow, 2008, pp. 171-186.

Denationalization of the North Caucasian Peoples due to the Spread of Protestantism

On the whole, the Protestant ideology and ethics contain no national components: the doors of Protestant churches are open to all irrespective of nationality. Denationalization of North Caucasian peoples, the partial loss of their national specifics is one of the most important effects of the spread of Protestantism in the region. Let us assess the degree to which the ethnic component has survived in the Protestant Ossetian and Adyghe communities.

Ossetian Protestants believe that there is no contradiction between the traditional Ossetian and Christian identities. However, they admit that their life changed when they joined a Protestant community. Many of them still attend weddings and funerals of relatives, friends and neighbors, but refuse to drink alcohol. There is, however, a fundamental problem: their attitude to the so-called Ossetian Gods.³⁴

A public organization, The Supreme Council of Ossetians (Styr Nykhas) supports Ossetian ancient traditions in every possible way. Its followers, the so called traditionalists, do not attend churches; they visit holy places, usually up in the mountains, where they pray to the so-called Ossetian Gods. They are convinced that the pre-Christian Gods are a part of their true national culture, which they refuse to call pagan. Today, there are many similar public organizations in the republic that are registered as religious, rather than public. These organizations³⁵ are founded on the faith in the Ossetian Gods.

They are geared towards the development of Ossetian ethnic identity, yet their status as religious organizations allows them to compete with the religious communities of North Ossetia. The ideologists of the movement Daurbek Makeev, Taimuraz Kambolov and Slavik Janaev created an Alanian Code of Ethics (Iron Agdau) based on the Ossetian Nart Sagas that differ slightly from Christian ethics. Below it is quoted in full:

- You should never forget that you are a descendant of an ancient and noble people, therefore you have no right to commit unworthy acts.
- You should know and respect the history of your people and your land—this will strengthen your spirit, ennoble your soul and support you at the worst moments of life.
- Do not think of yourself as an Ossetian (Alanian) until you learn the tongue, customs, songs and dances of your people.
- Continually improve your physical condition; improve your health by training to be worthy of your great ancestors.
- Know and never forget your family history from the very beginning. Respect old people, and especially your parents, who brought you into this world.
- Learn and accept as the highest value the truth that the greatness of an Alanian (Ossetian) has never been measured by wealth, but by courage and labor for the sake of the homeland.

³⁴ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

³⁵ There are local religious organizations of the traditional faiths of the Ossetians The District Mozdok Community of the Asses (Atsata) in Mozdok; the Traditional Faiths of the Ossetians True Faith (Atsag Din) in Vladikavkaz; Upper Ossetia (Uallagir) in Alagir; the Community of the Sanctuary Mayrama of the Upper Tower (Tsazziu) (Tsazziu Ualamasyg Mayramy dzuary kord) in the village of Lats, Alagir District; the Religion of Ossetia (Iry din) in the village of Zmeyskaya, Kirov District; Dzivgis (Dzyvgis) in the village of Dzivgis, Alagir District.

- You should never forget that everything bad and good that you do in life will return to you hundredfold.
- When talking to people, listen more and talk less; do not brag—many people are smarter and stronger than you are.
- Beware of thinking: Why are you better than me? This thought has repeatedly destroyed Alania. If you are a true patriot, prove it with your deeds.
- Avoid quarrels and scandals. In a quarrel with a fool you will become more stupid; and it is best to simply listen to a clever person.
- Be moderate in food and drink—this is one of the rules of the Alanian ethics. Celebrations and funerals are not held for gluttony.
- Select your bride (or groom) not only for their beautiful face and body, but also for the intellect, honor and the traditions of their clan and family.
- Never insult national and religious feelings of others. Each people are a gift of God.
- Be proud and honest. Neither hunger, nor cold, nor the fear of death should break down your spirit if you are a true son of the people of Alania.
- Strive to observe this rule of honor. May Xucaw save you from degradation and shame.³⁶

The Supreme Council of the Ossetians opened the Iron Agdau school, in which teachers (historians, experts in local history and in many other fields) familiarize everyone interested with the history of Alania and with Ossetian rituals and customs.³⁷ The Council of the Elders, a traditional folk structure and the congress of the community is an important element of the Supreme Council³⁸ and as such is supported by the republican administration. The so-called traditionalists insist that Ossetians should be present in all power structures of the republic that should acquire its own, specifically Ossetian, statehood.

The traditionalists celebrate the following holidays—the Holiday of the God of Gods, Saint Uastyrdzhi, Patron of the Bread Grain, Patron of Wild Beasts, The Day of the Tsar of Water, The Day of the Patron of Horned Cattle, Patron of Small Cattle, The Day of Mother Maria, The Day of Seven Deities.³⁹ On 23 November they celebrate Djiorgywyba, an important holiday in honor of Ossetian dzuar Uastyrdzhi, patron of men and travelers and protector of the weak and destitute. On these days people attend *holy places* and put three pies on the table in honor of One Great God *Iunag yshyir khusau*. People gather around the table to read prayers, then the pies are consecrated and the elder (histar) toasts the One God (Iunag *Kaddzhyn* Styr Khuytsau).

What do the Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Protestants think about the movement?

Today, Christian Orthodoxy in Ossetia functions within the Vladikavkaz and Alania Eparchies.⁴⁰ There are some 30 to 40 churches and chapels in the republic; the congregations are half Russian and half Ossetian; the share of practitioners comprises 1-2%. On Sundays approximately 500 people attend the St. George Cathedral. In Vladikavkaz there are about 1,500 practicing believers, a number compa-

³⁶ [<https://ironau.ru/allon.html>].

³⁷ See: “V Respublike otkrylas shkola Iron Agdau,” available at [<https://news.sputnik.ru/obrazovanie/5ecc4fa4c0a19361e8535f8341e01870a406dec3>].

³⁸ See: Z.V. Kanukova, “Obshchestvenny sovet v Osetii: traditsii i innovatsii,” *Uspekhi sovremennoy nauki*, Vol. 7, No. 11, 2016, pp. 9-11.

³⁹ See: O.A. Oleynikova, *Konfessionalnaia situatsia v RSO-Alania: vzaimodeystvie razlichnykh konfessiy i verovaniy*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁰ In 2013, Chechnya and Ingushetia still belonged to this eparchy; later the Makhachkala and Grozny eparchy was set up (Ingushetia also belongs to it.)

rable to that of Muslims and Protestants in North Ossetia, where Orthodoxy is weakened by covert rivalry between Russian and Ossetian priests (Russians comprise two-thirds of the local clergy, one-third are Ossetians); there is an unspoken desire to have an Ossetian at the head of the eparchy. Today it is headed by Archimandrite Leonid, a Russian with many years of service outside Russia. As a rule, the services are held in Russian with bits and pieces in Ossetic. Ossetian priests prefer the Ossetic tongue (which is used in Ossetian churches in Ossetian settlements where priests are Ossetians). The Service Book and other books used by the Orthodox Church are translated into Ossetic. There are contradictions between the Orthodox clergy and parishioners, on the one hand, and the “traditionalists,” on the other. The Orthodox people reject the traditional polytheism of Ossetians, while the “traditionalists” do not invite them to their celebrations (conducted in sacred forests, Hetaga and others). Supported by the republican authorities, these celebrations are held on a large scale. Today, the heads of the eparchy advise the clerics not to object to these holidays during the services. Many Orthodox clerics believe that the revived paganism is an indication of the desired self-identification.⁴¹

There are 29 mosques in the republic, including the mosque in Vladikavkaz. On Fridays it is attended by about 1,000 people.⁴² Khadjimurat Gatsalov, the Mufti of North Ossetia, is convinced that the contemporary Ossetian society can be defined as an industrial one; therefore, he argues that there is no foundation for the emergence of a traditional society, while many local traditions have been weakened or altered.⁴³ Traditional Ossetian beliefs lead to nationalism. The Mufti says that at the early stages young people were strongly attracted by the traditionalist practices, only to distance themselves from them after a while.⁴⁴ Unlike many other traditions, the legal traditions are very much alive, which has a positive effect on the Ossetian society. The Muslim leaders, who are dead set against traditionalism in the form of neo-paganism, are engaged in polemics with its followers.⁴⁵

➤ Muslim woman A. states:

“We are not invited to traditionalist feasts. I help my relatives cook and lay the table, but never sit together with them. Nobody forces me to join. I think that the current burial traditions differ a lot from the old ones. Today, for example, while the dead is being carried to the cemetery, people are already sitting at the table to reminisce about him. There are extremes in the revived traditions.”⁴⁶

On the whole, however, neither the Orthodox Christians nor Muslims deliberately demonstrate their attitude to the traditionalists. Sociologist Elena Fedosova rightly notes that the religious consciousness of regular youths is an intertwining of varied yet practically inseparable elements—Christianity/Islam, paganism, folk beliefs, etc. Both Orthodox Christians and Muslims remain loyal to the Ossetian traditions. Fedosova also points out that an ethnic identity is still much more important for the younger generation than their religious affiliation.⁴⁷

Members of the Protestant community of North Ossetia are of a different opinion: they treat traditional feasts and toasts to Uastyrdzhi, One and Only God as devilish.⁴⁸ Here is what Protestants in Ossetia have to say.

⁴¹ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

⁴² The capacity of the mosque is limited to 500 so women do not attend services while men occupy the section reserved for women. FMA. Severnaia Osetia-2019.

⁴³ [<https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/330087/>].

⁴⁴ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ See: E.V. Fedosova, “Konfessionalnaia identichnost i religioznye ustanovki molodezhi Severnoy Osetii,” p. 88.

⁴⁸ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

➤ Baptist Ossetian V.:

“As soon as I joined this church, I stopped attending traditional Ossetian feasts and holidays associated with the ‘three pies,’ toasts in honor of One and Only God and Uastyrdzhi. We heard this from our preachers. There are other holidays that we celebrate: Easter, the Nativity of Christ, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Spirit. I know that this separates us from other Ossetians or even from our relatives. Some of my relatives are Orthodox Christians who do not reject paganism. They do not invite me to their celebrations. Anyway, according to our religion these celebrations are manifestations of the devil. Jesus Christ is more important to us than the Ossetian traditions; the knowledge of Jesus Christ is more important than ethnic ties.”⁴⁹

➤ Baptist A.:

“We attend funerals and weddings, but never sit down at the table. If for some reason we do, we never drink alcohol and never pray together with others. My husband and his relatives are traditionalists. On the whole, traditionalists have nothing against our community, although lately they have been objecting to our religion because, they argue, the traditional Ossetian culture and language have been weakening, and all of us should help revive them.”⁵⁰

➤ Baptist R.:

“Christians should not discuss pagan deities. There are no contradictions between Protestants and Orthodox Christians in Ossetia. I am convinced that all communities, be it Baptists, Adventists or Pentecostals, are Christian. The Orthodox believers are also Christians and pray to one god, Jesus Christ. This is what should keep us together, not the pagan gods. Any Christian is my brother. To me, religious identity is more important than nationality, while Ossetian traditions come second. My relatives are fond of typically Ossetian celebrations. I have told them several times that this was wrong. If invited, I sit at the table together with others, yet I do not drink alcohol or toast. Pagan deities are not gods. In fact, the majority of the Ossetians treat this as a tradition; they have no faith in their gods. The faith in pagan gods is a retreat; we should move forward to the faith in the Christian God. There is no salvation in myths. I should say that the celebrations have changed a lot: people smoke at the table and swear.”⁵¹

➤ Pentecostal A.:

“We observe burial rites when one of our relatives dies, but I never attend burials in other families. I take part in funerals where no toasts are pronounced. We do not attend other repasts. When my husband died, there was no burial service and no burial repast.⁵² We treat all Christians as brothers; there is no national component. I think of myself as a Christian; we have nothing specifically Ossetian at home, we do not celebrate Ossetian holidays. Our holidays are the Nativity and Easter. On the other hand, I support the Ossetian moral code, which teaches respect for the elders and for men. This is a part of Christianity as well.”

➤ Pentecostal A.:

“I have been member of my Pentecostal community since 2008. Before that I did not differ from other Ossetians: I observed Ossetian holidays and believed in Uastyrdzhi. After

⁴⁹ FMA. North Ossetia-2019.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem.

joining the community, I stopped celebrating Ossetian holidays. We celebrate the harvest festival, but never the holidays of the Ossetian gods. Nearly all our relatives are traditionalists, who invite us to their celebrations. Normally, I accept the invitations and sit at the table, but never drink. Many of us do not accept these invitations. Our relatives have accepted us as Protestants; they do not criticize us. Jesus Christ is my god, and there are no other gods.”⁵³

In fact, Protestants do not support the majority of Ossetian traditions; there are no specifically Ossetian items in their residences.

* * *

On the whole, the Protestant communities of the Adyghe in Adygei prefer to live separately, to communicate with members of their communities and marry within them. For example, an Adyghe from the Iablonovskiy settlement married a Lak woman from a Pentecostal community in Daghestan. As distinct from North Ossetia, relatives, friends, neighbors and village communities in Adygei negatively respond to the change of religion. Today, however, they are much less aggressive than in the late 1990s-early 2000s.⁵⁴ Relatives prefer not to notice the Protestant and never invite him/her to weddings and burials.⁵⁵

In the 1990s-2010s the majority of the Adyghe were either “ethnic” or “practicing” Muslims, yet common Adyghe mentality and self-awareness have been preserved in both Muslims and Protestants.⁵⁶ The Adyghe layer that keeps the Adyghe together despite their religious affiliations is illustrated by burial of Adyghe Protestants. They themselves on deathbed (or their relatives ask about that after their relatives’ deaths) prefer to be buried in Adyghe (that is, Muslim) cemeteries. Pastor S. of the Baptist church told me that in 2016, Baptist Adyghe R. had died in one of the Adyghe auls and his close relatives had persuaded the imam to bury him in the Muslim cemetery according to Muslim rites.⁵⁷

The Adyghe who turn to Protestantism remain loyal to their ethnic component and are not willing to abandon it. This was confirmed in June 2017 at a meeting of the Adyghe Christians held in Maykop and attended by members of various Protestant communities.⁵⁸ It should be said that Orthodox Christian Adyghe were not invited.

There is an opinion among the Adyghe Christians that national identity is gradually retreating under the pressure of their new religious identity. Initially, however, the ethnic roots of the neophytes affect their religious life. In the course of time, however, these people mostly communicate with the members of their communities irrespective of nationalities, rather than with other Adyghe.

In the 1990s-2000s, the folk culture of the Adyghe, so-called Adyghe Habze weakened considerably; several traditions—respect for elders, mutual assistance, family values (those that could be supported through Christianity)—survived for the simple reason that Christian values and Christian ideology have a lot in common with what remained of the traditional folk culture.⁵⁹ The crisis of Adyghe Habze is partly explained by the highlanders’ search for new ideologies. Today, the Adyghe society is living amid considerable social and economic stratification, which means that the tradi-

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ FMA. Adygei-2009.

⁵⁵ FMA. Adygei-2009, FMA. Adygei-2016.

⁵⁶ FMA. Adygei-2017.

⁵⁷ FMA. Adygei-2016.

⁵⁸ FMA. Adygei-2017.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

tional Adyghe norms of behavior can no longer unite the people. There is the elite who states that Adyghe Habze is for the poor. People unite into different social strata with different moral codes.

There are Orthodox Christian communities in Adyghei, yet they cannot compete with the far more numerous Protestant communities. Orthodox priest Father Sergy, the dean of the church in the village of Khanskaya told me that he had baptized about 10 Adyghe.⁶⁰ There are Orthodox Christians in the republic's corridors of power.⁶¹ There is an Internet site named "Baptized Adyghe," where Orthodox Adyghe describe their spiritual experiences. In Kabardino-Balkaria, for example, there is a Kabardian priest, yet there are no Adyghe priests in Adyghei. An Adyghe from Adyghei became a monk at the Optina Pustyn monastery. Sometimes unbaptized Adyghe ask Orthodox priests to bless a house or a flat or pray for someone's health.

The director of the Arts Center deemed it necessary to point out that "we, the Adyghe intelligentsia, believe that Adyghe Habze is more important than Islam."⁶² He was convinced that for a long time the Muslims of Adyghei, and Mufti Nurbi Emizh (who headed the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Adyghei and the Krasnodar Territory) in the first place, exerted pressure on the Adyghe intelligentsia because of its atheism.

In their turn, the Adyghe that belong to Protestant communities are convinced that the Adyghe culture and Adyghe Habze as a moral code, lost their significance in the 1990s. This was, in fact, the starting point of a search for a new ideology, and it explains why the Protestant Adyghe treat all others as nominal Muslims who live without moral foundations.⁶³

It is crucial to point out that practicing Muslims based their new Islamic ideology on revised Adyghe traditions. This meant that they pushed them aside to become Muslims rather than Adyghe and developed their religious identities by suppressing their ethnicity. The Christian Adyghe (Protestants, in the first place), on the contrary, never rejected Adyghe values and Adyghe identity. The majority sees no contradiction between the rudiments of the Adyghe culture and the Protestant ideology, with the exception of several norms of the Adyghe etiquette.

- A member of a Pentecostal community told me:

"We observe some of the rules written down in Adyghe Habze—we respect the elders and family values; many traditions, however, have already disappeared, such as defining the future profession of the child by the object he selects from among others, etc. I attend Adyghe burials, they are organized according to Muslim rules; when the mullah reads Arab prayers I say my prayers out loud.

I meet my Muslim relatives and should say that I have preserved my Adyghe roots and self-awareness. For example, if I manage to persuade another Adyghe to baptize into my faith and liberate him from drug dependence I would be very pleased."⁶⁴

- Another Baptist Adyghe added:

"Many sides of the etiquette, viz. the relationships between men and women, husband and wife seem very strange to me. For example, according to the Adyghe rules, a woman should walk at a certain distance from a man, who should walk on the right side, which is considered to be more honorable; I am puzzled by the traditions of paying ransom for the bride, bride abduction, etc. When I joined the Baptist community I stopped observing or supporting them."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ FMA. Adyghei-2017.

⁶¹ FMA. Adyghei-2009.

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ FMA. Adyghei-2017.

⁶⁴ FMA. Adyghei-2009.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

The Protestant Adyghe are convinced that when a person begins attending a protestant community, his Adyghe identity will gradually disappear. This means that his ethnic roots affect his religious life for a certain time.”⁶⁶

New Muslims (“practicing” Muslims) are ready to abandon many of the Adyghe traditions, while “ethnic” Muslims are not ready to do the same; they try to preserve their Adyghe values and identities. Generally, Adyghe Christians do not push their Adyghe values and identities aside, which makes them similar to “ethnic” Muslims.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Apparently, Russia is acquiring new cultural/religious spaces that allow not only for religions traditional for the region—Islam or Christian Orthodoxy, but also for other religious trends that attract people, for example, different forms of Protestantism. Autochthonous peoples of the Northern Caucasus are seeking spiritual answers in these mosaics. Despite the fact that the highlanders are ready to defend their national roots and traditions, the role of national factors in the everyday life of the Ossetians and Adyghe is gradually weakening, giving rise to certain new trends in the mountain dwellers’ search for new ideologies.⁶⁸ Comparative studies of the Protestant movement in North Ossetia-Alania and Adyghe demonstrated that the path, forms and methods can be different, yet the search for a new foundation remains the same. Roman Lunkin has justly pointed out that “despite different political experience and the chance to take part in public political discussions, a variety of churches creates a democratic civil environment” that offers a new assessment of the role of Protestant churches in Russia.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ FMA. Adyghe-2009.

⁶⁷ FMA. Adyghe-2017.

⁶⁸ See: I.L. Babich, “Vzaimosviaz sovremennykh gorskikh ideologiy i natsionalnykh interesov Rossii na Severnom Kavkaze,” pp. 171-186.

⁶⁹ See: R.N. Lunkin, op. cit., p. 23.