

## INTER-CONFESSIONAL RELATIONS AS A SPECIAL TYPE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS: RUSSIA'S POLY-CULTURAL MILIEU

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### ABSTRACT

**I**n Russia, which is a poly-cultural state, the problem of inter-national and inter-confessional relations is invariably on top of the agenda. This is especially apparent in the south of Russia, where Orthodoxy and Islam have been coexisting for a long time and where the acculturation and assimilation processes are highly rigorous and contradictory. Disintegration of the atheist ideology imparted greater significance on the religious and cultural specifics and removed all ideological barriers. This had radically transformed the social context and the world-views of the local population and intensified the religious ideas and social engagement of confessions, primarily, Orthodoxy and Islam.

History has taught us that the coexistence of ethnoconfessional communities on

the Russian soil has been fairly complicated and highly ambiguous. On the one hand, there was latent or even open opposition; on the other, cooperation and interpenetration.

We are convinced that many aspects of this process were conditioned by the complex history and by the struggle between different political and religious forces and private interests that emerged as a spiritual component of life of different ethnicities. Today, the relations between members of different ethnic and confessional communities and their institutions are shaped by globalization and the ambiguous ethnoconfessional policy of the Russian state.

The inter-confessional relations in the poly-cultural contemporary Russia should be analyzed with particular care because the two great cultures—Orthodox and Isla-

mic—are not merely different. Their world-views are burdened by ideological contradictions, the settlement of which may lead to conflicts and clashes. On the other hand, dissimilar world views of religious cultures are not necessarily a source of confrontations. The latter are ignited by certain accompanying socio-cultural conditions and other forms of inter-confessional contradictions. Today, the poly-cultural milieu is fraught with conflicts and contradictions of this type.

The paper examines the essence of Russia's contemporary context and its impact on inter-confessional relations. We are convinced that their nature and content determine, to a great extent, the consistent development of the poly-cultural milieu.

The historical phenomena of religious macro-communities continue to actively manifest themselves in confrontations that

are developing into "civilizational splits." The authors are convinced that a constructive cultural dialog as one of the important factors of stability is largely a constructive, albeit not always obvious, dialog of confessions.

The structure of Russian society is highly complex, which means that inter-confessional agreement based on tolerance and a dialog is a must.

We have pointed out that consent and poly-cultural tolerance between confessions are two indispensable conditions for the peaceful coexistence of two or more religions. Their absence leads to confrontations and the domination of one confession over the others, even without social upheavals in the best-case scenario. More likely than not, the prevailing confession is protected by the state, which means a retreat from the concept of a secular state.

**KEYWORDS:** *inter-confessional relations, poly-cultural milieu, inter-confessional dialog, ethnoconfessional traditions, modernization processes, ethnocultural specifics.*

## *Introduction*

The timeline of the North Caucasian history can be presented as a chain of events that promoted the development of intercultural and inter-confessional relationships. They are important instruments of identifying the general patterns related to the above-mentioned issues. Historical time and space are not homogeneous: social processes accelerate at the turning points of history. At any given stretch of history, the problem of inter-confessional relations reveals one of its aspects to the society with a certain degree of tension. Researchers have stated more than once that during the times of acute tension confessional processes are more harmonized than during the periods of calm, when time slows down. This means that a coordinated picture of confessional cooperation may only be the result of concerted efforts of carriers of confessional specifics, spiritual and material culture realized through dialogs, disputes, congresses, etc.

Clearly, any effort to push aside the problems that exist in inter-confessional relations in the Russian Federation's poly-ethnic and poly-confessional environment had undermined in the past and will undermine in the future all attempts at economic and political reforms and democratization. To comprehend and systematize the course of events, their sources need to be traced and the past experience analyzed. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past, we should bear in mind the sad experience of the previous generations in the future.

## The Concept of a Poly-Cultural Milieu

A poly-cultural milieu is a social space where society and culture (religious, political, artistic, moral, etc.) function. This environment is created by interpenetration and mutual influence of highly diverse, historically determined national and regional cultures. They defy clear-cut criteria that would have guided an individual in a cultural and spiritual quest.<sup>1</sup>

The historically conditioned poly-cultural milieu presupposes qualitatively different ties between its elements in each of the historical epochs. Today, the content and structure of poly-cultural environment have become complicated to the extent that the spiritual development of personality cannot be adequately comprehended without analyzing and appreciating the role of poly-cultural environment and the mechanisms of its functioning. There is no cultural component identical to all cultures that can be set aside as the feature that sets any given nation apart from the rest. In some cases, this role belongs to language, in others—to religion, behavior, etc.

It should be noted that it is wrong to ignore culture as a medium of ethnic specifics. Ethnicity is a specific cultural component. Linguistic community disappears together with the tongue; religious community falls apart when some of its members change their religious convictions. If an ethnicity invariably disappeared when it lost its language or changed its religious convictions, and if language and ethnicity, linguistic and ethnic divisions invariably coincided, it would have become unnecessary to delimitate these concepts; the same is applicable to the ethnicity/religion pair. This means that the philosophical analysis of the structure of the sociocultural milieu, its content and the mechanisms of its functioning comes to the fore.

It is important to note that the condition of a poly-cultural milieu is considerably affected by the level of the country's economic development, the social policy of the state, the intellectual potential of society, historical traditions, religious situation, etc.

Today, the development of inter-confessional relations inside a poly-cultural milieu should not be regarded as a purely spontaneous process. It can be regulated and its regulation and governance require a profound examination and deeper comprehension.

This paper discusses the two aspects of the dynamics of inter-confessional relations in a poly-confessional environment:

- as mutually conditioned coexistence of several confessions in a poly-cultural environment that form a socially important “environment-religious confession” system;
- as mutually conditioned changes that led to the appearance of new qualities, features, structural elements, functions, etc. in poly-cultural milieus and confessions.

The milieu/confession interaction leads to qualitative changes in each of these subsystems and ensures, on the one hand, the uninterrupted development of human cultures and, on the other, evolutionary self-improvement of any given confession. The interaction between confessions and the milieu, the components of an integral functional system is realized through active and creative activities of a social actor.

As a sum-total of life conditions of an individual and the main determinant of his needs, a poly-cultural milieu is a form and product of activities of members of different cultures. The factors that inspire the actors' social activity spiritually enrich all sorts of micro-milieus (the closest circles) and the poly-cultural milieu per se.

In Russia, a poly-cultural, poly-ethnic and poly-confessional state, the dialog among confessions and between confessions and the state is a natural element of social development. The deepness, trends and nature of inter-confessional relations depend not only on collective goal-setting, but also on the spiritual values shared by all those involved.

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<sup>1</sup> See: A.M. Buttaeva, Ph.D. thesis *Spetsifika dukhovnogo bytia cheloveka v usloviakh polikulturnoy sredy*, Makhachkala, 2003.

## A Few Words about the Past

The present is incomprehensible without the knowledge of the past, while a clear understanding of the place of certain past events in the present context allows us to comprehend the place of one's country, one's people and culture on Earth and the role of any individual and each people in the history of mankind. Much of what was discovered and invented by our ancestors is preserved in human culture in a "concealed" form. Any human being is a result of the planet's cultural development, a knot in the highly complicated network of poly-cultural relations, as an expression of historical destinies of peoples, classes and states. It is a unique cultural phenomenon that reflects the complexities of the world and individual fates, a singular combination of natural talents with education and life experience imposed on it. All people have certain ethnic features, they represent their ethnicities, they imagine their fates as connected with the fates of other ethnicities, yet highly distinctive; they consider their cultures to be unique components of common culture of the planet Earth and speak their own languages. Each of us brings certain features of our ethnicities common to all mankind or belonging to each of their cultures from the past into the future.

Religion is a part of history. All religions are fairly complicated structures with features shared (at least, partly) by other religions and each with the specific characteristics that distinguish them from other religions. Religion is a comparative category and should be examined as such. Comparisons are based on objective characteristics of various peoples as vehicles of world-view philosophies, such as the areas where they live, the poly-cultural nature of people's communities, specifics of their lifestyle, etc.

Russia is home to many religions, Orthodoxy and Islam having the biggest number of followers. The share of citizens of Russia in the confessions:

- Parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church—41%
- Muslims—7%
- Orthodox Christians (non-ROC)—4%
- Pagans, Old Believers and followers of the traditional religions of Russia—1.5%
- Buddhists—0.5%
- Protestants—about 3%
- Catholics—0.2%
- Judaists—about 0.1%
- Non-affiliated believers—25%
- Followers of other religions—5-6%
- Atheists—14%.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the relations between Islam and Christianity are one of the most sensitive issues of inter-confessional relations in Russia and one of the most urgent problems in religious studies. This is caused by numerous prejudices, lack of knowledge of the fundamentals of one's own religion, let alone other religions.

As monotheist religions, Islam and Christianity address the souls of their followers and demand that they not only observe rituals and make certain sacrifices, but also become devoted to a definite system of ideas. In the first millennium A.D. any minor (from a contemporary point of view) devia-

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<sup>2</sup> See: "Religii narodov Rossii v sovremennosti i v dokhristianskuiu epokhu," available at [<http://sam-sebe-psycholog.ru/articles/religii-narodov-rossii-v-sovremennosti-i-v-dokhristianskuyu-epokhu>], 11 Ma,y 2019.

tion from a dogma or rite was important to an extent unimaginable in the late first millennium B.C. and defies our imagination now.

Today, world congresses of representatives of Christian churches convene, Christian, Muslim, Judaic, Buddhist and other clergy assemble to discuss issues of faith. In the 200-800 A.D., (and often later) church congresses turned into ministers anathematizing each other.

Intolerance is not limited to religion: in Byzantium and Medieval Europe social disturbances stirred up by both class and national liberation struggles took the form of religious wars.

Today, there are dozens of different trends in Islam and Christianity, and practically none of them are limited to one people or one country. It seems that the religions inauspiciously defined as “national religions” are, in fact, not limited to one people. For example, Hinduism has not gone beyond the space of South Asia, yet it is adopted by dozens of ethnicities of India and Nepal. Confucianism, habitually perceived as a Chinese religious teaching, has followers among the Koreans and the Vietnamese. The list can be continued.

Paradoxically enough, national relations have deteriorated in the epoch of *glasnost*. Today, different peoples who paid little attention to religious affiliation, deliberately deepen and aggravate ethnic and confessional specifics; “we” is juxtaposed to “them”, that is, significantly more importance is artificially attached to ethnic self-awareness.

## **The Globalized Present: Specifics of Inter-Confessional Relations in Poly-Cultural Milieus**

Today, poly-cultural milieus exist and develop under the following conditions:

- (1) all peoples have the right to a lifestyle and culture of their own;
- (2) any national culture should develop;
- (3) each living tongue deserves careful and thoughtful attention.

These conditions should become the basis of harmonious coexistence of the confessions functioning within any given milieu. Indeed, “The *bridges* which tie together different *philosophical points of view* decrease the disproportions in the development of human society, which, to a certain extent, is a self-unfolding process calling for humanistic ideals. In Daghestan (and elsewhere), there are certain public and political forces and national movements trying to saddle religious revival and consolidate spiritual life (closely associated with popular national customs and rites) to pursue their own interests. This is true of Christianity and Islam, the republic’s two most popular religions.”<sup>3</sup>

We can identify three levels of destructive feelings in religious consciousness. First of all, narrowmindedness, limitations caused by the unwillingness to go beyond one’s own religious ideas about the world. This is the level where religious prejudices frequently appear. Religious egoism emerges at the second level, when people try to promote their own religion at the expense of others. Religious phobias, that is, undisguised hatred of other, “alien” religions, appear at the third level.

Outcrops of destructive feelings in any religion should be suppressed, and not only when their extreme manifestations occur. This is what happened in Kizlyar (Daghestan), where in February 2018, on Shrove Sunday, a 22-year-old local man shot at people who were leaving the local church

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<sup>3</sup> A. Buttaeva, “Islam in Polyconfessional Daghestan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, 2012, pp. 69-70.

after the service, killing five women and wounding several people. This tragedy is known as Bloody Shrove.<sup>4</sup>

“Everyday” forms of these feelings are even more dangerous: they spread far and wide beyond inter-confessional relations to damage other communication forms. Religious feelings are highly susceptible, which means that words should be weighed carefully, so as not to stir suspicions that one confession is favored or that somebody was fired from work because of religious preferences. The media should learn to be impartial when covering inter-confessional subjects. People are especially sensitive to encroachments on their national and religious feelings. Meanwhile, our media prefer sensations in pursuance of commercial success and wider audiences; they stir up the basest of feelings, including everyday phobias. The media, television in particular, are not fully utilizing their potentials in the harmonization of inter-confessional relations, and fine-tuning the inter-confessional and inter-national dialog and cooperation.

Harmonious inter-confessional relations may be affected by failed expectations in specific situations related to everyday life, career prospects, urbanization, etc. In order to accept and understand the religious convictions of members of different confessions, we should grasp and adopt a certain ideology. It is not simple, and requires an ability to understand and accept, as well as an openness to dialog.

Rules, values, principles and convictions should be mutually adaptable in different ways that vary by context. Mutual respect of “alien” values frequently stirs up reciprocal gratitude and helps achieve mutual understanding at the level defined as personal by psychologists and sociologists. It is highly important to accept the fact that the majority of the traits—patriotism, courage, firmness of purpose, determination to cognize supreme truth, etc.—are common to all mankind. This means that there is no monopoly of any ethnicity on these traits. We can discuss the differences between ethnicities when it comes to their manifestations.<sup>5</sup>

Every measure should be taken to maintain the precarious balance that prevents conflicts or unacceptable choices. This is the main condition of adequate existence of any poly-confessional society. It should be our goal since our knowledge is limited—we will never fully comprehend people, culture or religion. We should bear in mind, however, that this precarious balance may collapse and, therefore, requires comprehensive support.

Therefore, dialog as the meaning and way of life is impossible if not all actors are ready to join it, if there is no tolerant attitude to peoples and communities that profess different religious values. The main characteristic of any culture that makes it a culture is its openness to dialogue as an internal ability to look at itself as if from the outside and enter into a dialog with itself and, on the other hand, to exist on the borderline of other cultures.

Isaiah Berlin, a great 20th century thinker, wrote: “These visions differ with each successive social whole—each has its own gifts, values, modes of creation, incommensurable with one another: each must be understood in its own terms—understood, not necessarily evaluated... Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false.”<sup>6</sup>

Regulation of inter-confessional relations requires special attention to the poly-cultural milieu. We all know that joint work and other activities and favorable communication establish friendly international and inter-confessional contacts. At the same time, social and cultural specifics come to the fore in the poly-ethnic and poly-confessional milieu. People tend to compare occupations and the

<sup>4</sup> See: “Krovavaia Maslennitsa. Chto izvestno o rasstrele prikhozhan tserkvi v Kizlyare, 19 February, 2018, available at [<https://narzur.ru/krovavaja-maslenica-chto-izvestno-o-rasstrele-prikhozhan-cerkvi-v-kizljare/>], 11 May, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See: Yu.P. Platonov, *Narody mira v zerkale geopolitiki*, St. Petersburg, 2000, 224 pp.

<sup>6</sup> I. Berlin, *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, Princeton University Press, available at [<http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s9983.pdf>].

lifestyle and values of their culture to the culture of others. They may not share these values, but if their minds are open, they realize that others may hold values different from theirs, that they should communicate with others regardless of their values and that others' values are closely connected with their life goals, and that achieving them also brings joy.

On the other hand, before mastering the skill of appreciation of other cultures, people should be open to their own culture, be patriots of their country. They should be aware of their closeness to their native land, accept the cultural traditions and customs of their people and understand the language of their culture. Vissarion Belinsky, a prominent Russian philosopher and literary critic, wrote at one time: "Those who do not belong to their fatherland, do not belong to mankind."<sup>7</sup> The road towards a better understanding of other cultures goes from native to world culture; it is the only road that leads to a constructive and reasonable dialogue of cultures and religions.

### *Conclusion*

The social space, where a society develops and culture in all its hypostases (religious, political, artistic, moral, etc.) exists and advances, constitutes the main reason to constructively organize inter-confessional relations. The poly-cultural milieu is poly-ethnic and poly-confessional, which means that a common national culture may share its territory with religious and cultural variety dissolved in the ethno-cultural variety.

The irreversible processes launched by the globalization of all spheres of social life pre-determine the world community's path towards a variety of interconnections and interdependencies of different countries, peoples and cultures. There are practically no ethnic cultures in the world free from cultural impacts of other peoples. The same fully applies to the religious sphere. Today, nobody can dispute the fact that cultural exchanges and direct contacts between state institutions, social groups, religious communities and public movements of different countries are far more extensive than before in the social life of many peoples.

Thus, any society, especially in the poly-cultural Russian regions require the optimal mechanisms of regulation of inter-confessional and inter-ethnic interactions based on the principles of humanism and tolerance. Today, there is no well-substantiated national policy in Russia, which is a fact that should not be ignored. Inter-ethnic and interreligious tension is the result of unbalanced relations in all spheres of a poly-cultural society; it has moved to the fore as the main feature of the relations between peoples and is largely responsible for the unfavorable social and psychological contexts. This calls for new methods of consolidation of the spiritual and moral constants. In Russia, religion is best suited to address these tasks, yet unified norms of inter-confessional interaction are hardly possible in this poly-ethnic and poly-confessional socio-cultural space.

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<sup>7</sup> V. Belinsky, "On Children's Books," in: B. V. Belinsky, *Collected Works*, in 9 vols., Vol. 3, 1840-1841, Khudozhestvennaia literatura Publishers, Moscow, 1976.