

15 April 2003

RUSSIA: Kalmykia's "common defence" against "non-traditional" religions

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Local officials met Buddhist and Russian Orthodox leaders in Russia's southern, traditionally Buddhist republic of Kalmykia on 1 April to discuss their common "concern" about the growing influence of religious communities they deem untraditional. One official told Forum 18 News Service that officials were concerned about "incorrect trends" within Buddhism in Kalmykia, while the Orthodox were worried by the presence of Adventists, Baptists and Pentecostals. Kalmykia's Orthodox Bishop Zosima told Forum 18 that after Orthodox preaching, Adventists had been "cleared out" of the settlement of Iki-Burul and Russians in the previously Baptist-dominated settlement of Yashalta were returning to Orthodoxy.

The president of the social committee in support of Kalmyk president Kirsan Ilyumzhinov's social reforms, Boris Ochirov, and the chairwoman of the president's expert co-ordination council, Zinaida Dorzhiyeva, visited the republic's head Buddhist and Orthodox bishop on 1 April to discuss their common "concern" about the growing influence of religious communities they deem untraditional. On 2 April Ochirov also explained to Forum 18 News Service that "incorrect trends" in Buddhism with "the wrong policies" were now in Kalmykia, while the Orthodox were similarly concerned by the presence of Adventists, Baptists and Pentecostals in the republic.

Bishop Zosima (Ostapenko) of Elista and Kalmykia freely acknowledged to Forum 18 on 3 April that the diocese "tries to keep sects to a minimum". However, this was not done in a hostile manner, he maintained, but primarily by noting where the many western missionaries in the republic operated and then "opening up after them". In this way, he said, Adventists had been "cleared out" of the south-western settlement of Iki-Burul and Russians in the previously Baptist-dominated western settlement of Yashalta were returning to Orthodoxy. "We just want to give our pastoral message," Bishop Zosima explained to Forum 18, and complained that, while the Orthodox were open to discussion, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses had rejected their invitations to dialogue.

By contrast, Bishop Zosima has extraordinarily harmonious relations with Kalmykia's state-sponsored Buddhists, which he puts down to a strong mutual desire for religious peace. While he would criticise the "very harmful" influence of Buddhist horoscopes when speaking with an individual, he said, it would be "unforgivable" to condemn Buddhist beliefs in the media. Bishop Zosima pointed out to Forum 18 that, contrary to the canons of Orthodoxy, he had even given communion to some Buddhist elderly. "They come up with such faith, maybe even more than ours, it would be a complete tragedy for them if I turned them away. There is no sin in an excess of mercy."

Kalmykia's US-born head Buddhist told Forum 18 on 1 April that Protestant missionary work among Kalmyks was "one thing I'm not afraid of, because no matter how much they're converted, there's always going to be some kind of Buddhist culture in their system." Telo Tulku Rinpoche acknowledged that the main alternative Buddhist trend in Kalmykia referred to by Ochirov, Karma Kagyu, was "not the particular group that I would really like them to be". He had wanted to create a better understanding of all four schools or sects of Tibetan Buddhism, "but when we opened the doors the wrong group took a step forward and introduced themselves to Kalmykia." Prior to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Kalmyk Buddhists were adherents of the Gelugpa school, which has a strong monastic tradition and a particular devotion to the Dalai Lama. The Kagyu school, on the other hand, emphasises lay meditation and reveres the Karmapa, rather than the Dalai Lama, as its head.

The head of Elista's Karma Kagyu centre, Sanal Batyrev, claimed to Forum 18 on 2 April that Kalmyks became Buddhist through the 2nd Karmapa in the thirteenth century, when they were still inhabiting what is now Chinese Xinjiang. Operating in Russia for only a few years before the 1997 religion law, the international Karma Kagyu organisation run by lamas Shamar Rinpoche and Ole Nydahl managed to register as a centralised religious organisation, and consequently register 80 local centres, within weeks of its adoption. The basis for the decision was a document signed by Kalmykia's official dealing with religious affairs, Mikhail Burninov, which informed Russia's Ministry of Justice that Kagyu "is a traditional religion and has existed among the Kalmyks alongside other Buddhist traditions since the thirteenth century and up to the present day".

Telo Tulku Rinpoche told Forum 18 that he did not understand how Karma Kagyu could have registered in this way. "The Russian government doesn't know anything about Buddhism," he remarked. "Just because they say it's Buddhist they go along with that. We

are a traditionally Buddhist republic, and no one is going to say, 'Oh, of what tradition?'" Due to the mainstream Buddhists' openness towards other schools, however, the Elista Karma Kagyu centre has so far thrived. Shamar Rinpoche and Ole Nydahl sponsored the construction in 1999 of a large Buddhist stupa (sacred statue) next to President Ilyumzhinov's showpiece City-Chess complex, and the centre has plans to build a meditation and study centre alongside it, Batyrev told Forum 18.

When Forum 18 mentioned Karma Kagyu to Bishop Zosima, he referred to the stupa and the recent display of a mandala (sacred symbol, famously executed in sand), which he had attended. "Then they said it was done by sectarian Buddhists. I was invited - but who it was who did it, I don't know." It was due to incidents such as this that the Interreligious Council for Traditional Confessions would be created, said Bishop Zosima. "Then, if the Muslims have similar problems, for example, the head mufti can explain the essence of them to us and we will support him." Bishop Zosima was confident of President Ilyumzhinov's support for the Council. "When he first came and talked about his programme for purity of faith and a clean town, I supported him."

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