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Summary

Gods, Spirits and Saints – Lived Orthodox Christianity in Karelia, Northwest Russia, in 1000–1900

This work deals with religious changes and (argued) continuities in the most north-western part of present Russia, which in Finnish is usually called Karelia, from the adoption of Christianity by Kievan Rus (including its northernmost outpost, Novgorod) around 1000 CE until the eve of the Russian revolutions circa 1900 CE.

The focus is on the effects that the institutionalized forms of Christianity and the State had upon lived religiosity, the popular reactions to these influences, and the use of coercion that was involved. It is not my goal to analyse each aspect or period equally, but to expose broad strategies, features and ‘patterns’ which arguably shifted slowly over time. My general presupposition, and also one of my conclusions, is that at the level of lived religiosity people tended to see – and defend – continuities, leading them to resist changes.

Due to the long period under inspection and the immense volume of available printed and archival material, this work resorts to primary sources rather selectively and otherwise largely depends on already existing research. The study is divided into seven chapters. The first one provides an overview of previous studies, mainly Finnish ones, in the fields of Church History, Comparative Religion and Folkloristics. My observation, unsurprisingly, is that the former was not interested in ‘folk religion’, whereas the latter two generally ignored institutionalized Christianity. I try to take into account both of these types of studies and place them in a sort of dialogue. Moreover, I do not focus on one single people, as most of the previous scholars have done. As far as possible, I attempt to cover both Finnic and Slavic peoples.

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In the second chapter, I present a hypothesis about the nature of the preChristian religiosity in Karelia based on rock art, archaeological findings, and some Scandinavian sagas, all related to the area around Lake Onega and the Onega Bay. From this material I conclude that rituals aiming at material benefit, such as health and prosperity of catch and kin, were important in pre-Christian Karelia and provided a means to interpret Christianity as one new form to gain practical advantages.

In chapter 3, I trace the gradual familiarization of Karelian peoples with Christian symbols (such as the cross), ornaments decorated with such symbols, and habits related to Christianity (earth burials, for example), followed by economic and political means of exploiting local people (for example, taxation). The former process started some hundred years before the official adoption of Christianity in Novgorod (presumably around 1000 CE). The latter was accompanied, to an unknown extent, by the dissemination of oral stories, many of them apocryphal. For centuries, these miscellaneous pieces of information about Christianity were the main form of religion for the people in Karelia outside the main urban centres.

The next chapter argues that the interpretative model suggested in chapter 2 was in fact used by Karelian inhabitants, at least in the countryside, to acculturate Christian influences into their own views. In other words, local people adopted in a peaceful way those aspects of Christianity which supported their pursuit of mundane benefits. The most important were miracles performed by God or saints and rituals aimed at the prosperity of the local community. Of these, I take St. Paraskeva (spelled variously in different sources) as an example. She was not central in mainstream Christianity, but I single her out to assess lived religiosity, particularly among women, for whom she was (and partly still is) quite important in northern Russia. In this chapter I also discuss some of the ways in which the sixteenth-century Novgorodian and Muscovite authorities tried (with little success) to force the local population to conform to and practise Christianity in a way that was acceptable to the Church.

The fifth chapter is devoted to an analysis of the role of Orthodox monasteries in Christianizing the Karelian peoples. Some senior scholars – above all in Finland the historian Heikki Kirkinen, as well as various representatives of Orthodox churches in Russia and Finland – have considered the monasteries' role as highly important, if not crucial. My claim is that the monasteries indeed brought people into contact with governmental taxation and other such issues, but, excluding perhaps the monastery of Solovetsky, institutions were not important at the level of lived Christianity. In everyday life, beliefs and practices associated with individual monks and ascetics considered as miracle workers by both ecclesiastics and local people were key.

The last two chapters focus, respectively, on the great religious turmoil of seventeenth-century Russia, called the Old Believer schism, and the modernizing attempts of the Swedish and Russian governments during the following century. The Old Believers comprised a highly heterogeneous movement, which resisted the Church's and the State's attempts to marginalize local religious and societal variety. Their armed resistance included 'invention' of local saints and relics, evidently to combat central power. The

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authorities resorted to force in order to suppress the movement, but Old Believers critical of the Church and State flourished in Russian backwaters, including Karelia, until the early twentieth century or even later. At the end of chapter 6, I present some examples of Old Believer life in Archangel Karelia.

Chapter 7 examines modernizing, which in the context of the eighteenth century meant the State's efforts to curb what it called 'superstition', to control people in an institutional manner (through priests), to educate them in the spirit of rational thinking, and to make them adopt a uniform practice and understanding of Christianity. This also failed in Karelia during the imperial period, not least because of the poor education of the clergy in the countryside and because of their close economic ties to their parishes, which paid their salaries.

Throughout the book, I emphasize the active role of the people (and as far as possible, women) in maintaining and shaping what I call lived religiosity or lived Orthodoxy. People did not just obediently adopt and follow the versions of Christianity the authorities offered or insisted that they comply with. Based on their own, often mundane needs they accepted what they considered appropriate. In other words, they negotiated their religion, and they did not merely consent to outside ideologies and practices. They could do this insofar as Karelia was outside, or on the periphery of, Russian – and in the seventeenth century, Swedish – modernization. As long as nothing much changed in the economic and social life and health care, and education followed traditional lines, Karelian inhabitants had no particular reason to abandon their time-proven lived religion. Only after social and other changes fully extended into the hintermost regions of Karelia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the local people forced to renegotiate their beliefs and practices relative to 'state Christianity'.