Religion, State & Society, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2003

Carfax Publishing
Taylor & Francis Group

Advocating New Moralities: Conversion to Evangelicalism in Ukraine

CATHERINE WANNER

Narratives of how one became a believer are oft repeated in the course of witnessing. In postsoviet Ukraine the narratives of recent converts to evangelical Protestantism reflect certain patterns in attitudes toward the past. Although there is widespread agreement among scholars that conversion involves 'radical change' and introduces a 'new universe of discourse' there is little consensus about the level on which this change occurs and the specific themes of this discourse (Snow and Machalek, 1984; Yamane, 2000). In the first postsoviet cohort of converts in Ukraine radical change is reflected in a rejection of the past and the notions of morality that characterised it. Conversion provides a platform on which to rupture and discard inherited moralities, memories and relationships, and a justification for doing so on higher moral grounds.

Religion, as a web of ideas, beliefs and behaviours, can also serve as the basis for a new social contract and a new moral code. This article uses conversion narratives to explain the appeal of evangelicalism in a traditionally Orthodox land by analysing the 'cultural conditioning' created by the Soviet experience which has prompted individuals to turn to evangelicalism in order to reconstitute their lives after the fall of the Soviet system.[1] I argue that conversion narratives reveal a critique of the moral code and social contract created under socialism. Converts advocate a change of inherited moralities via observance of Christian doctrine and membership in the faith-based communities that have been created on the ruins of socialism. This article is based on ethnographic research in evangelical communities in Ukraine conducted from June 2000 to June 2002 and is informed by interviews in Ukrainian or Russian with 63 recent converts to the Baptist faith and 17 recent converts to Pentecostalism.

The Politics of Religion in Ukraine

Much has been written about the role of the West in introducing democracy, market economies and other globalising forces into the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991. These ideologies and their associated practices are part of a cultural bundle. Another element of change that has received far less attention is the resurgence of religious practice and the presence of clergy in prominent public arenas. Ukraine is a country with deep religious traditions and this is one of many factors that explain its comparative legislative and popular openness to a multitude of religious faiths. Ukraine means 'borderland', and its strategic and valuable location as a crossroads, as a bridge between diverse cultural traditions, has created and

ISSN 0963-7494 print/ISSN 1465-3975 online/03/030273-15 © 2003 Keston Institute
DOI: 10.1080/0963749032000107072

perpetuated a tradition of religious pluralism.

Although in many regions of the former Soviet Union 'religious nationalisms' are thriving and remaking national communities with a distinctive religious blueprint for postsocialist society, the same cannot be said of Ukraine. Orthodoxy is considered the foundation of national traditions, aesthetic forms and other elements of a uniquely Ukrainian socio-cultural matrix. Yet the splintering and subsequent political bickering among Orthodox denominations, all striving unsuccessfully to become 'the' Ukrainian national church, has weakened the status of Orthodoxy in Ukraine (Plokhy, 2002). This rivalry among Orthodox denominations, following on the heels of the Orthodox Church's history of complicity with the Soviet state, has effectively tarnished the appeal of Orthodoxy and brought an end to the prospect of a single church enjoying a state-backed monopoly status in Ukraine. In addition, and in contrast to the situation in Russia, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine faces competition from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, which also claims to be an indigenous, historically national and uniquely Ukrainian church. When a single church cannot dominate and influence political policy, *de facto* there is a greater degree of freedom for other faiths to exist and for individuals to worship as they choose (Tataryn, 2001). As all the national churches compete among themselves for dominance, a new space is opened up for nontraditional faiths and new religious movements to establish roots in Ukraine.

This resulting religious pluralism, combined with a nominal commitment to Orthodoxy among large sectors of the population to begin with, has made Ukraine one of the most active and competitive 'religious marketplaces' (Casanova, 1995). Using free market dynamics as a model to understand religious participation (which is particularly apt for this formerly socialist society), Stark and Finke (2000) assert that when religious economies are unregulated, they become competitive, and this generates high levels of religious participation. The history of active religious participation and confessional diversity, particularly in western Ukraine where religion and politics have intersected sharply and frequently over time, has combined to create a political and cultural climate that is more favourable to a spectrum of missionaries, particularly when compared with Ukraine's closest neighbours, Russia and Belarus'.

Ukraine has been called the 'Bible Belt' of the former Soviet Union because of its numerous and vibrant Protestant congregations (Fletcher, 1985a, p. 91). In spite of repressive state attitudes toward religion, evangelicals in the Soviet Union capitalised on the traditions of prerevolutionary Baptist settlements and the early introduction of Pentecostalism to the Russian Empire in 1911.[2] Prior to the collapse of the Soviet state, in Ukraine alone the number of Baptists swelled to 750,000 and was nearly matched by 700,000 Pentecostals (Fletcher, 1985a, p. 91). Unofficial local estimates of the number of evangelicals in the USSR were considerably higher. Already in the early 1950s, after a brief wartime relaxation of repressive policies, Baptist leaders in the Soviet Union estimated their numbers to have already reached three million (Elliott and Richardson, 1992, p. 200). This pattern of membership growth continued and even rapidly accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet system. By the mid-1990s there were over 3600 Protestant churches officially registered in Ukraine and by 2001 this number had risen to over 5000 (Johnston and Mandryk, 2001, pp. 644–45). In addition, numerous temporary locations function as 'prayer houses' and elude official registration. The Institute of Religion and Society (*Instytut relihii ta suspil'stva*) in L'viv, western Ukraine, estimates that one-quarter of all religious communities in Ukraine today are Protestant.[3] Mission funding and overall financial support from

Protestant denominations in the West, most notably the USA and Germany, have been critical to the rapid growth of church planting and Christian broadcasting in Ukraine.

How can we explain the rapid growth of Protestantism in this traditionally Orthodox country? How does an evangelical religious doctrine mesh with the legacy of Soviet culture so as to render it so appealing? Just as the year 1991 is a watershed in twentieth-century history, dismantling political institutions and radically redirecting social life and cultural values, conversion becomes a pivotal event in the life of an individual, a critical experience which transforms behaviour and thought thereafter.

Narrative and Conversion

In her study of American Baptist fundamentalists, Susan Harding (2000) argues that becoming a believer in its most basic essence brings about a shift in speech by introducing a narrative tradition of witnessing between the believer and God, and between the saved believer and the unsaved listener. By actively listening, one experiences belief vicariously and this becomes the first step to converting. By speaking or witnessing, she claims, the believer uses a particular narrative tradition which celebrates submitting to God's will and placing it as 'the centering principle of your identity, your personal and public life, your view of human nature and history, and joining a particular narrative tradition to which you willingly submit your past, present and future as a speaker' (Harding, 1987, p. 179).

Witnessing, and the rhetorical devices this involves, becomes a means of reaffirming belief and of reaffirming one's willingness to submit to the will of God as one hears it, and ultimately a means of inspiring others to believe. Harding's study underscores the importance of narrating the conversion experience and the ensuing dialogue with God for sustaining and strengthening belief and for encouraging others to convert. Oleg, a 34-year-old who converted to the Baptist faith in 2000, explains how listening to God has transformed his patterns of daily living and how the dialogue with God sustains these changes:

> I didn't become, rather I am becoming a different person. The process is moving along. I would say that earlier I ran after sin – I used to like to drink, to be with girls, to look for adventure. All of that interested me – now sin inspires in me the fear of God. I'm not interested in it anymore. I'm afraid of losing contact with God, of becoming lost. God not only helps you, but he will find the best solution for you. There's contact with God and there's a certainty that God will always help you. And there's a wish not to lose this contact, a fear that it might break down.[4]

This 'conversation with God', the 'inner voice' which believers can appeal to, has enormous significance for generating and strengthening belief. Of this dialogue between God and convert, Harding writes:

> Among fundamentalist Baptists, the Holy Spirit brings you under conviction by speaking to your heart. Once you are saved, the Holy Spirit assumes your voice, speaks through you, and begins to rephrase your life. Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, as it were vicariously. But generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech: speaking is believing. (Harding, 2000, p. 60)

I am particularly interested in how believers speak about the past in conversion narratives and how this specifically relates to transcending it. If 'speaking is believing', as Harding argues, conversion narratives offer insight into options for refashioning identity as a 'believer' and forging a new ideology of morality supported by qualitatively different communities created after the fall of the Soviet Union.

I use the term conversion to mean a self-transforming experience imbued with religious meaning. Conversion is a complex process, not an event, culminating in religious change that occurs in a dynamic force-field of people, events, ideologies, institutions and experiences (Rambo and Farhadian, 1999, p. 24). Conversion is an experience that gives life new meaning by changing the way an individual perceives reality and the intellectual and social tools he or she has to respond to it. Here I am focusing on individuals who were nonreligious and have become religious believers, as opposed to those who have reaffiliated, or simply transferred membership from one religious community to another in the same tradition.

As such, conversion can be a swift means of redefining concepts of self and other through cultural appropriation and of marking this new collective identity with group membership and the subsequent behaviour modification this mandates. By becoming a believer, one redefines fundamental cultural categories, such as familiar and foreign, space and time, power and agency, and gender and class. One rewrites autobiography into pre- and post- conversion periods, giving in to the frequent temptations to see signs retrospectively of the impending conversion in one's deep past and thereby reaffirming the righteousness of the Christian life one has adopted.

Conversion, therefore, provides a new means to reinterpret history, one's own and one's group history, and provides new tools to act upon the present and future. Individuals choose a particular faith in part because it resonates with some aspect of an individual's historical experience. In nearly all instances, however, this connection with the past in postsoviet Ukraine centres on a rejection and a pronounced desire to change aspects of an individual's past private and social life. The narratives of recent converts to the Baptist and Pentecostal faiths in Ukraine detail a transformation of the self through a reassessment of the past and its moral code. It is therefore impossible to separate individual motivations to convert from the greater historical and cultural context in which the conversion occurs.

Most studies of conversion have been written by psychologists and have attempted to identify patterns as to who converts and why. Such studies have mainly focused on individual agency in choosing a new faith and have argued against conversion induced by passivity, social pressure to conform and 'brainwashing' (Richardson, 1985); or on 'motifs of conversion', meaning the type of sacred object with which the individual identifies (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981); and finally many studies have analysed the personality of converts, concluding that they are more likely than nonconverts to have reported a stressful childhood, a negative opinion of their parents, and a high incidence of paternal absence (Paloutzian *et al.*, 1999, p. 1056).

Many of my respondents echoed these findings by alluding to the combination of psychological and social stress brought on by serious illness, seemingly intractable family problems, persistent unemployment and similar troubles which led to feelings of acute powerlessness and preceded conversion. Many reported sustained interaction with converted kin, friends or trusted mentors during these stressful periods, reminding us of Lofland and Stark's (1965) early contribution that 'attachment' is at the heart of conversion.

The general critique I have of psychological studies of conversion is that even if they can identify predisposing personality traits, social influences or stress factors

which indicate who is susceptible to conversion, they do not indicate cause, nor are these factors found consistently among all converts. Such theories do not account for individuals who embody the same traits and are exposed to the same stresses but do not turn to religion. For this reason, I consider 'cultural conditioning', a universal factor, as an issue which should be included in studies of conversion. The process of converting is inextricably embedded in the cultural fabric of relationships, ideologies and moralities, and by examining the very same one gains insight as to how and why individuals become religious believers.

The Appeal of Evangelicalism

Given the cultural values and expectations fostered by Soviet institutions, there are several factors that explain the appeal of evangelicalism today. Protestant religious organisations garner legitimacy in postsoviet society on two levels: believers see church institutions and doctrine as transcendent and timeless and yet specific religious practices within congregations are tailored to local cultures. The strong emphasis on Scripture and its interpretation provides both an authentic, historical tradition and possibilities for local adaptation. As a result of divisions and splits from a central controlling authority, over time Protestant denominations in general have accorded a measure of self-determination to individual congregations.[5] The autonomy of congregations in Ukraine may appear partial when contrasted with the experiences of their counterparts in the West. Yet when compared with Orthodoxy and the notorious standardisation of Soviet institutions to which potential converts are accustomed, even the episcopal model of polity of evangelical faiths allows for perceptions of greater local autonomy in congregational life. This is a key point in a regionally diverse country like Ukraine with sharp divisions between urban and rural life.

Another factor in the appeal of evangelicalism is that evangelicals refer to themselves as 'believers' or 'Christians' and thereby dispense with the negative associations inherent in the terms 'Baptist' or 'Pentecostal' after decades of Soviet propaganda. Their faith is actualised through a strict interpretation of the Bible, as the Word of God, which dictates how one should live.[6] This faith-as-lifestyle orientation becomes a totalising source of identity, overtaking in importance other factors such as nationality, class and language. Conversion to Evangelical Protestant faiths constitutes a total lifestyle change, with belief and behaviour, family and community, ideally merging into one.

This is in direct contradiction to the situation in Soviet society, where one often thought one thing, said another, and did entirely another, a state of affairs which Verdery refers to as the 'social schizophrenia' generated by socialism (1996, p. 36). Protestant converts, especially as they compare themselves with the Orthodox, 'live' their faith according to the Bible, by blending word, thought, and deed. Asked why she didn't turn to Orthodoxy when seeking God, a middle-aged woman said 'Orthodoxy is also not bad, but it relates to the Baptist faith like kindergarten does to university. It's only the first step on the path to God.'[7] Many respondents criticised Orthodoxy for its lack of 'depth', as evidenced by the minimal sacrifice and lifestyle changes Orthodox believers experience as a result of embracing faith.

A third factor in the appeal of evangelicalism is that, in sharp contrast to Orthodox ritual, and to the host of rituals and commemorations of the Soviet state, evangelical services are highly participatory. Individuals are not mere spectators, nor are they relegated to scripted roles. Rather, three or four men preach per service, numerous choirs and musicians perform, some read poetry, and individuals are encouraged to

repent, witness and express themselves in their own prayers before the group. Particularly among Pentecostals, services become a forum for mystical experiences, for euphoria and even for regression to a past life or for envisioning a future one. Such outlets take on increased importance as possible avenues for self expression and self-affirmation established under the Soviet regime close. Most believers attend church services at least twice a week and many are involved in some church-related activity five or six days a week. Intense involvement in congregational activities means that members have little time, money or energy for worldly activities and relationships and this increases their dependence on and loyalty to the community.

Lastly, although pastors are clearly father-like authority figures, their authority, believers argue, fundamentally differs from that of their Orthodox counterparts. It is earned by example and not merely embodied in the symbolic trappings of office. Pastors are not thought to have a privileged relationship with God, as evidenced by the fact that they do not wear special robes, nor dominate the service, although they are visible at all times. Parishioners are not obliged to show homage by, for example, kissing the pastor's hand or kissing icons. Pastors try to recognise the individual contributions of parishioners, and to know their names, family histories and even birthdays in order to forge a community of believers. Yet a pastor unquestionably retains a higher status and great authority among believers by virtue of his office.

Perceptions of tempered pastoral authority are also attributable to the variety of ways in which some authority for running the congregation is allocated to parishioners. In something of an open forum, members vote on such critical issues as electing pastors and removing errant individuals from fellowship. Church committees run Sunday schools, youth groups, mission activities, social outreach and other humanitarian endeavours. An elected governing body, the Fraternal Council (*Braters'ka rada*), makes key decisions guiding the church's development and growth and listens to complaints and grievances. Such mechanisms and activities for the most part do not exist in Orthodox communities. When these activities are considered in light of the western origins of Protestant denominations they enhance the perception of Baptist and Pentecostal churches as 'democratic' institutions. This perception is part of their appeal and it only continues to grow as the Soviet experience is increasingly discredited for its misguided authoritarian hierarchies and moral bankruptcy.

Advocating a New Moral Order

Studying converts to the Unification Church, Eileen Barker argues that many of them are idealists who joined the church to express their idealism through action, especially when they perceived idealism and altruism as discounted by society at large in favour of materialism and self-advancement (Barker, 1984, pp. 242–45).

> The Unification Church offers the potential recruit the chance to be part of a Family of like-minded people who care about the state of the world, who accept and live by high moral standards, who are dedicated to restoring God's Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It offers him the opportunity to *belong*; it offers him the opportunity to *do* something that is of value and thus the opportunity *to be* of value. (Barker, 1984, p. 244)

She goes on to characterise converts to the Unification Church as individuals who have a strong sense of service, duty and responsibility and who are achievers, grappling with an unfulfilled yearning to contribute to the greater good of humanity. These converts, she argues, find a means to realise their idealism as members of the

Unification Church.

I would like to suggest that a similar dynamic exists among converts to evangelicalism in postsoviet society. In Ukraine today one hears numerous laments about the need to cheat, lie or steal just to earn a meagre living, about rampant corruption among government officials who have abandoned any commitment to pursuing the collective good in favour of self-enrichment, and about the ruthlessness and omnipresence of organised crime. Evangelicals see themselves as held to a higher moral standard than those from this brave new world and they consciously try to exhibit behaviour that reflects this. As a retired day-care worker put it, 'There is the Trinity of word, deed and life, and all of it is for God. The most important is our lives; we should fulfill all the commandments so that we will be an example for others.'[7] She told how she found a wallet and returned it with all the contents in place, including a considerable sum of money, much to the astonishment of its owner. This act, she consciously reasoned, would demonstrate the meaning and relevance of living by Christian values in a way that the wallet-owner would not soon forget.

This desire and pressure to exhibit model behaviour in order to offer direction to others has particular consequences in postsoviet society where distrust, cynicism and self-interest are pervasive. One man, an environmental inspector, recounted how his colleagues were constantly on the take but asserted that he, as a Christian, could not accept bribes or 'presents' (the English word is used) and this made him a 'white raven' (black sheep) at his workplace. The dominant pattern among his colleagues was to inspect an installation, find fault, threaten to report it, accept a bribe and then no longer find fault. He, on the other hand, tried to align his religious beliefs, and the values and modes of behaviour they inspire, with the requirements of his job, an effort that was condemned by his coworkers because it threatened their livelihoods. Finally, his boss created a situation whereby he was obliged to resign from a job he had hitherto enjoyed. 'That is what God wanted', he said. 'I understand that I myself would not have left. But it's good that it happened. I am thankful to God. I am trying to pay more attention to what God has given than to what he has not.'[8]

Living by Christian values made him an unwanted outcast among his colleagues. On the basis of his religious convictions he challenged dominant cultural expectations and business practices even though this meant that he jeopardised a job he enjoyed and ultimately was fired. Many believers marshal a certain moral justification in going against cultural norms and then, regardless of the consequences, use the benevolence of God and his shepherding of believers through life according to his plan as a frame to cope with the ensuing hardship. In trying to provide justification and motivation for individual believers to challenge morally abhorrent, yet dominant, cultural practices, a village pastor said 'In a dark time when a lamp shines somewhere, everyone will come, attracted by the light. Believers should be light, to which others are drawn and around whom others will gather.'[9]

Numerous converts reported that they felt they had become kinder, more caring and more generous people since they became believers. In many instances, this change was part of adapting to the ethos of the congregation they had joined, which they perceived to be markedly 'kinder' than the society in which they lived. Let us take, for example, a young student from Luhans'k who became interested in exploring the Baptist faith when she was 16 years old. Her parents were not believers but her grandmother had converted to the Baptist faith and had taken her to church and Sunday school as a small child. When Lena was 16, one of her friends celebrated his birthday by throwing a party and inviting his friends. For nonbelievers, religious and state holidays hold little meaning. Birthdays are therefore probably the single most

important and joyful day of the year. In spite of this, only Lena and her brother came for the party. It was extremely cold that day and the other guests, without excuse, simply decided to stay at home. Lena was indignant.

> That really bothered me and I thought, what is that kind of friendship worth? I began to compare the relationships among young people in this group with the relationships among young people in the Sunday school I used to attend and came to the conclusion that the latter were far more favourable. They were calmer, not aggressive, and they had a sense of purpose in life. I was drawn to them again. The first Sunday after that party, I called my grandmother and asked her to take me to church and we went together.[10]

That very day she repented and claimed she felt 'a huge sense of relief, as if I had been given a long, white robe and my task now was not to soil it'. I interviewed her five years later, when she had already become a member of a church, and she claimed that her childhood impressions had only been confirmed many times over. 'People here are not like those in the world', she said. 'They are much better. Much kinder.' The perception that believers relate to one another differently from nonbelievers is a key point of attraction. Among believers, converts are able to reject the manipulative patterns of interaction, the 'functional friendship', which characterises mainstream society, and to relax the defences needed to guard against being deceived by a street salesmen, a greedy government official, or a jealous colleague (Wanner, 1998, pp. 49–75; Ledeneva, 1998).

One man explained how as a nonbeliever he began to accompany his ailing mother to church after she fell ill. After one of the first services he attended, a celebratory meal was offered to all present.

> When I sat down at the table and looked at the faces of the people sitting around me, I saw that they were smiling and laughing and I couldn't find a single backward fanatic among them. Going home, I laughed and thought to myself, one more visit like that and I'll become a believer.[11]

Soviet propaganda portraying Baptists as superstitious lunatics was exposed as a lie; instead he saw people at peace with themselves and engaged in genuinely caring relationships. Not only was a myth shattered, but also a new opportunity was presented. His initial impressions of kindness and peace among Baptists were confirmed over time and this prompted him to convert.

In gravitating towards such an atmosphere individuals find themselves adapting to it, both consciously and subconsciously. A particularly strong change in attitude towards others since converting is reflected in the comments of Vitali, a 42-year-old history teacher. He explains the changes in his thinking since converting:

> Before I had a rebellious personality but then I experienced humility. I started to write poetry and songs. From God I received the gift of preaching. For me the ideal of Christ and the promise of eternal life became the reason for living and the goal of my life.[12]

As a result of this shift in thinking, his behaviour and relationships with others changed markedly. Vitali lists the ways in which he lives differently now:

> I started to take better care of myself, to dress better. Before I would think nothing of expressing harsh opinions, but now I don't. If I can say this, I think I have become more loving. I really feel full of love for others. I

> have started to compliment women more, although before they called me misogynous.

Of course, for the changes in an individual convert's attitudes and relationships with others to be lasting, they must be sustained in communities that foster and reward them.

New Social Bonds, New Communities

Lewis Rambo (1993) considers conversion in terms of an exchange of one type of community membership for another. His contribution is valuable in that it highlights the fact that although conversion occurs at the individual level, perceptions of anticipated communal life are a key factor explaining motivations to convert and sweeping changes in social life are an important result of conversion. Under the Soviet regime church members created tight networks of mutual assistance and cooperation, which bred group solidarity. These social relationships served as buffers against the constant threat of state repression and helped to ensure survival in rough political times. These ongoing practices and relationships of solidarity now help to ensure economic survival. Places of worship offer emotional and spiritual comfort and, often with significant help from abroad, tangible material aid to those in need. The ability to alleviate suffering has enhanced the reputation of organised religion and increased its magnetism after decades of stigmatisation.

Stark and Finke (2000) argue that individuals rationally conduct a cost-benefit analysis to select a particular congregation and to decide whether or not formally to become a member. The most crucial factor, they claim, which influences whether an individual will be recruited, convert and join is whether or not such a move will strengthen his or her social networks. I have written elsewhere of the colossal importance of social networks in the Soviet Union and postsoviet Ukraine for survival, not just for maximising opportunities and well-being (Wanner, 1998; Wanner and Dudwick, 2002). Procuring a vast array of goods, services and information depends on having robust social networks, a practice that evolved in response to the Soviet system of 'organised shortages' and continues today. In the early 1990s, during the initial years of acute economic chaos, having access to social networks was the single most important factor in determining who became impoverished temporarily and who ran the risk of becoming part of a permanent underclass.

Stark and Finke also add, however, that a person is far more likely to choose a faith that will not result in the alienation of friends and family or loss of social capital (2000, p.138). Converting to Protestantism in Ukraine often still chills old friendships, arouses suspicion among neighbours and potentially creates difficulties with disapproving colleagues at work. In counterbalance, however, it increasingly promises the acquisition of new, perhaps more valuable, networks. A very persistent theme emerging from interviews with recent converts is the extent to which they now socialise only with other believers, which reflects the creation of an entirely new set of social relationships. They also now exclusively confide in other believers, illustrating how a new 'universe of discourse' yields a common language that conceptualises problems in similar ways and searches for solutions in similar domains. By the same token, the possibilities for intimate exchange with people who are areligious, who do not enter that universe of discourse, begin to close after conversion.

New church-based communities, serving economic and social functions, are often anchored in a particular district or neighbourhood, and provide impressive levels of

informal assistance to persons in need. Under one roof, individuals can reconstitute a sense of belonging, identity and economic security. Sometimes workshops are created right on church grounds offering a plethora of services and job opportunities. Church members patronise each other's businesses and barter services. The men form construction brigades that are highly sought after by outside entrepreneurs because of the assumption that the men won't drink, steal or quarrel with one another.

During an interview, one respondent was interrupted when the telephone rang. A member of her church was inquiring as to where she could get some shoes repaired. The respondent told her the name and address of a fellow-believer who mended the shoes of other believers for free. She later explained how the hairdressers, plumbers, seamstresses and other skilled members of her congregation provide their services free to fellow church members on a regular basis.

These orchestrated economic activities of exchange, combined with a commitment to assist those in need, provide a much needed safety net for members, especially women, at a time when the state's ability to provide employment and assistance to the poor has withered. Although converts often experience the loss even of longstanding friendships because they have embraced a faith that remains culturally stigmatised, they nonetheless gain membership in a vibrant and highly active community that provides for their spiritual, social and even material needs.

Tanya, a young Baptist convert, provided one of the more dramatic examples of a community's ability to care for one of its members. She divorced her first husband after he began to drink and after he and a friend had beaten her one New Year's Eve to the point that she required prolonged hospitalisation. After that incident she took her one-year-old daughter and moved in with her mother in spite of the hostile relationship they had. Several years later she married a man who gave up his job as a pastor with the Salvation Army to convert to the Baptist faith. Together they were christened and joined a church. He was employed in one of the church brigades and received his salary directly from the pastor. Tensions arose when she learned that he was using his job to earn additional money illegally, which believers are forbidden to do. Troubles deepened when she realised she was pregnant.

> When I told my husband about the child, he didn't want to hear about it. I was in despair. My mother screamed, 'I'll throw you out!' and she demanded that I have an abortion. My older sister also tried to convince me to have an abortion. We went to the hospital, but when we got there, I got so upset that we went home. I know that abortion is a sin. I understood that if I had an abortion, I would not return to church because I wouldn't be able to look my friends and pastor in the eye. What is there for me in the world? To start partying again? Where would I hang out? And second, I had already fallen so in love with my future child. I felt as if it would be a son and I always wanted a son. And my church friends already knew that I was pregnant because I had had a strong toxic reaction early on. I understood that to have an abortion would offend God and my friends. But what to do? I was very scared. I knew that I would need a caesarean section and that that would cost about [US]$150–200, which I didn't have. But my friends said to me, 'Do you believe in God? If your faith is strong, than God will not leave you. If you don't commit sins then God will bless you and your child. Put your trust in God.' I remembered Andrei [a fellow believer] and his fifteen children and thought, if they can somehow live, then I can make it too.[13]

Her husband, however, was not in agreement. At a time when she was feeling morally confused and physically weak, her husband, under strong pressure from his own parents, deserted her when she refused to have an abortion. Facing substantial medical bills and no means to pay for them, and the prospect of single motherhood with two small children and nowhere to live, Tanya went to her pastor for advice. He rallied the members of the church to her cause.

Not only did they collect enough money to pay her medical bills and to support her after the birth, but on the day of her caesarean section the entire congregation fasted and prayed for her and her newborn. Every day someone from the church came to the hospital to take care of her. They brought her home and gave her gifts. When her milk supply proved inadequate, another mother from the church even shared her breast milk. At the time of the interview, her son was six months old and she was still being entirely supported by her congregation, an act of generosity that would probably be beyond the capacity of even the most dedicated of friends.

When asked, a fellow church member explained how such a level of support was possible. Like other members of Tanya's congregation, Shura, a 55-year-old accountant from Kharkiv, is committed to help anyone in need, regardless of the nature of her relationship to them. She explains how her attitude towards other – unknown – people has changed since converting in 1993.

> Now, as I'm no longer part of the church choir, I have more time. I visit the sick – believers and nonbelievers. I visit the elderly parents of one of my friends. I help them take care of themselves. If I wasn't a believer, I would help, let's say, only my close friends. Now for me there are no longer strangers ... . For a worldly person, it [this practice of giving] is, of course, strange. We're not relatives. But at the same time, we're much more – we're brothers and sisters in faith.[14]

Because of the sweeping and foundational nature of the claims of religion on a person's way of thinking and behaving, old friends often become alienated by a convert's new commitments and activities. Evangelical communities provide a system of values and comprehensive assumptions about reality that, once embraced, lead to a new way of life. Usually only the very oldest, very best nonbelieving friends remain with the new convert and become the first to whom the convert witnesses. Shifts in attitudes toward others outside one's circle, and by extension the obligation to help them, what I am calling a new moral code, can be difficult for the nonbeliever to understand and accept because they represent a break with accepted cultural practices.

Besides the feeling of a greater sense of connection to other people, other respondents alluded to various other benefits becoming a believer has brought. Faiths that demand significant sacrifice or sweeping changes in behaviour from its members generally have congregations with more highly committed members. For some the motivation to convert, or to encourage others to convert, stems from a desire to change certain patterns of behaviour and the social relationships that sustain them. Some scholars have argued that religious communities can serve as something of a 'halfway house' in which to unlearn destructive behaviour patterns (Paloutzian *et al.*, 1999). Conservative evangelical communities forbid drinking, smoking, drugs, dancing, divorce, premarital sex, birth control and abortion, to name the most obvious activities which are part and parcel of everyday life in postsoviet Ukrainian society.

A middle-aged man from Kharkiv commented on the changes in his life since becoming a Baptist: '... earlier I was paid about five times more and it was never enough. It always seemed like too little. Now we have very little money but it's

enough for us; as is written in the Scripture, be satisfied with little.'[15] Earlier the extra money financed a variety of habits, outings with women, and questionable friendships, which he also forfeited once he joined the church and adopted a far more modest lifestyle.

Another man wanted to give up smoking and prayed to God for help. The next morning when he went out onto the balcony to smoke in his underwear, somehow the door locked, and although he had his cell phone with him he was unable to contact either his mother or the neighbours since none of them were at home. There he sat in his underwear until late afternoon with nothing except, as it turned out, a Christian newspaper. He took this episode as a sign from God and was finally able to give up smoking.[16] Many women, in particular, express a desire during services and prayer groups for their children to convert as a way for them to break with self-destructive or reckless behaviour.

A change in behaviour, then, becomes a marker of true faith. It also works in the opposite direction, however. When a member of a faith community violates behavioural norms, a rigorous sense of order mandates that the he or she be 'defellowshipped' (*vidluchenyi*). Usually the offender is given a trial period during which he or she is allowed to try to amend his or her errant ways. If modifications are not made, or are not made satisfactorily, the entire congregation usually participates in an open vote to determine if the person should be defellowshipped or not.

Frequent contact among members allows for close scrutiny of behaviour. The possibility of quickly identifying transgressions leads to greater accountability to the group and makes it easier to uphold the norms of morality and behaviour that define the group. In short, members subscribe to a new moral code and tolerate the restrictions on their behaviour that set them apart from the society at large because not only are their spiritual needs met, but membership often yields specific social and material rewards. As growing numbers of people gather in congregations regularly across the country, they reaffirm these moralities, practices and identities. Slowly, very slowly, the legacy of Soviet culture is chiselled away.

Conclusion

Although Soviet propaganda tended to use the terms 'sect' and 'cult' interchangeably, social scientists reserve the term 'cult' to indicate a group which is both in high tension with society at large and also draws its belief system from an alien religious tradition. A sect, on the other hand, espouses a belief system rooted in the dominant religious tradition (in this case Christianity), although it too challenges the dominant norms and values of the surrounding sociocultural environment. In the Soviet Union atheism was obviously posited as the norm. Even though minor concessions were made to 'indigeneous faiths', meaning Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, all others, including Protestantism, were treated as cults in the sense that they were considered alien and unwelcome.

Soviet propaganda stressed the cult-like possessed behaviour of believers and slave-like obedience to doctrine (all the while demanding the same unquestioning allegiance to its own ideology from Soviet citizens). Persecution of believers and clergy by the Soviet state, and rampant discrimination in society at large, meant that the decision to become an active believer carried enormous ramifications which included, at a minimum, probable lack of access to higher education for oneself and one's children, a career in manual labour, and the possibility of constant surveillance and hostility from state authorities and one's neighbours.

Seven decades of propaganda which stressed collectivism and pursuit of the collective good actually yielded hyperindividualists who were mostly committed to their own self-interest. Evangelicals, ironically, not only espouse these same collective ideals but also, as we have seen, to a significant extent fulfil them. Since the fall of the Soviet system, active discrimination against Baptists and Pentecostals in Ukraine has ceased. This is not to say that religious organisations do not encounter difficulties with state authorities, but they are not entirely unlike the difficulties suffered by enterprises, non-profit organisations or other associations trying to negotiate with those same authorities.

Popular conceptions of religious institutions are nevertheless changing. The cultural landscape of this traditionally Orthodox land is now dotted with qualitatively different social and religious institutions. As Protestant 'sects' gain greater acceptance, their status will shift to that of 'church'. I have outlined the pattern of motivations for, and the results of, converting to evangelicalism as reflected in narratives by recent converts. By analysing the appeal of Protestant doctrines and communities, we gain insight into the nature of the cultural legacy of the Soviet system and the cultural and social changes currently under way.

I suggest that the magnetism of evangelical communities is unlikely to fade; that, on the contrary, it will grow and slowly influence the practices, identities and understandings of community and morality. As more and more people experience anomie in life in a postsocialist society teeming with choices and challenges, but short on clear guidelines for behaviour, belief and purpose, the promise of a shared, meaningful life with a supportive group of like-minded people will continue to exert appeal. In this article I have shown some of the cultural attitudes and practices that are rejected as Ukrainians dedicate themselves to evangelical communities. A consideration of broader cultural factors yields clues to explain why people convert and what the fate of these new communities will be.

The 'state religions' in the former Soviet Union are effective political players, influencing social, political and religious policies on a number of levels. The same could be said of evangelical denominations in the USA and their umbrella organisations. There is no reason to think that the extreme marginalisation that the Soviet regime forced on Protestant communities will reemerge in Ukraine. In time they too will find an audible political voice. Already in 1998 a pastor from a charismatic church in Donetsk was elected to parliament. Pastors from two Pentecostal and one charismatic congregation have also been elected to regional soviets in Ukraine. The political influence of religious leaders was further evidenced when in 1998 more than 50 deputies in the Supreme Rada signed a petition to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to protest against the harassment of a Nigerian-born charismatic preacher who used metro stations and other public forums to proselytise (Mitrohkin, 2001, pp. 184–85).

More than one thousand new religious communities are registered every year, most in the southeast where there are two to three times fewer religious communities than in western Ukraine (Mitrokhin, 2001, p. 189). The identities and allegiances that these new communities are forging, I predict, are likely to prosper and continue to exert appeal among the tens of millions of unchurched Ukrainians. Over time, along with other aspects of western culture and ideology which are indigenously adapted to local cultural values and practices, evangelical communities will contribute to the social fabric and a new moral order in Ukraine.

Notes

[1] This article is drawn from a larger ethnographic research project that examines Protestantism in Ukraine in terms of the dual processes of religious practice and migration in an effort to pose new questions about the historical circumstances of displacement and their effects on group formation, about the spatialisation of identity, and about the new forms of community arising in contemporary Ukraine. The names of all respondents involved in this research have been changed to ensure confidentiality. This research has been funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Research Council's Twinning Program, and an International Migration Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council. I would like to thank Valentina Pavlenko for her valuable assistance with this project.

[2] The significant presence of Baptist communities in Ukraine, both during the Soviet period and following the fall of the Soviet Union, is the culmination of a prerevolutionary tradition of Baptist settlements. See Coleman, 2002, for an overview of the growth of the Baptist faith as a result of conversion in the Russian Empire and in the early years of the Soviet Union. For a more comprehensive overview of the Soviet period, see Savinsky, 2001 and Sawatsky, 1981. For a study of the introduction and development of Pentecostalism in the former Soviet Union, see Fletcher, 1985b.

[3] This estimate was made as of 1 January 2002. See the Institute's website at www.lta.lviv.ua/irs. It is important to note the critical structural differences between Protestant and Orthodox congregations that account for such a high proportion of Protestant congregations in Ukraine. While Protestant congregations might be numerous, they often serve a small group of believers, most of whom are official members of the church. This is in sharp contrast to Orthodox churches that serve a large and amorphous group of local believers who often have only nominal allegiance to a particular church.

[4] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 13 November 2001.

[5] Much has been written about the persistent splits, autonomy and independence among Protestant denominations, and especially among Baptist churches. The editor of a Texas Baptist newspaper cast the whole issue in a positive light when he said that if you hear a lot of 'screaming cats during the night, the result is never a pile of dead cats, but a pile of kittens' (cited in Rodney and Stark, 2000, p. 164).

[6] Behaviour becomes a marker of true faith and a means of delineating who is a member of the group and who is not. When accusations of errant faith or discussions of 'defellowshipment' arise, usually behavioural violations are cited as evidence of insincere faith.

[7] Interview conducted in Kiev, June 2000.

[8] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 23 December 2001.

[9] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, June 2000.

[10] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 16 December 2001.

[11] Interview conducted in Kiev, June 2000.

[12] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 18 January 2002.

[13] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 11 November 2001.

[14] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 5 November 2001.

[15] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, June 2000.

[16] Interview conducted in Kharkiv, 13 November 2001.

References

Barker, E. (1984) *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing*? (London, Basil Blackwell).

Casanova, J. (1996) 'Incipient religious denominationalism in Ukraine and its effects on Ukrainian-Russian relations', *The Harriman Review*, 9, 1/2, pp. 38–42.

Coleman, H. (2002) 'Becoming a Russian Baptist: conversion narratives and social experience', *The Russian Review*, 61, 1, pp. 94–112.

Elliott, M. and Richardson, R (1992) 'Growing Protestant diversity in the former Soviet Union', in Ra'anan, U., Armes, K. and Martin, K. (eds.), *Russian Pluralism – Now Irreversible*? (New York, St Martin's Press).

Fletcher, W. (1985a) 'The Soviet bible belt: World War II's impact on religion', in Linz, S.J. (ed.), *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (New York, Rowan and Allanheld).

Fletcher, W.C. (1985b) *Soviet Charismatics: The Pentecostals in the USSR* (New York, Peter Lang).

Harding, S.F. (2000) *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

Harding, S.F. (1987) 'Convicted by the Holy Spirit: the rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion', *American Ethnologist*, 14, 1, pp. 1167–81.

Johnston, P. and Mandryk, J. (2001) *Operation World: 21st Century Edition* (Waynesboro, GA, Paternoster).

Ledeneva, A.V. (1998) *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informational Exchange* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Lofland, J. and Skonovd, N. (1981) 'Conversion motifs', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, pp. 373–85.

Lofland, J. and Stark, R. (1965) 'Becoming a worldsaver: a theory of religious conversion', *American Sociological Review*, 30, pp. 862–74.

Mitrohkin, N. (2001) 'Aspects of the religious situation in Ukraine', *Religion, State and Society*, 29, 3, pp. 173–96.

Paloutzian, R.F., Richardson, J.T. and Rambo, L.R. (1999) 'Religious conversion and personality change', *Journal of Personality*, 67, 6, pp. 1047–79.

Plokhy, S. (2002) 'State politics and religious pluralism in Russia and Ukraine: a comparative perspective' in Danchin, P.G. and Cole, E.A. (eds.), *Protecting the Human Rights of Religious Minorities in Eastern Europe* (New York, Columbia University Press).

Rambo, L.R. and Farhadian, C.E. (1999) 'Converting: stages of religious change', in Lamb, C. and Bryant, M.D. (eds.), *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (London, Cassell).

Rambo, L.R. (1993) *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, Yale University Press).

Richardson, J.T. (1985) 'The active vs. passive convert: paradigm, conflict in conversion/recruitment research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24, 2, pp. 163–79.

Savinsky, S.N. (2001) *Istoriya Yevangel'skikh Khristian–Baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1917–1967)* (St Petersburg, Bibliya dlya vsekh).

Sawatsky, W. (1981) *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottdale, PA, Herald Press).

Snow, D.A. and Machalek, R. (1984) 'The sociology of conversion', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10, pp. 167–90.

Stark, R. and Finke, R. (2000) *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press).

Tataryn, M. (2001) 'Russia and Ukraine: two models of religious liberty and two models for Orthodoxy', *Religion, State and Society*, 29, 3, pp. 155–72.

Verdery, K. (1996) *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next*? (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

Wanner, C. (1998) *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (University Park, PA, Penn State Press).

Wanner, C. and Dudwick, N. (2002) 'Children have become a luxury: everyday dilemmas of poverty in Ukraine', in Dudwick, N. (ed.), *When Things Fall Apart: Qualitative Studies of Poverty in the Former Soviet Union* (Washington, DC, The World Bank).

Yamane, D. (2000) 'Narrative and religious experience', *Sociology of Religion*, 61, 2, pp. 171–90.