

Religion, Power and Nationhood in Sovereign Bashkortostan

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Relations between the nation-state and religion are always paradoxical, an effort to square the circle. Spiritual life, the search for the absolute and worship belong to a sphere which is by nature free and not susceptible to control by authority. How can a president, a police officer or an ordinary patriot decide for an individual what constitutes truth, goodness or personal salvation from sin and death? On the other hand, faith forms the national character, moral norms and the concept of duty, and so a sense of national identity and social order depend upon it. Understanding this, states and national leaders throughout human history have used God for the benefit of Caesar. Even priests themselves often forget whom it is they serve.

In all historical circumstances, however, religious faith shows that it stands outside state, nation and society, and consistently betrays the plans and expectations of monarchs, presidents, secret police, collaborators and patriots. It changes regardless of any orders from those in authority. Peoples, states, empires and civilisations change fundamentally or vanish completely because the basic ideas which supported them also vanish. Sometimes it is the rulers themselves, striving to preserve their kingdoms, who are unaware that their faith and view of the world are changing and themselves turn out to be the medium of the changes which destroy them.

In the countries of the former USSR, indeed in all the former socialist camp, constant attempts to 'tame the spirit' were in themselves nothing new, but the historical situation, the level of public awareness and the character of religiosity were unique; and the use of religion for national and state purposes therefore acquired distinctive and somewhat grotesque characteristics.

Whole volumes will probably eventually be written on this subject, classifying the various ways in which religion was used in the interests of nation and state in the postsocialist world. In this article we would like to offer a contribution to this study, focusing on the socio-religious situation in one particular sovereign state, Bashkortostan, where the process of religious revival is interwoven with the interests of nation and state. Before the communist revolution religion in this region was used in the interests of the ruler in a most unexpected way, and it seems that this tradition is alive to this day.

Murtaz Rakhimov was elected as the first president of Bashkortostan in December 1993 and a constitution was drawn up. In August 1994 an agreement was signed on the 'demarcation of areas of jurisdiction and mutual delegation of authority' between the Russian Federation and Bashkortostan. Several years of uncertainty, tugs-of-war,

behind-the-scenes intrigues and noisy street protests by Bashkiri nationals had culminated in the formation of a state within a state, like Tartarstan, Kalmykia, Yakutia and Tuva. Thereafter, socio-political processes and the construction of the state were free to follow their own logical pattern.

In the political sphere the rapid evolution of the Rakhimov regime is reminiscent of what has happened in several other republics in Russia and the CIS. There is the gradual consolidation of a regime of personal power and increasing control of politics and the economy by the executive. Open opposition, whatever its ideological colour, comes into conflict with an increasingly crude press that quickly forces it to fall silent, as has already happened in Kalmykia for example. Of course, life in any Russian province can hardly be called democratic by any European standards, but comparisons can always usefully be made.

The national policy of the administration is likewise not notable for its originality. A methodical 'indigenisation' of cadres takes place – in this case, the advancement of Bashkirs to all significant posts. However, this policy is already proving a greater problem than in most of the other republics in the Russian Federation. There are actually very few Bashkirs in Bashkiria – only a quarter of the population, according to the latest census. (The rest include Russians (more than 40 per cent), Tatars (25 per cent), Chuvash, Mari and Udmurts (1.5–3 per cent) and there are tiny communities of Germans and Poles which nevertheless play a prominent part in the life of the republic.) This fact already makes the policy of 'indigenisation' rather a tricky business, requiring careful manoeuvring.

The mixture of nationalities in Bashkiria means that the republic is also multi-denominational. Behind this simple statement lies a complex history. The close interweaving of religious affiliations here has strange features; the way the various faiths coexist and conflict, for instance, has no analogy.

The ancient Bashkirs were pagan nomads; Islam began to penetrate Bashkiria from the Bulgarian kingdom only from the tenth century. In the first half of the thirteenth century Bashkiria was conquered by Khan Batu and remained part of the Golden Horde until the latter's disintegration. After the rise of the Kazan', Nogai and Siberian khanates in the fifteenth century it was divided amongst them. At this time there were two mutually exclusive tendencies amongst the Bashkirs as far as religion was concerned. On the one hand, they steadily adopted Islam under the influence of their rulers; on the other, resistance to foreigners was just as steadfast, and spiritually this was expressed in adherence to many pagan beliefs, the preservation and wide popularity of the Bashkiri national epic, which is pre-Islamic in origin, and the appearance of new tales similar to the Russian heroic *byliny* which, among other things, celebrate the struggle against the Islamic invaders. Opposition to Kazan' and a nomadic lifestyle thus prevented Islam taking root in Bashkiria; 'all nomads make poor Muslims'.

The conquest of the Kazan' Khanate by Ivan the Terrible in 1552 changed the situation radically. Separate groups of Bashkirs gradually, and for the most part voluntarily, united themselves with Russia. This process was completed by the mid-seventeenth century. The fact that the Bashkirs had joined Russia voluntarily safeguarded many rights and freedoms for them in comparison with other peoples of the Volga and Ural regions. The Bashkirs formed a military Cossack community owning their own land. There was no subsequent systematic policy to christianise the Bashkirs. Two such attempts – from 1681 to 1684 and at the beginning of the eighteenth century – led to mass uprisings; efforts to convert them to state Orthodoxy were then abandoned.

It was not only the freedom enjoyed by the Bashkirs but also natural conditions such as impenetrable forests, mountains and uninhabited slopes which attracted freedom-loving and persecuted people to Bashkiria. Pagans fleeing christianisation – Mari, Chuvash, Udmurts and Mordvins – escaped to Bashkiria. Old Believers played a very prominent part in the first intensive colonisation of the area. Their picturesque appearance and their monasteries, scattered among mountains and the wilds of the taiga, may possibly have been a source of inspiration for the artist Nesterov, a native of Ufa. His pictures, exhibited in Moscow at the turn of the century, seemed stylised to many who saw them; but not to Nesterov himself who had seen these unique sights in his youth.

The fall of the Kazan' Khanate marked the beginning of the serious islamisation of the Bashkirs. Attempts at forced christianisation of the Tatars in the sixteenth century has resulted in a steady emigration of Tatars to Bashkiria, including recalcitrant Muslim clergy. Under conditions of Russian political control and mass Russian colonisation Islam became the most important element in the ethnic self-identification of the Bashkiri people. They clung to their faith, and were proud of it; attacks on it drew firm opposition. For all that, 'Islamic law' was poorly observed and there was low attendance at mosques.

Bashkiria became a seething vessel filled with mutinous factions disaffected for a variety of economic, political and religious reasons. It was natural that this region should become the centre for the Pugachev rebellion, which without too much oversimplification can from a religious point of view be regarded as an uprising of dissidents – Russian Cossacks, Old Believers, Bashkirs, Muslim Tatars and Chuvash and Udmurt pagans – against the state creed.

After the suppression of the Pugachev rebellion Catherine the Great decided to come to grips with the Bashkirs and with Islam. This hardly over-pious empress realised that despite all the might of the Russian state attempts to convert Russian Muslims to Orthodoxy would be futile. It was therefore decided to integrate them all into the political system of the empire.

In 1789 an Islamic spiritual administration (*Magometanskoye dukhovnoye upravleniye*) was set up, with its centre in Ufa. This move defined how the Muslims' affairs were to be run: henceforth Islamic clergy were not elected, but appointed after an examination of candidates. The post of mufti as head of Russian Muslims was introduced. Like his assistants and the vast majority of rank and file mullahs he was appointed 'from among the Kazan' Tatars'.

These developments had two important consequences for Bashkiria. Firstly, thanks to 'Little Mother' Catherine, there was mass construction of mosques and the promotion of Islam with the support of the Russian state. Genuine conversion to Islam, observance of the *sharia*, regular mosque attendance and the Islamic education system all took increasing hold among the Bashkirs over the following century and a half. Secondly, while Ufa became the centre of official Islamic life in Russia most of its adherents were Tatars by nationality. Ufa was therefore also the centre of the religious life of the Tatars. Bashkiri national consciousness fell victim to a syndrome of complexes and phobias, which were later expressed in a powerful anti-Tatar reaction.

By 1917 Bashkiria was a region of the most varied religious tendencies. Islam was gaining strength among Bashkirs and Tatars but at the same time demands for the bashkirisation of Islam could be heard on the wave of a growing Bashkiri nationalist movement, which supported the national variant of Sufism–Ishanism disseminated in the nineteenth century. The ishans, with their numerous murids,¹ became influential

national, religious and social authorities.

In Christian circles turbulent processes were also at work. After the decree *Confirmation of the Principles of Religious Tolerance (Ob ukreplenii nachal veroterpimosti)* in 1905 the Old Believers in Bashkiria quickly took up a prominent position in economic and social life. The German–Polish Catholic community, which had grown among urban engineers and skilled workers as well as rural colonists and Russians who had converted to Catholicism, was one of the most active in Russia. It was the basis for a socio-religious ‘Roman Catholic Union of the Sacred Heart of Christ’ (*‘Rimsko-Katolichesky soyuz v chest’ Serdtsa Gospoda Iisusa Khrista*) which was founded during the Civil War (1918–19), and an attempt was made to form a Christian Democratic party. V. Zenkin, a Russian Catholic and Russian nationalist(!), headed this movement.

It was not surprising that amidst such religious turbulence the reforming activity of Bishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky), who became head of the Ufa diocese in 1914, should reach its peak in Bashkiria. Bishop Andrei unleashed a whirlwind of activity aimed at involving the church in secular affairs and at developing charitable activity, cooperation amongst the churches and the education and self-organisation of lay people. One of the most important spheres of his activity was missionary work; here he was most successful among the Chuvash, although there were Tatar and Bashkir conversions. Bishop Andrei had a deep interest in establishing links between the Orthodox and Old Believer churches, and his efforts in this field were to bear fruit after the revolution. One of the most important results was the founding of a diocese for the ‘*Yedinoveriye*’ branch of the Old Believers, and Simon (Shleyev), the *Yedinoveriye* leader, died a martyr’s death at the hands of the Bolsheviks in Ufa in 1921. Andrei himself became *Yedinoveriye* leader after Simon’s death.

The February Revolution presented the Islamic population of Russia with considerable opportunities for political self-expression. In May 1917 an all-Russian Islamic conference convened in Moscow; elected delegates came from all the Islamic regions of Russia, including Bashkiria. The first Islamic soviet and executive committee were elected at this conference, and thus a democratically elected Islamic religious organisation emerged outside Russian control. Somewhat late in the day, an Islamic political organisation appeared: the All-Russian Islamic Military Soviet ‘*Kharbi Shuro*’, whose agenda included the creation of a federation of Volga-Ural states with Kazan’ as its capital. The territory of these states was to include Kazan’, Ufa and Orenburg *gubernii* and parts of Samara, Simbirsk, Perm’ and Vyatka *gubernii*.

From a religious and political point of view this all-Russian Islamic movement was completely dominated by Tatars, although one of its main centres was Ufa. The Tatar leaders did not take Bashkiri interests into account at all: they did not regard Bashkiris as a separate people and denied the individuality of their language and culture. As far as the Tatar leaders were concerned there was only one people – ‘Turko-Tatars’. It is not surprising, then, that an intense nationalist reaction arose among the Bashkirs, hostile to both Tatar pan-Turkism and Russian unitarism.

In the political arena the Bashkiri nationalist movement had two main factions, headed by Akhmed-Zaki Validov and Mukhamed-Gabdulkai Kurbangaliyev. Validov was in favour of the creation of a Bashkiri state with maximum independence, Kurbangaliyev of what is now called ‘cultural-national autonomy’. The position of the latter can be explained by the fact that even in Bashkiria Bashkirs are a minority population while considerable numbers of Bashkirs live alongside Russians in many Ural provinces.

In contrast with the Tatars, the less religious Bashkirs did not create an independent religious movement. Their religious concerns were subordinated to the aims of a movement for the preservation and self-determination of the Bashkiri nation. Both Validov and Kurbangaliyev supported the creation of a Bashkiri Islamic organisation independent of the Tatars, but Kurbangaliyev ascribed far more significance to it, for on his agenda it was to be the spiritual core of Bashkiri self-determination. History judged the dispute between the two leaders in favour of Validov. Kurbangaliyev sided with Kolchak; a mullah and a White officer, he ended up in Manchuria after the Civil War. Validov joined the Bolsheviks and led the first government of an autonomous Bashkiria. The birth of the Bashkiri Autonomous Republic led to the creation of an independent Bashkiri religious administration. A Spiritual Directorate (*Dukhovnoye upravleniye*) for the Muslims of Bashkiria was proclaimed by the *kurultai* (assembly) of Bashkiri clergy in 1921. In fact, however, the successor to the prerevolutionary Islamic Spiritual Directorate continued to function even under Soviet control: the Central Religious Department for Muslims of the Russian Interior and Siberia (*Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye vedomstvo musul'man Vnutrennei Rossii i Siberii*), founded in 1921, kept the residence of the mufti and central organs of administration in the same building in Ufa as the prerevolutionary administration. As before, it was dominated by Tatars.

The 1920s – and even the early 1930s – were a turbulent period in the religious life of Bashkiria. Among the Muslims it saw a continuous and implacable struggle between Tatars and Bashkirs, marked by extreme violence and culminating in the liquidation of the Bashkiri Spiritual Directorate in 1936. There was a similarly violent struggle among the Orthodox too, initially between the Renovationists and the Tikhonites, and later between the Sergianites and the Catacomb Church, one of the main centres of which was in Bashkiria. Bishop Andrei Ukhtomsky appointed bishops and priests who travelled throughout the whole country; he settled many of them in Bashkiria itself. The republic remains one of the main centres of catacomb Orthodoxy to this day. It was in Bashkiria, thanks to the efforts of Bishop Andrei, that many Old Believers were converted to catacomb *Yedinoveriye*. Despite all the repressions the hierarchy of catacomb *Yedinoveriye* survives in the silent Nikolsky monastery in the Beloretsky *raion*.

Between 1938 and 1984 the leading hierarch of catacomb *Yedinoveriye* was Merkuri (Kotlov), a simple, barely literate peasant from Beloretsky *raion* who prescribed heavy penance for using that satanic vegetable, the potato, and who succeeded in saving his church through courage and faith. One of the catacomb priests told us with a smile how Merkuri was held in great esteem by teachers from St Petersburg institutes of higher education and officers who had taken catacomb holy orders, and how he in turn adopted one of their phrases, 'comme il faut', which was not exactly sacred Russian.

From the 1930s onwards brutal repression led to the steady decline of both Christian and Islamic religious life. In 1988 there were only 14 officially registered mosques and 17 officially registered Russian Orthodox churches left in Bashkiria. The Sufi Islamic tradition had completely died out: there was nothing comparable to the 'parallel Islam' of the Northern Caucasus. Of Orthodox believers from a huge, independent area there remained only tiny communities of elderly peasants. Of the Old Believers all that was left was a sort of folklore, of interest only to philological and archaeographical expeditions. There was no trace either of Catholics or Lutherans and other Protestants.

Developments after 1988 seemed initially similar to what was happening

throughout the country. The first few years, when 'religion was permitted', saw an omnivorous interest in faith and the return of peoples 'to their roots': Tatars and Bashkirs to Islam, Russians to Orthodoxy, Udmurts and Mari to paganism, Germans to Lutheranism. Confessions relatively new to Bashkiria arrived and achieved a certain success – Hare Krishnaites, charismatics, Protestants, Baptists. It was not only Russians who took up these new creeds, however, but also Bashkirs. One of the sociological surveys conducted in Ufa in early 1992 revealed that just under 10 per cent of urban Bashkirs and Tatars considered themselves Christian.² Particularly successful at missionary work was the New Apostolic Church, coming to Bashkiria from the GDR, where it had close contacts with the Soviet troops and made use of their transport facilities. Initially the New Apostolics said that their aim was to serve the local Germans, but their lighthearted 'jolly' services and easy adaptation to modern youth culture soon began to attract Bashkirs and Russians too. Since 1990 both Muslim and Orthodox clergy have denounced the New Apostolics for proselytising and see them as one of their main opponents.

The renaissance of the Orthodox diocese began in 1990, when Nikon (Vasyukov), a comparatively young doctor who had become a priest not long before *perestroika*, was appointed bishop. The number of parishes rose quickly from 17 to 85 in 1993 and 125 in 1996. Bishop Nikon is known for his broad range of interests. He is preparing documents for the canonisation of the two most famous Orthodox of Bashkiria, Andrei Ukhtomsky and Simon Shleyev. He has been particularly enthusiastic about restoring the church of Simeon Verkhotursky where Bishop Andrei served. The uncompromising struggle between Bishop Andrei and Metropolitan Sergi (Stragorodsky), the role of the former organising catacomb Orthodoxy and widespread suspicion in the Moscow Patriarchate that he was excessively sympathetic towards the Old Believer faith may put the present bishop of Ufa in a difficult position.

Bishop Nikon was not afraid to give responsible positions to people who had previously fallen foul of the secular authorities, or even to ordain them as priests. For instance, the authorities were obviously displeased by the appointment of Boris Razveyev as senior priest of the restored cathedral: he had formerly been active in the underground religious movement, taken part in the seminars run by Ogorodnikov and Poresh³ and been imprisoned twice by the Soviet authorities for his religious activity.

It was some time before Catholics, Lutherans, Old Believers and members of the Catacomb Church began to follow the Orthodox example and raise their heads too. This was not surprising, as Catholics and Lutherans, Polish and German by nationality, had experienced not only religious but also ethnic persecution. There was barely a flicker of religious tradition in Polish and German villages, and almost every working family in industrial centres had experienced repression. We attended some of the first – very moving – church services they held in tiny, cockroach-infested flats, the faces of the elderly marked by their years in prison camps, their grandchildren enthusiastically rediscovering their national and religious roots. After one service we asked a handsome young priest, who had come from Austria and whose artistic manner recalled the hero of some Strauss operetta, 'Father, don't you find it difficult living in Bashkiria when you've come from one of the most well-off nations in the world?' Father Johannes retorted, 'You can't be better off than celebrating a mass like this'.

The revival of the Old Believer faith and the True Orthodox Church seem to be going to happen very soon. The spiritual descendants of the fiery archpriest

Avvakum have recently begun to organise themselves, and the meetings of the Catacomb Church held near Moscow in 1994 and 1995 are the first evidence of the recovery of what was possibly the most persecuted religious group in Soviet times.

We are giving this account of all these religious minorities not for the sake of encyclopaedic thoroughness but in order adequately to convey the impression our visit to Bashkiria made on us of religious life in all its variety and turbulence emerging out of oblivion and proving difficult to control. In Udmurtia, Mari El and Chuvashia we had earlier been intrigued by people telling us that paganism was best preserved among Mari, Udmurts and Chuvash in Bashkiria; and fellowship with Orthodox, Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans has only strengthened our impression that the very soil of Bashkiria is filled with the seeds of religious profusion.

Christian life in Bashkiria, then, has unique characteristics; but developments in Islam in recent years have a far greater significance not only for the republic itself but for the whole of Russia.

All confessions in Russia are undergoing the difficult experience of a complex process of overcoming the Soviet past, and often when some people think they are overcoming 'Sovietness' others think they are in fact preserving it. In Islam, a particularly democratic religion with a mass following, this struggle with the 'accursed past' has been clear and well organised. Ufa has become one of the main centres of this struggle. At the beginning of the 1990s discontent with the leadership of DUMES⁴ began to grow among Muslim clergy in Russia, and specifically with its head, mufti Talgat Tajutdin. Young reformers accused the mufti of inaction, grovelling to the Russian authorities and neglecting the most important requirements of Islam, and even cast doubt on his morals. In the course of this struggle new Islamic spiritual directorates and muftiates arose independently of DUMES in many regions of Russia; these later united in the 'Supreme Coordinating Centre of Muslim Spiritual Directorates' ('Vysshi koordinatsionny tsentr dukhovnykh upravlenii musul'man') (VKTSDUM). In the majority of cases the young reformers were supported by the radical Tatar nationalist organisation 'Tatar Social Centre' ('Tatarsky obschestvenny tsentr').

The historic administrative centre of Russian Islam is Ufa, where religious conflicts have been complicated by traditional rivalry between Tatars and Bashkirs. A reform movement openly declared itself for the first time here in Ufa, when in August 1992 a group of young clergy created the 'Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Bashkortostan Republic' ('Dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man respubliki Bashkortostan') (DUMRB). DUMRB put into effect a dynamic policy of Islamic revival. Under its auspices dozens of mosques were opened and publishing activity, charity and an education system developed. DUMRB managed to establish extensive international connections in the Islamic world, which provided it with considerable material assistance.

What were the ideological foundations of DUMRB? Professional experts on Islam have warned us against jumping to conclusions, pointing out the ideological shakiness of any Islamic union and the presence in all of them of people representing all kinds of viewpoints. Many people have joined both DUMRB and DUMES through friends or family connections, or for a wide variety of reasons having no bearing on any ideology. While heeding these warnings, we will nevertheless try to outline the ideology of DUMRB as it appeared to us after interviews with its leaders and with supporters of the VKTSDUM outside Bashkiria.

We will risk making a generalised summary of our conversations with the leaders of DUMRB in the form of the following declaration:

Any believer who makes a positive effort to follow the doctrines of his religion without watering them down is a fundamentalist inasmuch as he takes a stand on the firm foundation of his faith. In this sense we are fundamentalists. Extremism, however, is quite a different matter: adopting an extremist position means deviating from the Quran. We are fundamentalists but not extremists. Islam in Russia is in a very parlous state and, in fact, needs to be created anew. Ninety per cent of people who traditionally belong to Muslim religious culture not only do not know the Quran and do not attend worship, but do not even observe basic moral norms: they get drunk, lead depraved lives, steal, idle their time away. There is nothing positive in Russian Islam and we need to take lessons from our fellow-believers abroad. The current interpretation of the law on separation of religion from the state in fact amounts to a separation of the people from their faith and therefore a separation of the people from the state. Under a law like this it is impossible for religion to revive a nation. Islam should be separate from politics, but not from society. There should be legislative norms which would allow religion to regulate human life. Russia is a Christian Orthodox and Islamic Eurasian state: the Western values of unbridled individualism and self-will are alien to the soul. Together with the Moscow Patriarchate, Muslims should renew the primordial Eurasian culture of Russia and fight against American influence.

It has to be said that the above declaration, artificially composed on the basis of our conversations with DUMRB activists, differs in fundamental respects from what Talgat Tajutdin told us. Without doubt, the struggle between DUMRB and DUMES is not only a struggle between sincere zealots of faith and ‘amoral leaders grovelling to Moscow’ (accusations made by DUMRB activists, which we are not in a position either to confirm or refute), but an ideological battle. Incidentally, accusations of ‘inaction’ are easy to disprove with concrete data – the statistics show that in the late 1970s and early 1980s Tajutdin achieved the opening of a greater number of places of worship and a higher number of students in religious educational institutions than the Moscow Patriarchate.

Talgat Khazrat (Orthodox equivalent: Bishop Talgat) holds that

Russian Muslims do have something to be proud of; if foreign teachers are needed then their field of activity must be limited. For many centuries in Russia Muslims have shared a common life with Christians and have formed a unique religious culture that is open, tolerant and dynamic. Russian Muslims have something to teach, let’s say, the Afghans or the Sudanese. The sharia is a matter for the individual conscience of each Muslim; no one can be forced to observe it by external pressure. If any attempts to change the legislation in order to create conditions in which it would be possible to make Islamic norms compulsory were successful they would lead only to dishonesty and hypocrisy. What exactly does it mean to be ‘Eurasian’? I don’t know. Of course, Russia lies both in Europe and in Asia, so those who champion Eurasianism are at least demonstrating a sound knowledge of geography. But there is no serious intellectual substance behind that concept. Both Russian Christians and Russian Muslims are (or at least should be) supporters of the values of modern civilisation – freedom or democracy.

After the rise of DUMRB in Bashkiria and of other muftiates and spiritual directorates all over the country, supporters of Tajutdin quite quickly lost their positions in many regions, and several experts started to maintain that DUMES had no future. In our view, however, Talgat Khazrat's position is not at all a hopeless one. Young Muslim converts, like Orthodox ones, are noted for the pursuit of the most radical, orthodox teachings. Even if their own credentials as believers are dubious, nationalists and supporters of the state want to reinforce the most 'severe' beliefs for their own purposes, as beliefs of this kind are the most suitable for bringing about the unity of the people and the state. These two elements, utterly different in their nature, have been facilitating the growing influence of Muslim orthodox reformers (a completely analogous situation exists in the Moscow Patriarchate). The religious faith of the main body of believers (Muslim or Christian) is however quite different – antidogmatic, open, even eclectic. This is the kind of faith which is reflected in the views of Talgat Tajutdin.

The conflict between DUMES and DUMRB is a religious dispute not directly connected with either the Bashkiri nationalist movement or the assertion of Bashkiri statehood. Moreover, the vast majority of leaders and clergy in DUMES and DUMRB are Tatars, who are at best merely indifferent to the aims of the Bashkiri nationalist movement. Nevertheless, the conflict lies at the heart of the Bashkiri nationalist movement. Their relations with it are of key significance for both DUMES and DUMRB in their struggle to consolidate their influence in the republic. This issue is psychologically a very complex one for Tatar clergy. The Tatar attitude to Bashkiria is almost exactly the same as that of Russia to Ukraine. Tatars are inclined to regard Bashkirs either as an ethnic group within one Turko-Tatar people, or as such a closely related people that the differences do not need to be taken into consideration. The Tatars' wish for a close brotherhood looks to the Bashkirs like the threat of a smothering embrace. This kind of friendship provokes a hostile reaction, an attempt in turn to assert their own unique differences; Bashkirs like to emphasise their cultural affinities with other nomadic Turkic peoples, such as the Nogais and the Kazakhs, in order to counterbalance Tatar efforts to achieve 'unification'. Bashkirs have always rejected the suggestion, which constantly crops up in Tatar circles, that the two peoples should unite.

The analogy between Tatar–Bashkir and Russian–Ukrainian relations also arises in the religious sphere. Just as the Moscow Patriarchate proclaims the supranational nature of Orthodoxy, and on this basis stresses the sinfulness of the Ukrainian autocephalous movement, so the Tatar Muslim clergy accuse Bashkiri nationalists of ignoring the universality of Islam. Both Orthodox Russians and Muslim Tatars, saying similar things, are apparently unaware that Russian Orthodoxy and Tatar Islam are thereby exhibiting national characteristics which might be alien to Ukrainians and Bashkirs, and do not notice the fact that despite the universality of Orthodoxy and Islam they are reacting very negatively towards the existence of Russian Catholics and Orthodox Tatars.

No independent Bashkiri religious movement arose initially during the revolutionary period nor has one done so to this day. The religious programme is worked out by socio-political national organisations. The largest of these, and the one which carries most authority, is the 'Bashkiri National Centre' ('Bashkirsky natsional'ny tseñtr') 'Ural' (BNTs), founded in 1989. The BNTs fights for the highest possible degree of sovereignty for Bashkortostan, and its ranks include radicals whose aim is independence as well as moderates whose wish, in practice, is for a confederate relationship with Russia. In its internal policy the BNTs has come out in support of

enhancement of the national character of Bashkortostan, which involves administrative, cultural–linguistic and economic programmes. The ideologists of the BNTs rain down equally harsh criticism on both ‘Russian chauvinism’ and ‘Tatar expansionism’. As in every nationalist movement of a people who are in a minority but link their plans for the preservation and revival of ethnicity with the construction of a ‘nation state’, there is something neurotic about the very ideology of the BNTs – a peculiar mixture of bravery, radicalism and fear for the future. The steadfast movement towards democracy in Russia will surely affect sovereign Bashkortostan too; but the BNTs does not have any long-term perspectives in a society where the principle of ‘one man–one vote’ rules.

As far as the ‘religious’ activities of the BNTs are concerned, here too it is necessary to distinguish two basic trends, which in recent times have been contradicting each other more and more.

On the one hand, the BNTs stands in favour of the preservation and development of the traditional culture of the people. In the first instance this means the national epic *Ural-Batyr*, ancient tales and songs. The world of Bashkiri folklore is a living vehicle for the pagan Tengrian tradition.⁵ In epic and folklore the figure of the supreme pagan god, Tengri, mingles with that of Allah; but in its outlook on the world Bashkiri national culture retains a pagan layer which has survived in a far more intact state than in Russian or Tatar national culture for example. In distant rural regions ancient cults are preserved to this day. The most widespread is the cult of the Mountain Spirit Tau-Eyakhy; cairns are still placed on the summits of mountains and hills in his honour. In some regions people religiously observe a ban on throwing stones from mountains or hills. People still also worship the Water Spirit Khlu-Inyakhy and the House Spirit Ui-Iyakhy, albeit to a lesser extent. In the depths of Bashkiria cases have recently been reported of local Christian Bashkirs strongly opposing attempts by Tatar mullahs to prohibit the cult of the Mountain Spirit. Generally speaking, people who were at one time ruled by the Khanate of Kazan’ – Mari, Udmurts, Chuvash and to a lesser extent Bashkirs – have shown a remarkable attachment to paganism. This fact needs careful assessment.

We asked the leaders of the BNTs, Marat Kul’sharipov and Damir Valeyev, to tell us about the place of Tengrianism in the modern ideology of the Bashkiri renaissance. They were keen to convince us that Tengrianism had no future as an organised national *religion*, that paganism was relevant only to the nation’s artistic culture and way of life, and that the BNTs supported it only in that capacity. ‘The remnants of Tengrianism give a poetic quality to life and strengthen our national culture’, said Valeyev. At times we were almost convinced; but at other times they reminded us of a girl who suspects she is going to accept a proposal but who is still protesting ‘No, no, no. I will never marry that brute!’ Several things Valeyev said confirmed us in our view. In 1994–95 several members of the Bashkiri artistic intelligentsia, including the writer Akhmet Utebayev and the artist Farid Yergaliyev, openly declared that they had broken with Islam and converted to Tengrianism. There was a minor scandal at the international Bashkir *kurultai* in June 1995 when one of the delegates came onto the stage in strange snow-white clothing, declared he had broken away from Islam, and urged the Bashkiri people to return to the faith of their forefathers – Tengrianism.

These might be just escapades by individuals of an artistic nature, but of course one cannot rule out the possibility that they might have more serious consequences. The Muslim clergy certainly take Tengrianism completely seriously: mullahs forbid their faithful not only to speak of the old Bashkiri faith but even to think about it.

In the strictly religious sphere the BNTs declares unconditional adherence to Islam. Kul'sharipov and Valeyev are evidently proud of the religious idiosyncrasies of their people, which they describe in somewhat paradoxical terms: 'We make poor Muslims; we seldom observe the law or go to the mosque; there are stubborn pagan remnants in our faith. But unlike the Tatars we have never converted to Christianity; we may be lax followers of Muhammed but we are very faithful ones.' It is true that there have never been any national Bashkiri Christian parishes, while there have been, and still are, Tatar ones; but the assertion that no Bashkirs have ever converted to Christianity is of course an ideological exaggeration. The conversion of individual Bashkirs to Christianity has never been that exceptional a phenomenon. We are probably not going to convince Kul'sharipov and Valeyev, however: their story is after all part of the heroic national myth.

The BNTs has done a good deal to disseminate Islam. Under its auspices the Quran has been translated into the Bashkiri language, large quantities of other kinds of religious literature have been published and educational programmes of various sorts have been organised. The BNTs has taken the initiative in collecting money for the construction of mosques. Thanks to the activity of the Bashkiri nationalist movement a sense of national identity has grown up in Bashkiri society, and one of its most important components is loyalty to Islam. Easy and open conversions of Bashkirs to Christianity of the kind that took place in the late 1980s have become a rarity. Christian believers of various denominations have told us that now Bashkirs join them secretly; the Bashkir convert hides his Christianity from his friends and those close to him. Some Bashkiri women who secretly convert to Christianity hide the fact even from their husbands. Members of various Christian communities have told us that these women put their change of faith down to the oppressed position of women in Islam, which they say they cannot accept because of their European-style education.

The Bashkiri nationalist movement may have done a good deal to help with the dissemination of Islam, but it is a secular socio-political movement rather than a religious one, and when it involves itself in religious affairs it has to cooperate with clergy, most of whom are Tatar in both DUMES and DUMRB. These relations are not always easy, because the main aim of BNTs, as Kul'sharipov told us, is the formation of an independent Bashkiri national Islam and national Bashkiri clergy.

Islam is by nature a democratic religion. The use of the Bashkiri language in worship has never been a problem for either DUMES or DUMRB. Moreover, in multinational communities or in communities which have become Russian-speaking the Russian language is used as well. There are in fact virtually no Bashkiri national clergy: the majority of them are Tatars. Islam is a truly international religion. All these facts are of no significance for the Bashkiri nationalist movement, however, especially as the Islamic clergy adopt on principle an attitude of indifference to Bashkiri national problems.

When the DUMRB was founded Bashkiri nationals gave it enthusiastic support. When we asked BNTs activists why they had left Tajutdin for DUMRB they cited two main reasons: that DUMES and its leader Tajutdin were tied to Moscow and were serving the aims of Russian imperialism; and that a Bashkiri national, Nurmukhammat Nigmatullin, had been elected head of DUMRB (which, however, had not changed DUMRB's attitude to nationalist issues in the slightest).

The position of the BNTs did a lot to determine the nature of the triumphant procession of young reformers of Islam. At the start of 1996 there were 310 registered Islamic communities in Bashkiriya, of which 260 were in DUMRB and

only 50 in DUMES. However, Tajutdin was aware of the danger which comes from an excessive concentration of power in an individual's hands and set in train a process of decentralisation: in 1994–95 he established more than 20 muftiates under DUMES control, including one for Bashkiria in Salavat. It is hard to tell whether this attempt will give the Tajutdin form of Islam second wind, but in any case it is a serious challenge to DUMRB.

In 1995–96 there was a clear halt to the advancement of Islam in Bashkiria. Aislu Yunusova tells us that

Towards the end of 1994 the construction of some 200 mosques was halted due to insufficient funds. After the demand for Muslim religious literature was satisfied income from that quarter fell significantly and the problem of finance is now the main one. There were also problems with the clergy – not so much with their training as with their selection. Between 1990 and 1992 a large number of young people expressed the wish to study in the recently opened madrassahs. However, many of them were driven by opportunist motives rather than true devotion to Islam. As a result many mosques today have still not got priests.⁶

In our view, the crisis of 1995–96 was due not only to financial problems and irresponsible students but to profound ideological tensions within Islam, and between Islam and the nationalist movement in Bashkiria. By mid-1996 Bashkiri Islam and the Bashkiri nationalist movement appeared to be at a parting of the ways once more. It is impossible to say what decisions they will take about the paths they are now going to follow.

As a rule, moderately authoritarian governments in areas with a mixed Muslim–Orthodox Christian population end up making the same decisions in the field of religion. The line has already become clear in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Having put down overt political opposition, the government gives special importance to religious associations which appear to be exponents of the interests of the people and at the same time do not present outright political competition to the powers that be. The government is interested in the loyalty of religious organisations and their conformity with its own fundamental ideological-political aims. This line has been most consistent in Kazakhstan, where there are now two unofficial state religions, Islam and Orthodoxy. Nazarbayev has undertaken a thorough kazakhisation of the Muslim clergy and has put them under strict control. The Orthodox archbishop Aleksii (Kutepov) has shown full support for the present regime in Almaty, and Nazarbayev is building up secure relations with the Slav population. In Bashkortostan, President Rakhimov is moving in the same direction, judging by steps he has already taken, but he is finding it far more difficult to implement the Nazarbayev plan because of the comparative weakness of his regime. In the early years of the sovereignty process the authorities in Ufa were looking to Tajutdin and DUMES support, but Tajutdin had wide connections throughout Russia and contacts with Moscow and was not in the least interested in confining his activity to the regional level. Around 1993 a short romance between Rakhimov and DUMRB began. The president included DUMRB leader Nigmatullin in the State Council, as well as Orthodox Bishop Nikon, and broke off his regular contacts with Tajutdin. At the beginning of 1996, however, Rakhimov's bureaucrats began to realise that the young Islamic reformers were not quite what was needed either; it was impossible to control them and turn them into mouthpieces of their own interests. After the DUMES muftiate was founded in Salavat relations with Tajutdin grew warmer once more; but again this was a choice

from necessity and not a sincere commitment. The aim of the authorities in Ufa was obviously to create an obedient Bashkiri Islamic centre under their control; but achieving this end was to take much further plotting and scheming.

Strange as it may seem, Rakhimov finds it easier to deal with the Orthodox, who have quite quickly learned to play the role they have been assigned. The diocese has ceased to have open contact with Russian socio-political movements and the Cossacks and is fast becoming a convenient vehicle for the expression of Russian interests in the corridors of power. Activists of the Bashkiri nationalist movement are indignant that 'our president's relations with the bishop are better than with the muftis'; but the muftis, whether from DUMES or DUMRB, are not showing the necessary loyalty. The 'love for Orthodoxy' of Murtaz Rakhimov is very limited in extent, however. Fr Boris Razveyev has been appointed senior priest of the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the centre of Ufa, which is being restored and is to become a cathedral. He told us about an unexpected and very revealing confrontation with the president of Bashkortostan. The prerevolutionary cathedral was demolished in the 1930s and the ruined Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God was the largest church building in the centre of town. The diocese quickly managed to come forward and claim the building, apparently without the knowledge of the higher authorities, who had other plans for it. One day, several months after restoration work had begun, the presidential limousine drew up, Murtaz Rakhimov got out and spoke to the senior priest who ran up to him roughly as follows: 'Our Bashkiri republic is Muslim and this building in the town centre should belong to the Muslims. You have enough churches as it is; I don't know how you managed to lay your hands on the documents for this site, but we shall be reconsidering this case.' It is thus quite clear what the plan for religious relations is in sovereign Bashkortostan: two official, but unequal, faiths giving their blessing to national statehood. It is impossible to say whether this plan will succeed.

Throughout the history of Bashkiriya, then, there is a constant pattern. The state suddenly latches onto religion, the nationalist movements claim it, then the religious feelings of people, disinterested and unconnected with either the former or the latter, upset the plans of state authorities and national leaders alike. Who is going to win this time, we keep asking ourselves: statesman Pilate, patriot Caiaphas or the son of Man?

Notes and References

- ¹ An ishan is a local mystic revered as a religious leader. His followers or disciples are called murids.
- ² *Politicheskkiye issledovaniya*, no. 3, 1993, p. 147.
- ³ The young Orthodox convert Aleksandr Ogorodnikov ran unofficial Christian seminars in Moscow in the second half of the 1970s; Vladimir Poresh travelled regularly from Leningrad to participate in them. See Jane Ellis, 'The Christian Seminar', *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1980, pp. 92–112; Philip Walters, 'The ideas of the Christian Seminar', *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 9, nos. 3–4, 1981, pp. 111–26.
- ⁴ DUMES: Russian acronym for the 'Spiritual Directorate (or Muslim Board) of European Russia and Siberia' which was based in Ufa and was one of four boards set up during the Soviet period to look after Muslim affairs. See Yaacov Ro'i, 'Islam in the Soviet Union after the Second World War', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 24, nos. 2/3, September 1996, pp. 159–66. On Talgat Tajutdin, see Ravil Bukharaev, 'Islam in Russia: crisis of leadership', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 24, nos. 2/3, September 1996, pp. 167–82.
- ⁵ On Tengrianism see Irène Mélikoff, 'From god of heaven to king of men: popular Islam

among Turkic tribes from Central Asia to Anatolia', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 24, nos. 2/3, September 1996, pp. 133–38.

- ⁶ A. B. Yunusova, *Islam v Bashkirii 1917–1994* (Ufa, 1994), p. 118. We have made extensive use of this excellent book when dealing with the history of Islam in Bashkiria in the Soviet period.

(Translated from the Russian by Philip Walters)