

„BUDDHIST COMMUNITIES OF SAINT-PETERSBURG“

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After the revolution of 1917, Traditional Buddhism in the Russian Far Eastern Federal districts (Buryat Republic, Kalmykia, Tyva, Altay Republic, The Zabaikalye Territory and The Irkutsk region) suffered from the mass persecutions as much as other traditional religions and confessions. However, Buddhist tradition survived and newly developed after World War II.

Nowadays Buddhism is considered as an official religion in those regions where it has been practiced before. There are more than 500 thousand practicing Buddhists in Russia. It must be pointed out that Russian Buddhism is popular among intellectuals. You can easily find big entrepreneurs, politicians, public persons among those who practicing Buddhism. For example, ex-president of Kalmykia Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was Buddhist and actively promoted it.

Due to the quick and wide spread of Buddhism among Russian people it became the subject of interest of different science disciplines including religiology, ethnology, culturology, anthropology and sociology.

The book of Elena Ostrovskaya “Buddhist Communities of Saint-Petersburg” is devoted to a special phenomenon in the spiritual life of Saint-Petersburg called Buddhist communities that were set up by laypeople and operate independently and differently from traditional Russian Buddhist institutes.

It must be admitted that the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in big cities started in the late 80-s and in the 90-s of 20 century. It was popular among intellectuals, the student community and youth. In some part it was connected with a “fashion for Eastern culture” and attempts of spiritual quests that have been popular in Western Europe long before, in the 60-s.

According to some researchers and experts on Russian Buddhism this belief system was restricted more than the “Abrahamic” religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Talking about brands of Buddhism, it must be added that the most popular of them among city inhabitants are Mahayana and different versions of Tibetan Buddhism like Dzogchen and Karma Kaguy.

The biggest Russian Buddhist communities are set up in Sverdlovsk, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg.

E.A. Ostrovskaya did field research of temporal communities of Buddhists-converts beginning in the 1990-s. She used different research approaches, like methods of participant and non-participant observations and interview (indi-

vidual interview with practicing Buddhists, group interview, expert interview with scientists of Buddhism, people who have left this religious community, Datsan abbot, leader of Buddhist communist and so on). She also effectively analyzes document, especially of video and audio materials from the communities' archives, Buddhist periodicals and works of spiritual leaders. The main aim of this research was to find out specific features of religious life of Buddhist temporal communities of Saint-Petersburg.

The author's book reflects the results of case-studies of three Buddhist communities in Saint-Petersburg: Karma Kagyu Community, Rime movement, Dzogchen community. Using interviews materials we can reconstruct the biographies of Ole Nydahl, Vitaly F or "Vitalik" and Namkhai Norbu, founders and leaders of these communities. More than that, these materials show us the fact that they claimed the status of prophets.

Sociological and anthropological approaches are used to elicit typological specific characters of a particular community. The detailed analysis of the modern conditions of these communities, the spread of everyday and ritual practices, the procedure of involvement of new members and so on. As a result, the author concludes that despite the fact that the communities' leaders claim the direct dogmatic and historical-cultural connection between their communities and similarly-named brands of Tibetan Buddhism, there is almost nothing the same between their practicing forms of religious life and Tibeto-Buddhists prototypes. Leaders create their own conceptions of preaching the Buddhist message and interpretations of lay activities, introduce their own texts of primary initiation in Buddhism, and offer their own variants of Buddhism. They all aim to attain legitimacy of their own teaching. Nevertheless, according to the researcher, Saint-Petersburg's communities were developed in terms of Western models of religious life, so the social base of community was restricted.

No doubt that the thing of huge interest is the author's analysis of psychological and somatic parts of religious practices that make each case-study rich and informative.

Talking about minuses of this work we can name author's partiality towards modern leaders of Buddhism.

The author subjectively accuses popular Western and Russian religious Buddhist leaders of egoistic position and claim of "teaching" but having no research data.

Moreover, the author subjectively asserts that Buddhist leaders create their own conceptions contrary to traditional Buddhism.

The author also concludes that all founders of communities considered Datsan (which activity was renewed in Saint-Petersburg in 1990) only as religious organizations serving the spiritual needs of Buryat and Kalmyck national minorities. At the same time they were interested in the creation of Buddhist center that could unite all believers regardless of their ethno-cultural identity. Due to

this fact Karma, Rime and Dzogchen communities were opposed to Datsan activity to a certain degree.

Taking all things together, Elena Ostrovskaya's work can be considered as a serious sociological analysis of obstacles to the successful activity of Buddhist communities of Saint-Petersburg. This work should be taken into consideration by those who are interested in religion and actual religious practices within scientific field.

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