

SOWING THE SEEDS OF FAITH: A CASE STUDY OF AN AMERICAN MISSIONARY IN THE RUSSIAN NORTH

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s foreign missionaries have eagerly visited the Russian Federation to disseminate God's word among the subjects of the formerly atheist state. Different Protestant denominations have been among the most successful in gathering followers. However, the Russian Orthodox Church and its supporters have not welcomed the evangelising work of Protestant missionaries. The present article aims to examine some aspects of the development of this relatively new religious diversity at the grass-roots level by analysing the role of an American missionary in forming an evangelical congregation in a small rural community in the Republic of Komi. Drawing on fieldwork materials, I intend to discuss both the missionary's perspective and the local response to his presence.

KEYWORDS: Evangelical missionaries in Russia • Republic of Komi • Orthodox • community • place

In the focus of this article* is a case study of an American evangelical missionary in the post-Soviet setting of the Russian North. I will begin the paper with a brief overview of the religious situation in the Russian Federation and in the Republic of Komi to outline the wider framework in which evangelicals operate and to which they react. In the subsequent section I will turn my attention to the missionary's personal account of starting a congregation in a small Komi village and how the surrounding rural environment is experienced and represented in his narratives. I will then tackle the non-evangelical (tentatively Orthodox) response to the evangelical enterprise on the one hand, and look at how the American is depicted in the narratives of local evangelicals and what kind of role he is seen to have within the community he initiated, on the other.

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The ethnographic material presented in this paper has been collected over the course of recurring short-term fieldwork trips to villages of the Kulömdin Rayon (district)² in the Republic of Komi. The Republic of Komi, with a population of about 900,000 and scattered over the territory of 416,800 km² is situated in the north-eastern part of European Russia. Nearly a third of the republic's population lives in the capital, Syktyvkar. With large forest areas and industrial towns developed near former Soviet prison camps, Komiland is considered the periphery in the wider Russian context.

For centuries both the Russian Orthodox Church and most of its inhabitants have considered Komiland to be Orthodox terrain. During the years of Soviet rule, official religious structures were almost completely abolished. However, according to Sergey Filatov's (2005: 171) estimation Orthodox tradition among lay people was actually preserved better here than in many other parts of Russia as there was a characteristic tradition of gathering at prayer meetings without ordained clerics (cf. Koosa, Leete 2011). This has to do with the fact that often enough there were simply no priests regularly available in the remote villages even before the Soviet period. Today, although individually people can be hesitant in calling themselves Orthodox believers because they feel they lack the necessary knowledge and practice assumed by the Church, an average villager would readily consider the Komi in general to be Orthodox (cf. Leete 2010; Leete, Koosa 2012). Even non-believers tend to think that there is a certain 'correct' way of believing that is acceptable in the Komi context. At the same time people can be very critical towards what they see as public exploitation of faith by, for example, politicians.

While Orthodoxy is considered to be traditional among the Komi, small Protestant groups have also existed here since the early 20th century. The first indigenous Protestant groups in Komi appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. These were formed under the influence of those locals who had converted to some Protestant denomination while away from the home region during their studies or army service. Soon, the Soviet prison camps established in Komi territory proved to provide another source for instigating new Protestant groups. Former prisoners and deportees predominantly from the Baltic States, Belarus and Ukraine were the initiators of such communities³ (Gagarin 1978: 259–260; Rogachev 1997: 200; also cf. Leete 2013). Today, less than one per cent of the Republic's subjects say that they belong to some kind of Protestant denomination (Arena 2012: 182).

With the demise of the Soviet Union and of the officially atheist ideology, an unprecedented number of foreign missionaries from various churches and denominations started to arrive in Russia to preach God's message according to their understanding. This quickly developed 'religious marketplace' with a diverse assortment of goods was indeed enthusiastically welcomed by many, while many were also confused by this sudden diversity. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) felt increasingly uncomfortable with the new and active competitors. While the ROC had at its disposal the arguments of tradition and continuity in claiming a special position in the Russian Federation, the more critical voices in society raised the question of the ROC's overly close cooperation with the Soviet authorities – a charge from which the newcomers were free. The very different style of mission work employed by the Western churches also caused discontent among the Orthodox who often simply have not been able to compete with it, mainly lacking the necessary experience. Moreover, the ROC

tends to think of the mission activities of other Christian denominations in the Russian Federation as unlawful, as it considers the people already Orthodox (see, for example, Kirill 1999: 72–75).

As soon as the first half of the 1990s, one of the ROC's main strategies to cope with unwanted competitors was to label them 'sectarian' (see Baran 2006). Even Christian denominations well established in the USA and Europe have been depicted as dangerous and totalitarian in the anti-sectarian discourse which has borrowed a lot from the western anti-cult discourse of 1970s–1980s (Golovushkin 2004: 105; Filatov 2009a: 22–23; Lunkin 2009: 111, 122–123; Egilskiy, Matetskaya, Samygin 2011: 73–84).

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations adopted in 1997 took into account the concerns voiced by the ROC and its supporters when differentiating traditional and non-traditional religious institutions and acknowledging Orthodoxy's special role in Russian history and culture in its preamble; it also limits the possibilities of registration of new religious communities. In 2000 this was followed by a national security policy document that clearly drew a connection between foreign espionage and foreign religions, warning of "the negative influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries" (Elliott 2003: 42; Golovushkin 2004: 107). Connecting 'sectarians' with the hidden undermining work of foreign countries is not a new idea. Catherine Wanner (2004: 742) has pointed out that in the Soviet era one of the main reasons for especially hard repressions of evangelicals was their perceived 'foreignness'; in addition, the fundamentalist Protestant churches in the West and especially in the USA were extremely anti-communist. Recent sociological surveys continue to indicate that America is regarded as an aggressor, unfriendly towards Russia and with the aim of controlling the world (Zorkaya 2012: 200, 207–208). Ethnographical data from Komi largely seems to confirm these kinds of data as people indeed tend to see America as Russia's rival if not opponent. Thus concern about unwanted cultural influences and anxieties about unfamiliar religious practices are the two main sources of scepticism with regard to religious groups that are perceived as foreign.

WILLIAM AND HIS MISSION IN THE VILLAGE OF DON

During initial fieldwork trips to the Kulömdin Rayon I was mainly interested in the role and importance of Orthodox tradition in the lives of contemporary villagers. Talking to people about religious matters, most of them sooner or later mentioned the American(s) living in the village of Don and spreading their faith in the rayon. This is how I first learned about the mission and became curious to check for myself whether there really was such a massive conversion to Protestantism going on in the area as some of the informants implied.

Don, with about 500 inhabitants, is situated 15 km from the rayon centre Kulömdin.⁴ The village has a kindergarten, primary school, medical office, sawmill and two small shops providing foodstuffs and other necessities. While some people go to work in the rayon centre, many more are unemployed. Some live off tiny pensions, while growing vegetables and fishing and hunting to supplement provisions or to sell for additional income is common. In the summer, picking berries and mushrooms in the surrounding woods and selling them to wholesalers offers villagers the possibility to earn significant extras.



Photo 1. William has just helped to repair a neighbour's truck. Photography by Art Leete, 2008.

During our first visit to the village to meet William⁵ in person we found him busy helping to repair his neighbour's truck. While some of the people who had first told me about William had depicted him as a rather assertive person, to me he appeared to be quite modest in both looks and behaviour. Later I met William several times when visiting the services and he always seemed to keep rather to the background.

In the following I will briefly summarise his biography as he told it during our interview. William was born and brought up in a farmer's family. He left school at an early age and soon got married. The marriage ended with divorce, and William was drafted to go to the Vietnam War. As for many others, the war experience had a traumatic impact on him and when he returned, he started drinking. His alcoholism escalated, and he became addicted to drugs as well. He caused several car accidents because of drunk driving and once a child was nearly killed. As a result he developed an acute fear of actually killing someone and after unsuccessfully seeking help from doctors to break from drugs and drinking, his anxieties led him to the local Methodist church. In late 1991 at the age of 43 he became an evangelical Christian or, as he says, accepted Jesus. With the help of his conversion, William was able to quit his addictions within what he terms a "miraculously short period of time".

In 1992 William already took part in his first mission trip to Russia. In 1991, Operation Carelift had been founded under the Josh McDowell Ministry to "meet the physical and spiritual needs in orphanages, hospitals, schools, and prisons in the countries of the former Soviet Union" (Josh's Bio). Hearing about the programme over a Christian radio, William felt this was something he wanted to take part in and gathered up the money needed to participate on the trip. Until 1997 he repeatedly (altogether nine times)

travelled to Russia for short-term periods with the Josh McDowell Ministry, delivering humanitarian aid and handing out Christian leaflets on the streets of Moscow.

In 1997 William retired from working as welder in a factory in his home state Illinois, sold his house and other possessions and moved to Russia. He then worked in Moscow with the Christian medical organisation Agape, which combines missionising with providing medical care in various areas of Russia, concentrating on “most remote and isolated people groups in the Arctic and Siberia as well as the poor and overlooked in rural and urban areas” (Agape Unlimited). As part of this project, William first arrived in the Republic of Komi at the town of Yemva,⁶ accompanying Dr Bill Becknell, founder of the Agape mission. This is how William describes what he perceived the region to be like⁷:

And when I went there, I saw more needs in the North than I did in Moscow. Yes, there’s needs in Moscow as well. But there’s more needs here in the North. And I think it’s kind of like America, whenever you get away from the big cities that has the money, it tends to get... the amounts of funds are not available for people and they’re more backwards, the roads are not as good, the job situation is not as good.⁸

Being engaged with social charity projects like acquiring and chopping firewood for the elderly, fixing up roofs, etc., William decided that this kind of very practical work was his true calling and the best way for him to serve God as he felt he was not skilful with words. Since the Agape project did not have the means to support the kind of undertaking William had in mind, he went back to the USA and was able to gather enough funds to return to the Republic of Komi to start his own mission.⁹ In Moscow he was introduced to a young Russian, Andrey, who was willing to accompany the monolingual William as interpreter and fellow missionary. Already in the Republic of Komi, a local young Baptist, Semyon, joined the small team. Below is an excerpt from an interview where William describes how the three of them ended up in the Don village:

And we went to Yemva first of all. They had a drug rehab centre there. So we went there to help this drug rehab centre. And we stayed there couple of months. And then we kept hearing about this Kulömdin Rayon, Kulömdin Rayon and so... one day we took a drive and we came here. And it was basically what I’m looking for, I’m looking for something where people didn’t live in a big cities where they had jobs, I’m looking for a place where people were more needy. Where there’s more help needed. And ... that’s because that’s where our heart is, helping the most needy. And you find it more in the rural villages than you will [when] going to Syktyvkar, of course, or Moscow. So when we came to Kulömdin Rayon we felt basically that this is the place God wanted us to come.

William therefore understands his coming to the Kulömdin Rayon in terms of following God’s plan for him. This kind of understanding coincides with the local evangelicals’ interpretations of why William ended up specifically in Don (see below). Even though William explains his choice of the site of his mission work in terms of its peripheral location and overall deprivation, at the same time he is adamant that people themselves are the same everywhere. This emphasis on the basic similarity of human nature serves the purpose of minimising the perceived otherness of Americans as compared to (rural) Komis or Russians, largely associated with different background and living environment and standard and thus, in a way, to advocate William’s right to missionise in a

foreign land. The aim is to downplay the denominational discrepancy from what is locally customary and thus to emphasise the possibility of dialogue and mutual understanding. That is, regardless of national, cultural or denominational belonging, peoples' inner need for gospel and way to salvation is declared to be universally the same. Discussing Orthodox-Protestant relations in post-Soviet Russia, evangelical scholar Mark R. Elliott (2003: 37–38) points out that just as Orthodox believers have been negative towards evangelical missionaries, so have the latter been at least occasionally highly critical in their assessments of Orthodoxy. Laur Vallikivi (2011: 16, 89) reports that the Baptist missionaries active in the area close to the region of my case study consider the Orthodox as mistaken idolaters or even devil worshipers. In contrast to this kind of positioning William and his fellow missionaries mainly express a positive attitude towards the Orthodox, saying that there are “true believers” in every Church (denomination). Of course, vernacular religious practices can earn sternly critical evaluations; for example, when William conveyed how he is not afraid to die and that he has told his friends to rejoice on the occasion as it means he will be living with Jesus, he comparatively judged the local funerary customs:

Most people here... they're crying [when somebody dies]... they're putting even money into the grave... they're... even sometimes I've seen them putting vodka into the grave, pack of cigarettes into the grave. Have a good journey on your way [imitating a considerate tone of voice], where ever you're going, heh. Yeah... they have no idea.¹⁰

The evangelicals also criticise overly keen attention to icons (the idea of icons having agency) and are disapproving of people who call themselves Orthodox but smoke and consume alcohol. Even so, in general the Don evangelicals rather avoid directly condemning Orthodox believers, emphasising the importance of ecumenical principle. William stresses that his agenda is not to compete with the ROC but simply to bring people to God:

See, I never had a plan to start churches. This is not my plan. I mean, Russia has a lot of churches; you've got them almost everywhere, the Orthodox Church. I, all I'm gonna do, is show them the way... to Jesus Christ. Where they go to worship, is, you know... that's... that's up to them. [If] they wanna go to the Orthodox church to worship, that's fine, I don't care. You can worship [where ever]... that doesn't make any difference.

However, the ecumenical approach is not greatly appreciated by the ROC (see, for example, Filatov 2009a: 20–21). The ROC priest Alexander who is serving in the Kulömdin Rayon centre and conducting home services in Don, is correspondingly critical of the evangelicals for emphasising only the role of Jesus Christ in acquiring salvation:

He [William] has an ecumenical mindset. [...] Ecumenical means, that everyone who believes in Christ will reach God. But it is not so that one should only believe in Christ. One must also revere the saints, the mother of God, the tradition.

Thus the priest has taken the position that even though the evangelical missionaries are seemingly doing good when helping people, they nevertheless have a negative impact on local life by creating discords and schism in the community and confusing people with, according to him, erroneous teaching.¹¹

Although William insists that he never had any plan to start a church as such, with the missionaries settling in the village, in a short time a small congregation formed. As William does not consider himself to be a skilful preacher, and furthermore, he speaks neither Komi nor much Russian, the translator Andrey became the pastor of the congregation.¹² Initially, the American's house attracted quite a number of intrigued and curious locals, many children and young teenagers found the newcomers and youth events organised by them entertaining. The missionaries even had to build an extension to the house to accommodate participants in Sunday services. Now it seems that the initial interest has somewhat simmered down and some 15–20 people, including children but predominantly middle-aged and elderly women, usually show up for the weekly service.¹³

The character of the Don congregation is similar to the so-called new paradigm or free churches increasingly common in America (see Miller 1998). This kind of nondenominational approach¹⁴ is quite untypical in Komi and in Russia more broadly. Although William's background and ideological stance are substantial in this regard, the 'American' style is not promoted because of his guidance alone. Pastor Andrey, who leads the church, very strongly pursues the nondenominational and casual approach in the congregational life. It is important to say that Andrey is not simply copying the easily available or pre-given model but very consciously and for reasons well thought through prefers the nondenominational approach. Unregistered¹⁵ and called simply the Christian Community of Don (Донская христианская община), the group welcomes Christians of all denominations. Encouraging interactivity and free conduct, and praising God with pop-style music, their services differ considerably from Orthodox ones. In fact, not only the Orthodox are suspicious of the Don evangelicals. Some others, representatives of the more established and conservative Protestant groups, can be somewhat doubtful of what they consider to be a too liberal approach as well. Indeed, some of the members of the Don congregation with a background in Baptist churches specifically emphasise that they like the community's openness and readiness to socialise with Christians of all denominations – an attitude which they missed in their former churches.

In the summer of 2011, after planning to do so for a while already, William left Don to set up a mission in the neighbouring rayon.

Immediate verbatim communication between William and congregants or any other local people has been minimal because of the language barrier.¹⁶ Although William has thus not been directly active in establishing the Don congregation, the group's present profile and form is nevertheless in a certain virtual and yet practical manner inseparably connected with him. In the next sections I will look at how William's person and his role have been reflected by different local views.

OUTSIDERS' REFLECTIONS ON WILLIAM'S PRESENCE

Missionaries settling in Don quite expectedly caused excitement and stirred up multiple rumours not only in the village itself but across the whole of Kulömdin Rayon. As the missionaries actively engaged themselves in evangelising in different villages, mainly in the form of charity work (renovating schools, kindergartens, orphanages, etc.), but also otherwise (such as arranging Christian concerts or film nights at local clubhouses), awareness of their presence quickly spread by word of mouth as well as through the media.

The dominant discourse that accompanied William's residence in Don from the start depicted him as a foreigner with more than questionable intentions. William (and in fact his associates who were also categorised as 'Americans') was deemed to be a spy by Komi villagers in discussions of his person and his reasons to come to live in Don. This labelling did not include elaboration on the charge, or ideas of what exactly there would be to spy on in a village in the Komi hinterland. Certainly not everyone who refers to William as a spy does so in full seriousness; occasionally this is done jokingly and quite casually. Nevertheless, the tone and vocabulary adopted clearly signify the mistrust common people feel about the American's motives for being in their rayon. People voice the otherness of William and Don evangelicals predominantly by addressing them as 'sectarians', thus following the public discourse previously mentioned. The commentators do not generally formulate their suspicions specifically and William's supposedly dubious agenda is only hinted at:

Now he [William] is renovating the kindergarten for example, yes. And Maria Yevgenyevna asked how to pay him, with money or what. And he said that I don't need anything but [to help] your children and that's it. Well, isn't that interesting! He helps, helps the children... Why does he intrude here? (Yelizaveta)

Probably those who don't really think why this [missionary activity] is so widely sponsored, leave [Orthodoxy to join the evangelicals]. (Zhanna)

When commenting on outsiders' attitudes, several members of the evangelical congregation attest that before joining the group they used the prevailing disparaging discourse as well. Nadya, a former alcoholic, reminisces:

When they [missionaries] first came here we were of course all unbelievers and we didn't acknowledge anything but the Orthodox Church. And that's what we called them – sectarians. The spies arrived, that's what we said.

Such recollections serve the purpose of explicating the unjust and groundless nature of the accusations or hostile comments about William (and evangelicals generally) made by the villagers.

According to evangelicals, some of the most outrageous local indictments of sectarianism included allegations that they actually worship William not God; some of the villagers supposedly suspected the missionaries were really terrorists with plans to blow up the village council (see Ovchinnikov 2004). In general, however, the opposing feelings are not founded on such extreme grounds. Rather, the evangelicals are blamed for spreading teachings alien and misconceived from the Orthodox perspective. Some of the Orthodox worshippers see predominantly selfish motivations in William's undertakings, commenting that he wants to "earn himself a good life after death".

Despite numerous negative or doubtful commentaries, various villagers in the area have welcomed the practical help William and other missionaries provide. The situation has also prompted people to critically address the Orthodox Church, asking why the traditional religious institution is not paying attention to the many social problems in such an active form.

As mentioned, the media too has played a role in spreading knowledge about William's presence and, at times, helped to provoke the feelings of mistrust. On the one hand, simply the idea of an American coming to live in a Komi (Russian) village is presented as

something highly extraordinary and as such, newsworthy and entertaining. These sorts of accounts describe the Westerner managing in the rural setting, especially underscoring the remoteness of Don to magnify the bizarreness of American's choice.¹⁷ On the other hand, descriptions of the social work William and other missionaries carry out can be a more or less obvious way to criticise the local authorities for inactiveness in this regard (see Ovchinnikov 2004). However, some media reports have opted to promote the scandalous vernacular ideas and interpretations, following the more general trend in Russian society and hinting that there is covert danger in the American's motivations. This is how William describes the negative experience with representatives of the media:

Many television reporters coming here, next time we know, we read about it or hear about it on television... and it's a lie. [...] They never tell the whole truth. They will say some things that you said but then they add some other things that are just not true. Like they say, well, you're from some big organisation in America, from the government. I'm a pensioner! This [what the media says] is not true, it's a lie! [...] And this is the part... It hurts God and it hurts m... our reputation too.

A good example of media accounts with a specific anti-evangelical agenda and potential of generating agitating rumours is an article published in an Orthodox newspaper in which the reader is informed that the "followers of Americans" go by schools giving each pupil 10 roubles so that the children would come to them (Suvorov 2007).

Somewhat surprisingly, an alternative vernacular interpretation of William's person identifies him as a kind of healer or even a witch. Although the missionary has tried to emphasise that he only has an instrumental role in mediating God's word, some people have come to conclusion that the curious stranger himself possesses some sort of special powers or (secret) knowledge. Allegedly someone travelled to William even from the neighbouring region to have a curse taken off (Karmanova 2007). Interestingly, Aleksey Sidorov (1997 [1928]: 26) has recorded that in the Kulömdin villages the Germans who ended up in the area as a result of World War I were thought by the locals to be powerful witches. This suggests the existence of a specific folklore tradition that credits the uncommon foreigners with certain supernatural expertise in matters not possible to solve with normally attainable methods. It is possible to speculate that in a way the evangelicals (unintentionally) encouraged this sort of interpretations by buying a house in which a man had hung himself. Being aware of the local vernacular ideas of the pollution of this kind of place (which are thus to be avoided), the evangelicals assert that being a place of worship and being filled with believers has consecrated the house.

Just as William's arrival in Don gave rise to rumours, so did his departure. This is how a young woman from the group summarises the changing attitude of Don villagers towards William:

At first, they were afraid that some kind of spy arrived from America. They thought he would be spying on something. Afterwards they somehow calmed that he somehow started to aid everybody, to put his money in this aid. And he didn't take money [for helping]. Afterwards everybody started to like William very much of course. Now they ask why did he leave. [...] Now they said it was us who drove William away. [...] They thought that we had fallen out with him for some reason. (Galina)

However, people not living in Don, that is, not in immediate proximity to William, have had less interest and possibilities to reconsider his person and motives. Generally in the rayon the Don evangelicals are still strongly associated with William's presence. During our fieldwork trip in August 2012 conversations with Kulömdin residents revealed that more than a year after William's leaving they still had not heard about it.

WILLIAM'S ROLE AND IMAGE IN EVANGELICAL NARRATIVES

One of the core members of the Don congregation is Lidia. She became a believer in the mid-1990s, when she repented in a Baptist church in Syktyvkar. Although her sister had become a Baptist some years earlier, she lived in the capital and thus Lidia remained the only evangelical Christian in her immediate social environment. From the start she felt under pressure from both her relatives and the wider community because of her choice, and in constant need to justify it. This is how Lidia describes her thoughts prior to missionaries' appearance and how William's arrival was God's answer to her prayers for help in her struggles:

I started to pray to God – please, Lord, I cannot do anything alone, I need a helper. I need someone to support me, someone with transport, let's say, not only one person. As Jesus went to villages and talked about the truth. And I think that William is the answer to my prayers. [...] And also Anna Viktorovna's [...], she also said that when she was not yet a believer in living God, she nevertheless felt that some kind of enlightener is needed. As Stephen of Perm¹⁸ arrived in Komiland and disseminated Christianity here, so this William arrived too. [...] And I think – thank God, it is a blessing to our rayon, to our Don village, because Arkadiy's family was also in addiction [...], and God made this miracle and they are free from it now. [---] They started to go to William and William told them the word of God and it really touches people through the Holy Spirit. [---] Because of that, not only is William a blessing but also the fact that we have a church now in Don. I consider it a great blessing. So, thank God that there is William, that there are believers!

What is not explicit in this abbreviated excerpt is that Lidia played a very specific and active role in William's decision to move to Kulömdin Rayon in more than the form of prayer. When William was still in search of a place to settle in Komi, he became acquainted with Lidia in the Baptist church in Syktyvkar. When Lidia heard what kind of social programs William wanted to carry out, she assured the missionary that with the highest unemployment and crime rate in the republic, Kulömdin Rayon epitomised the kind of deprived location he was looking for. After taking some time to consider her proposition, William arrived at the conclusion that this rayon was indeed the place God wanted him to be in.

William's exemplary conversion story of an alcoholic and a drug-addict turning into a deeply religious man dedicated to helping needy people serves as a primary example in communicating the evangelical message to non-believers:

And he tells everyone that he does this because he believes in God, Jesus Christ. Because he was, how to say, heavily addicted to tobacco and drugs. And only God could release him from that not friends, not coding, not hypnosis.¹⁹ (Lidia)

As alcohol addiction is indeed a very sore and serious problem in the villages, William's promise of the possibility to break free from heavy addiction touches on a very real topic for many. So it is that some of the bystanders although not necessarily endorsing the evangelical faith as such, nevertheless support the missionaries' activities as they target the problem of alcoholism. Even some people attending the evangelical services are not so much motivated by religion (at least initially) but rather attend to support the real change in family members' lives that has brought about with the help and influence of the evangelicals.

Different aspects of William's conduct and appearance are perceived by the evangelicals as conveying his sincerity and devout belief in God. For example, simply the fact that he has not experienced any difficulties with extending his residence permit, a problem for many foreign missionaries (see Filatov 2009b: 17), is seen as a sign of God's special blessing on his pursuits. Furthermore, William is characterised as leading a very simple way of life, being unpretentious in his looks and needs and paying extremely little attention to himself. Even simple working clothes, worn by most villagers to carry out daily chores, seem to acquire a specific meaning when worn by William. From such depictions the perception is almost that the mere fact that this American lives in the scarce conditions of a Komi village somehow demonstrates his rarity, if not holiness.

And you see what he himself looks like – he goes about in simple clothes, even in so-to-say working clothes. This means he doesn't spend anything on himself. He eats very modestly. You see. And people say let him be American, let it be the American faith, but he is a man of God. Because indeed you know them by [their] works and fruits.²⁰ (Lidia)

The references to the Bible in the excerpt above are often made by the evangelicals to underscore the notion that one's belief should show in one's daily conduct, while only the expression of one's belief in words is empty or dead if one's actions do not support such a claim.

Both the opponents and supporters of William's activities share the general idea that in America most people are if not rich then at least well off and life there is easy. When in the media and in the pro-Orthodox vernacular discourse the fact that William left the 'good life' in America to move to Komi village to "help the needy people" is presented as something bizarre if not suspicious, the evangelicals see this as a prime manifestation of God's work in his servant's heart on the one hand, and God's care for the people of Komi on the other. The evangelicals like to emphasise the material wealth and high living standard that William willingly gave up to come to evangelise in Komi. This is not only to 'prove' that he is indeed a godly man, but I suggest that it is also an attempt to 'translate' to non-believers (non-evangelicals) how much more valuable is life with Jesus in one's heart as compared to any of the material commodities that people in the villages feel they are deprived of. In the following excerpt the pastor and one of the congregants discuss the radical change of living environments that William went through as prime evidence of transcendent guidance in an individual's life:

Andrey: William would never have arrived from welfare-America, where there's real welfare. He sold his house there, he had a house and a garage for two cars, a two-storey house, everything in the house, all the home appliances were new, a boat, a truck, a car, all thinkable and unthinkable tools. He was retired, the mort-

gage was paid [...] he had a good pension even according to American standards²¹ [...]. What would be the reason to come to a country, where he doesn't understand the language, to live in a village, to help people [...] – it doesn't make sense! [laughing to underline the incredibility of this kind of conduct] It doesn't make sense.

Anna: He went about in torn trousers.

Andrey: [To come here and] To heat the oven. This is the Lord. The Lord indeed changes peoples' lives, he changes people internally.

Andrey empathises with William on the matter of village life all the more as he had previously lived in big cities and admits that living in a log house without central heating or plumbing and having only a sauna to wash himself in was challenging at first.

Some members connected with the Don community express a certain discontent over the fact that even though they were evangelical Christians before meeting William, the local people still label them as fools deluded by the American or as opportunists hoping to gain some kind of personal benefit. As outsiders tend to associate all evangelicals in the rayon with the American, some additional difficulties can be caused to other missionaries' work as well. After settling in Don, the missionaries quickly established a friendly relationship with a Pentecostal missionary, Aleksey, based in the rayon centre. While Aleksey values and strongly supports the cooperation, he does note that the popular assumption that links his activity with foreign missionaries adds to the mistrust he encounters from the locals:

This evangelical faith is like an American faith, even though in this case [the Pentecostals in the Kulömdin Rayon] Americans have nothing to do with it. We were not sent here by the Americans. William, the one who is in Don [...], we did not know him at all. They only came here after us. [But] For them [sceptical bystanders, the Orthodox] it is an American faith anyway. All this is American for them, [like] some kind of chewing gum, it's all detrimental, it's all one and the same for them.

William is well aware that his endeavours to spread the gospel are often met with sceptical if not directly hostile feelings by the locals specifically because of his nationality. In fact, he even relates to such reactions by recalling that he too used to think of Russia as an enemy to America, that is, he recognises that much of the ordinary people's distrust is generated by public (political) discourse. Despite all the rumours, William concludes that most of the villagers take a very practical stand in regard to his and other missionaries' activities:

Lot of people will call you all kinds of names and it hurts being an American because – hah, American, he's a spy or he's here because he wants something, you know that kind of, of... persecution. Basically, just word of mouth, no one has threatened to kill me per se so far or anything like that. Most of the people, because we do help them, tend to... they accept us and they tend to like us. Yeah, they don't believe in what we believe, yeah, they won't come to Bible study or pray or anything. But they like us. Because we help them.

William's moving to another rayon has caused various reactions and interpretations in the small evangelical community as well. Apparently, for some members of the community William had a considerable entertainment value in a sense. One of the ladies bluntly announced that "it is very boring without William, we were already used to

him, [now] it's boring", although she still continues to visit the services quite regularly. Then again, some ladies seem to come to the meetings very rarely now that William is gone – a tendency that is commented upon by more zealous churchgoers. There are also some evangelicals who claim that William's leaving has not affected church life at all but only caused outsiders to gossip and say that there would be no more services. According to one interesting insider interpretation, William left because he felt that the local people were only taking advantage of him and he was disappointed in how few people actually came to God. During our interview William indeed made some remarks showing regret that "only very few" people are willing to believe and accept Jesus and that people who come to seek help to quit drinking for example are rather hoping to find "a tablet or a hypnotiser", that is, some sort of external and material remedies for their problems. Pastor Andrey, however, was much more enthusiastic in evaluating the success of their mission work. Considering their accomplishments over 9 years, he not only counted some 20 people "truly touched by God"²² but said they were only "the tip of the iceberg" as

Very many have had the opportunity to hear the alternative possibilities, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in a language comprehensible²³ to them. [...] Seeds were sown in their hearts and when these will grow, perhaps in five years...²⁴

That is, according to the pastor's understanding, all those people who have somehow been in contact with the missionaries are possible converts as God might already be working in their hearts, even if the people do not show special interest in the gospel, or even flatly reject it.

Following the group members' somewhat varied levels of commitment to the congregation, the elaboration with which they discuss William's role somewhat differs too. Nevertheless, although not having been directly active in the quotidian life of the congregation, William is unanimously ascribed with the credit of starting the church. In contrast to outsiders, who typically only mention the American(s) as initiator of the congregation, the members do refer to Andrey's and Semyon's roles as well. Nevertheless, William is certainly attributed a particular position as specially sent by God to spread the gospel among the people of Komi.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is possible to detect two distinct, though in some respects interweaved ways in which the Komi village as environment is depicted in William's narratives. On the one hand, Komiland is pictured in terms of an 'at the end of the earth' discourse – a hardly accessible northern periphery with many needs and deprivations. Being such a remote and 'primitive' place, it is perceived as an almost ideal field for mission work. The idea of missionising 'at the end of the earth' is cosmologically significant in evangelical understanding because the necessary precondition for the Second Coming of Christ is that the Word of God has been heard in every corner of the world²⁵ (see Vallikivi 2011: 99ff.). Laur Vallikivi has observed that a considerable part of the Ukrainian missionaries' narratives about their mission trips in the North consists of accounts of overcoming difficulties and dangers in conquering the 'world's edge', rather than descriptions of witnessing

and conversion (2011: 103–105). A similar tendency to emphasise encountered hardships in a sort of uncivilised environment is also present in William's and his fellow-missionaries' narratives. Over the years, several American evangelicals have visited William to observe the progress of his mission work. For them too, coming to Komi and visiting the remote villages to hand out Bibles or other religious literature and overcoming certain (mainly physical) inconveniences in the course thereof seems to offer an opportunity to strengthen their own evangelical identity and to experience it in a more intense way than is usual in daily life. On the other hand, this 'wilderness' of Komi villages is seen by William as somehow more authentic or genuine as compared to the more developed West or bigger towns in the same region. According to this view, village people, even if unwilling to accept the gospel, are still more open-hearted and kind when compared to hard-boiled urban-dwellers. From this perspective William's reflections have a more personal character as he draws many parallels with the 1950s American milieu in which he grew up. For William the remote village environment thus offers an opportunity to actualise and strengthen his own evangelical faith and identity.

The missionaries in Don have had moderate direct success in evangelising. Yet the group has received a disproportional amount of attention²⁶ in the traditionally Orthodox environment primarily because of the American missionary, who has determined the group's image for the wider public. There are specific local discourses of which William became an object regardless of his particular person.

Non-Orthodox believers are commonly regarded as unwanted in Komi villages. Because people can hardly distinguish between different denominations and mainly just characterise them as new and alien, the presence of an American missionary epitomises this perceived foreignness. William is apprehended as a threat to the (imagined) consistent collective identity. As such, William's presence functions to activate the Orthodox identity – an aspect of the overall self-perception that might not be salient for most villagers in the course of the everyday, but emerges as a reaction to the critical Other. Then again there are voices that point out that the social welfare work William carries out is much needed in the villages and thus his presence is seen as acceptable. The source of conflict there is a certain ideological-spiritual clash as William has a very specific agenda to change something, not only materially as according to his evaluation the locals do not have real faith.

The evangelicals themselves, too, emphasise William's role in starting their church and initiating the active sharing of the gospel in the rayon. William's arrival in their home district is seen as a sign of God's care for the people there. Through the human actor, William, God is working to show the way to salvation. Although any elaborated communication between William and the villagers can only occur through a translator, according to the evangelicals observing his looks and behaviour should suffice to demonstrate his message. William is taken to be a moral role model not only for the congregation members but to all others too.

As I have tried to show, there is heterogeneity within both, Orthodox and evangelical, parties. Yet certain dominating discourses concerning William tend to come forth. It seems to me that William as a person has lost any real individuality or personality, and carries a certain symbolic meaning for different 'interest groups'; competing discourses have assigned him specific roles to support their particular claims. While the evangelicals interpret William's dramatic (and yet, typical in the evangelical tradition)

conversion story and his arrival in Komiland as evidence of the Holy Spirit working in his heart and God's care for the Komi people, for sceptical outsiders the American signifies the alien nature of the evangelical faith and its connections with foreign agents.

NOTES

1 This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence, CECT) and the Estonian Research Council (grant no. 8335).

2 Both the rayon and its centre are called Kulömdin. The rayon's territory is 26,200 km² and there are about 27,000 inhabitants.

3 As a result of the Stalinist repressions in the 1940s a considerable number of German Lutherans were deported to Komi territory. However, their (underground) congregations were rather exclusively for ethnic Germans, services and prayer meetings were held in German and as a rule, and they did not engage in proselytising. (FM; also cf. Filatov 2005: 189)

4 While the indigenous Komis constitute about 25 per cent of the republic's overall population, they are a majority in both the Kulömdin Rayon and in the village of Don. However, the missionaries have not paid any specific attention to the ethnic background of the local people.

5 William and other missionaries, publicly known, are identified in the article by real names; all others have been given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms given will indicate the informants' sex, but I will not give their respective age as due to the smallness of the Don congregation it would make the identification of specific people very easy.

6 Yemva is a town of about 14,000, located some 300 km from Kulömdin.

7 All quotations here and below are from interviews conducted during fieldwork in the Kulömdin Rayon between 2006 and 2012 (see FM).

8 Here and elsewhere William's speech with colloquialisms etc. is left unchanged. All other quotations are translated from Russian.

9 William receives donations made under the name of William Wood Missions to Russia to support his work in Komi; see the mission's web page (William Wood Missions to Russia).

10 Certainly neither the ROC generally nor local priests approve of such practices. Nevertheless, the ROC tends to be more accommodating of vernacular ideas and rituals.

11 Supposedly, the priest was quite willing to cooperate with the evangelicals until Bishop Pitirim, well known for his anti-Protestant attitude, interdicted against this kind of relationship. This seems to be in accord with Mark R. Elliott's (2003: 36, 45, 48) estimation that friendly relations between the Orthodox and evangelical churches are most likely to occur at a local level, as long as the higher Orthodox clerics do not ban such affiliations.

12 The sermons are held in Russian but Andrey has also shown interest in learning the Komi language. Most of the congregation members are Komi and use their native language in daily interactions, but all of them are bilingual.

13 Nevertheless, the number is not so small when considered that during our occasional visits to the regular Sunday services at the Orthodox church in Kulömdin about 40–80 church-goers attended.

14 Nondenominational Christian churches and congregations are historically Protestant but officially do not belong to any specific denomination (see Prothero 2007 for the historical developing of nondenominationalism in the United States). The Don congregation members usually refer to themselves as simply Christians or evangelical Christians and while they agree that there are different possible forms of worship, emphasis of the importance of individual conversion and mission activities places them in the evangelical tradition.

15 This is not a conceptual decision as in the case of the so-called Unregistered Baptists. Here the pastor simply found that going through the registration process would be too complicated,

while there would be no specific benefits to gain. Another important aspect is that it would only be possible to register under some already officially acknowledged Church and this does not fit with the nondenominational approach the Don evangelicals advocate.

16 Supposedly William has made some effort to learn Russian, but his knowledge of it is far too scarce to manage conversations. He has commented that he is too old to be able to learn a new language.

17 For example, the village is said to locate more than a half-day journey from the capital (see Kolobayev 2009) when in fact it is three hours by bus.

18 Stephen of Perm converted the Komi to Russian Orthodoxy at the end of the 14th century and became the first Bishop of Komi. Today, both the local ROC and indigenous evangelical Komi Church (see Leete, Koosa 2012: 181; Leete 2013) consider themselves to be descendants of St Stephen. The comparison made by Lidia seems perhaps somewhat ironic to a bystander as St Stephen missionised in the native language of the Komi while William speaks neither Komi nor Russian. However, Lidia's main point here is that like St Stephen, William promulgates the gospel in its genuine form.

19 In Russia, coding (a controversial technique in which the therapist convinces the patient that a code is inserted in the patient's brain after which consuming alcohol has serious physical effect and might even cause death) and hypnosis are popularly advertised as methods that help to quit drinking.

20 "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works." (James 2:18)

"Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" (Matthew 7:16)

21 Supposedly William's pension is above the average due to being a war veteran. It is hard for me to evaluate how well-to-do he was in the American context, but compared to the average Russian pensions William's income is certainly much more substantial. In addition to the donations from the believers in the United States, William has used his personal funds for the mission programs to a considerable extent.

22 Andrey regarded not only the community members who had explicitly repented, but also those who were going (or had previously been going) to services with a certain regularity to be "truly touched by God".

23 Here is an implicit criticism of the ROC, which the evangelicals reproach for conducting services in Old Church Slavonic, incomprehensible to most church-goers, and not making an effort to explain God's word in a way that is understandable to common people.

24 Here Andrey is probably referencing the parable of the sower in Mt. 13:1–9.

25 "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts of the Apostles 1:8)

26 For example, when asked about non-Orthodox religious groups in the district, people who identified themselves as Orthodox or non-believers not once referred to the Pentecostal missionary Aleksey mentioned in the previous section, even though he was based in the district centre and had arrived there three years earlier than William. Then again, the district centre might be seen as providing certain anonymity and the possibility to remain unnoticed specifically because it is a much bigger settlement than the Don village; in addition, although he had been away for some years, Aleksey was actually of local origin.

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork notes and recordings from 2006 to 2013. The material has been collected in the Kulömdin Rayon of the Republic of Komi by Art Leete and me; in 2006 Jaanika Jaanits and Kristi Tinkus also participated in the fieldwork.

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