

*Yurij Maximov*

## **Ñontemporary mission Russian Orthodox Church among muslims**

*The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few;  
Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest,  
that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.  
(Matthew 9:37-38)*

**Problems and perspectives of modern Orthodox mission on initial territory of Russian Orthodox Church.** A few tens of nations confessing Islam live in Russia. They are different peoples, with unlike mentality; various attitude to Islam, to Orthodoxy; different period of Islam confession; unlike traditions. For example, it is a great difference between Tatar, Kazakh and Chechen at every points, say nothing of different currents that this nations profess: Sunnah, Shia, Sufi.

Problem is as well that some eparchies are situated on the territory of neogenic muslim states, which have, sometimes, hostile attitude to the Christians and Christian mission, that of cause forced the Church make alterations in its policy in this regions. The present government of Russian Federation aims for strengthening of national traditions, on this evidence active mission of the Orthodox Church can be considered by officials and politics as destabilizing factor. Sometimes the mission becomes complicated by race-hatred – Orthodoxy often identified only with Russian people, as since many blame Russia in all problems of past and present then they at the same time dissociate from Orthodoxy.

However, despite of all these difficulties, by virtue of a number of reasons the present period in Russia and nearby states is a time of large opportunities for confession of Christianity to mahommedians. And though, at the expense of migrations and resettlements of natiois in the past century, large muslim communities exist almost in all eparchies of the Russian Orthodox Church. We shall consider situation, perspectives and problems of Orthodox mission on four, most typical examples - Central Asian, Kazakhstan, Stavropol and Kazan eparchies.

**Tashkent and Central Asian eparchy.** The head – archbishop Vladimir. The eparchy embraces a few independent islamic states - Uzbekistan, Kirghisstan, Turkmenistan and Tadjikistan enters.

Activity of the Orthodox sermon in given eparchy is characterized by the following words of the archbishop: “the hopes for wide success of Christian mission in the midst of Moslems concern to the category of groundless dreaming. And we know the name of the main “dreamer”: it is the satan”. Certainly, it is not meaningful to speak about any mission under such relation. Some cases known when natives which ask to be christened was refused by orthodox priests.

Meanwhile the mission of Baptists, Pentecosts and Korean Christian communities is relatively successful in Uzbekistan. At the present time more than 200 Christian churches exist here.

In conditions of passivity of Orthodoxy the population of northern regions of Kirghizia accepts Protestantism even more actively, so, that the chairman of State committee of Kirghizia on religions Emil Kaltagaev considered possible establish “christianization of the given regions”. The Kirghiz have accepted Islam rather recently, 70 years of the Soviet authority have weakened traditions even stronger, so now Kirghiz youth is strongly attracted by Christian values and Islam for many from them is alien. In this conditions the absence of sanguineous Orthodox mission on the Kirghiz land is especially sad.

As to Turkmenistan and Tadjikistan, it is necessary to note, that the attitude of state leaders and officials to Christian mission in these countries is more negative and attempts of protestant missionaries stumble across serious difficulties, so their success in these regions is insignificant. For example, the only registered religious community (besides muslims) in Turkmenistan is the Russian

Orthodox Church. Sometimes here even occur blow-outs of Islamic extremism. For example, an explosive device was laid under an Orthodox temple last winter in Tadjikistan, fortunately nobody suffered from explosion. However this is meanwhile isolated instances that is scorched by most of the people.

Absence of sanguineous sermon from our Church is especially sad, while conditions for Orthodox mission among the peoples of Middle Asia presently are more than favorable. Firstly, the Orthodox Church historically is held authority and respect among these peoples, whereas foreign Protestant missionaries are met with alertness. Secondly, Russia keeps the influence in region and, if desired, could ensure safety of the Church.

Nevertheless, conversions from Islam occur, and they are not single. But these occur wholly on converts own, which sometimes come in Church with the receipts from natives and neighbors, that those do not object to their christening. Totally, number of so people: Tadjiks, Uzbeks, Kirghiz and Turkmen, which on themselves convert from Islam in Orthodoxy, makes up some hundreds and does not exceed two thousand.

**Almaata's and Kazakhstan eparchy.** The head is archbishop Alexei. Eparchy embraces territory of independent Mohamedian state of Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan differ from the other post-Soviet states by low share of aboriginal nation. Even after migration of Russian population in the beginning 1990-th, Kazakhs make up only about 55% of total population, moreover in half of areas they are ethnic-confessional minority.

The Kazakhs have accepted Islam only about two hundred years ago, and the most part of them especial in flat country, concern to it with indifference, vestiges of heathenism are still strong. Therefore Protestant missions, as well as in the above mentioned states, have here some success. The activity of Rome-Catholic church is observed in this country in last years. Since 1991 works apostolic administration of Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Vatican has diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan since 1994.

Muslim clergy repeatedly outspoke concernment by Christian missionaries success. In 1994 the management of Kazakhstan muftiate had distributed the open letter, in which was expressed the concern by renunciation of youth "from the religion of ancestors" and it was offered legislatively "to forbid for the Kazakhs to convert in other religions". Fortunately, this request was not adopted by officials.

As against archbishop Vladimir, archbishop Alexei repeatedly spoke about necessity of the mission among Kazakhs and gave corresponding directives to clergy and congregation. The eparchy organized and regularly conducts radio- and telecast at local and national broadcast. Parish newspapers are issued. Monthly missionary magazine "Light of the Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan" is published (circulation 3 500 copies).

Despite of these efforts, the quantity of converts is not great and also does not exceed several hundreds. Though there were also striking instance, so, for example, some years ago well-known muslim theologian Ak-Beket, the author of the book "The New message of Allah to the world", adopted Christianity.

Recently group of the orthodox Kazakhs has addressed a letter in the eparchy administration, in which the request to create Kazakh Missioner Orthodox Center aimed to coordinate efforts on translation New Testament and basic prayer on the Kazakh language is stated. There was asked also about possibility of a service in the Kazakh language in a special temple or in one of temples of the city.

The sermon of the Orthodoxy on the Kazakh ground has good perspectives and we hope, that the Lord will help to confess the truth of the Gospel to all who are ready conceive it.

**Stavropol eparchy.** The head – metropolitan Gedeon. The eparchy includes some regions of Russian Federation with mainly mohammedian population - Stavropol Territory, Kabardino-Balkaria republic, Dagestan, Nord Ossetia, Chechnya and Ingushetia. As a matter of fact, the eparchy is located at the front and pre-front zone, and service here often is confessing - for last five years by mohammedians were killed three clergy of: two priests were martyred in the Chechen captivity (fathers Anatoli Chistousov and Petr Suhonosov), another – father Igor Rogosin was killed in Kabardino-Balkariya.

Though the eparchy is situated in the most restless territories of Russia, the mission here organized in the best way, active work with mohammedian population is carried out here. Conversions from Islam in Christianity occur almost every week. Due to his peacemaking initiatives, metropolitan Gedeon has deserved respect and authority among official persons and simple muslims of Northern Caucasus, and this often contributes conversions. Some priests in the eparchy are former muslims: one of them – Chechen, one more – son of mufti etc. Many students from Nord Ossetia born in Islam but accepted Christianity learn in the Stavropol Seminary and prepare to serve on their motherland. The instances of conversion from Islam to Christianity are known in Chechnya, Cherkesia, Balkariya and other places of Northern Caucasus are known.

So we may praying to wish forces and God help for farther Gedeon and clergy in their peaceful works on sermon of the peoples of Caucasus.

**Kazan eparchy.** The head – metropolitan Anastasi. The eparchy is located on the territory of Tatarstan which is one of the region of Russian Federation.

Tatars - one of the most ancient mohammedian nations on the territory of Russia. Their ancestors have accepted Islam 1000 years back. Apart, they have been coexisting with Russian at longest – more than 450 years after a capturing of Kazan by the king Ivan the Terrible. During this time numerous attempts to christen this people occur that has resulted in formation of the separate nationality – Kryashen (christen Tatars, which were discussed below). All this has leave especial print on mentality of the tatar people, and on their attitude to Islam and Orthodoxy.

Unfortunately, mission among muslims in the eparchy is not carried out because of the appropriate position of the metropolitan. Though the preconditions for this purpose are - there are traditions of pre-revolutionary mission with its translations, there is a favorable attitude to Orthodoxy among majority of the population, there are tatar-priests (10 men) in clergy of the eparchy, there are miraculous signs, that are witnessed by nonchristians too. The instances of conversions occur basically under former muslims own, and their quantity is not much more than in Central Asian eparchy.

At the same time it is necessary to note work of metropolitan Anastasi on revival kryashen nation (they are tatars, christen before revolution). Yesterday it was possible to speak about danger of Kryashens as the separate nation disappearance. The sixteen years' assimilation by large tatar nation have an effect on mentality of these people which have been deprived they own literature, self-confident and official status.

By blessing of the metropolitan. 12 years ago was organized small Kryashen's community at Petropavlovski cathedral of Kazan held by born Kryashen, priest Pavel Pavlov. So, due to the orthodox faith, Kryashens find they national founds.

Some years ago father Pavel together with Kryashen's community received an own temple in the name of the Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God, where divine service is held on kryashen language. Just he, by blessing of metropolitan Anastasi, organized and headed a group on translation of those books of the Holy Wright, which were not translated in kryashen language before revolution. The father Pavel united the community numbering now more than two hundreds regular parishioner – native Kazan Kryashen. This parish is occupied with publishing and translating activity. Annually in the holiday of

the Saint Iosaf Belgorodsky, especially respected by Kazan Kryashens, bishop Anastasi makes the Divine Liturgy on kryashen language.

Now this community in Kazan has become the spiritual center for all Kryashens of Volga region. Here come Kryashens from various villages, cities of Tatarstan, and from other republics - Bashkortostan, Udmurtiyas, Chuvashiya. They come to confide about own problems, to get literature on native language. Literature famine occur. It is issued in small circulations due to slender means of the Kazan community and is bought up very quickly. The Greek monastery Paraklit help a few times, issuing the Gospel, Apostel and Psalter on kryashen language at its own charge.

For last 10 years in Kazan eparchy have been organized already seven kryashen's parishes. Will hope, that this small, but courageous orthodox people with God help will be able to get over all difficulties on the way of finding national and religious self-consciousness. In the long run, the example of Kryashens certainly can exemplify for muslim tatars.

**In European Russia** conversions from Islam take place even more often because of partial assimilation, so total number of christen for lust years is a few thousands, and if protestant and Rome-catholic are included it is a few tenses of thousand. Here in Moscow I met Kirgises which convert from Baptism to Orthodoxy. And this is also one more field for the Orthodox mission.

Activity of Islam propagandists in Russia more and more is pointed out by the Church. Theological works on comparative analyze of Christianity and Islam. There is a site "Orthodoxy and Islam" in the Internet (part on English language: <http://www.um-islam.nm.ru/indexeng.htm>). But the deficit of missionaries, peoples which purposeful ring for the Church between muslims occur.

*Translated by Ivan Ognjoff.*

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## **Upwards Home**

**email: [umaximov@newmail.ru](mailto:umaximov@newmail.ru)**