Religion and Identity in Buryatia: Competition between Orthodoxy and Buddhism in Imperial Russia

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Abstract

The paper discusses political importance of religious identity in the context of competition between Orthodoxy and Buddhism in the Buryat spiritual space. Christianization of Buryats, who are one of the biggest Siberian indigenous ethnic groups, as well as other non-Russians in the remote regions of Russia, seemed a necessary tool for strengthening the borders of the Empire under threat from Qing China. While Christianization of Pre-Baikal (Western) Buryat-shamanists was quite successful at least formally, the Trans-Baikal Buryats remained largely steadfast Buddhists. Considering this fact, the secular authorities built relationships with the Buddhist clergy in the framework of the existed legal regulations. However, the relation of the Orthodoxy towards Buddhism was irreconcilable overall the imperial history. The situation worsened at the end of the XIX century, when in connection with the Buryat ethnornational movements Buddhism began to spread among Western Buryats causing serious trouble to the Irkutsk Orthodox eparchy. Meanwhile, in addition to big adaptive ability, institutionalized Buddhism in Russia developed all-Buryat adoration and devotion to the Tsar through appropriate preaching among believers thus promoting and strengthening both its own positions and Russian identity of the Buryats.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, Buddhism, religious identity, Buryats, Russian Empire, spiritual space.
Introduction
Among the numerous social identities, religious identity takes one of the most important places because of its consolidation and mobilization potential. Therefore, throughout the history of mastering Siberia baptism of inorodets (natives, non-Christians. – D.A.) was understood as an important tool for strengthening positions of the Russian state and the communion of non-Russians to the progressive values: “The concept of world history (universal chronology) and the unqualified support for the “moderns” over the “ancient” were recent imports from Germany, both crucial to Russia’s state – sponsored ‘growing-up’ project. <…> the inozemtsy (literally: foreigners, here: natives. – D.A.) were not only ‘from a different land’ but also from a different time. Infants must be baptized and taught how to write” [1]. Until the first decades of the XIX century Buddhism seemed a backward pagan cult and was considered similarly as various shamanic beliefs of the Buryats, Evenks, Yakuts, and Chukchi. The Christianization of the adherents of different faiths including shamanists and Buddhists was a strategic objective aimed at the education of Russian identity and patriotism. Ultimately, it was a question of Russification, and a tool for this was a wide spread of Orthodoxy and Russian language: “Hitherto for one non-Russian we haven’t even two Russians, and for one unorthodox we can hardly count two Orthodox <…> territorial remoteness, in which unorthodox settlements are still hitherto situated from the center of Russian life, not only naturally prevented the merger of non-Russians with the main population of the state but brings to the fact that this population almost doesn’t know the neighboring non-Russians” [2]. And allowing Buddhists to practice their religion and including Buddhism into the number of the “recognized tolerant” beliefs resulted from the objectives of strategic nature both within the state and in the international aspect. On the one hand, institutionalized Buddhism promoted better control over Buryats and eliminated the activities of foreign clergy who potentially could bring political and ideological damage to Russia. On the other hand, Russian Buddhists who were allowed to profess their religion clearly showed how tolerant the Orthodox Empire was in relation to the unorthodox; this mattered in the terms of the widening Russian interests in Central Asia. Simultaneously, the Orthodox representations about Buddhism as something alien and heterogeneous remained unshaken.

Christianization as a path to Russian identity
In other words, tolerance of the Russian authorities to Buddhism, in the most general sense, is a fact, but it still did not mean that Buddhism was treated with understanding and respect. While the relations between the state and Buddhist community were regulated by certain rules that got the most complete form in the ‘Regulations on the Lamaist clergy in Eastern Siberia’ (1853), the Orthodox Church throughout the history of the struggle for spiritual space in the region remained intransigent towards Buddhism and “to the end of the XIX century, this opposition has extremely escalated” [3]. Failures in the baptizing policy were explained by the activities of the Buddhist clergy that enjoyed unlimited authority and influence among the Buryat population: ‘Lamas (lama is a monk in Tibetan Buddhism, – D.A.) strongly frighten Buryats in making the Christian faith’, ‘Buryats for the most part very firmly hold their superstitions but not because of being convinced of their truth as they do not know the truths of their faith, but because they believe these superstitions are the legal faith of Mongols, and most of all because they are afraid of the lamas more than their authorities who act unanimously with the lamas. Lamas are so numerous and they are touring through the ulus (villages) so often that the aboriginals are in perfect enslavement at the lamas’ [4].
Meanwhile, the real root was of course the fact that the Orthodox clergy that persistently named Buddhism the paganism, for a long time did not want to understand the meaning of the Buddhist faith and reveal the reasons why Buddhist influence was expanding both on the long ago buddhicized eastern Buryats and western Buryats-shamanists who were steadily turning to Buddhism during the XIX century. This process was marked with displeasure in the reports of the Irkutsk eparchy to the Holy Synod. It was as early as in 1841 when Irkutsk archbishop Nil wrote: “Among Alarsky and Balaganskii Buryats (western Buryats) there are many Christians. The number of these and general disposition of the tribes to spiritual enlightenment is increasing from year to year because the (Orthodox) clergy has the possibility to affect them with greater convenience than others <...>. The dominant belief among them is Shamanism and its followers are much closer to Christianity then Buddhists. Unfortunately, the lamas from Transbaikalia began to sneak to them. And having been supported by the clan heads Taishas that are the everlasting enemies of Christianity – they are changing in the spirit of the tribes considerably” [5].

Identification and consolidating role of Buddhism has become very noticeable from the end of the XIX century since the formation of the Buryat national movement. At the same time the Orthodox Church also intensified efforts to strengthen its positions among Buryats. In particular, this was marked with the cases of forcible baptism, examples of which were numerous although only a few were documented in the petitions to the Irkutsk Governor-General. It is noteworthy that the complaints often mentioned the Buddhist religion, which was the main obstacle to the adoption of Orthodoxy: “they announced to me that I was to adopt Orthodoxy. As I confess the Buddhist religion (Lamaism), I did not want to neglect it. Seeing the insistence, I was forced to hide and really went into the taiga having left behind my pregnant wife” who was baptized forcibly in the church where she was pulled unconscious after beating [6].

In the 1890es, forcible baptism resulted from official zeal to celebrate through the growing number of baptized (whatever methods were used) a significant event – a visit paid to the Buryat territories by the crown prince Nicholas in 1891. Perpetrators of forcible baptism argued that “all these were done upon wish and order of the Sovereign-Heir and therefore the complaints <...> will not have any effect” [ibid.].

At the same time, from the point of view of those who carried out the task of baptism, the converted aboriginals did not become real Christians as “most of them knew Christianity only by the name” [7]. Moreover, those Buryats who were empowered with governmental authority adopted baptism for career reasons remaining in religious sense either Buddhists or shamanists. In his report to the Synod the Irkutsk bishop in details explains that both the former Tunka Taisha and his son who became Taisha after his father received state awards for converting Buryats into Orthodoxy. However, both Taishas “hitherto not only by inner convince but also in outer appearance are the idolaters. When visiting his house consisting of two large rooms I saw in the anteroom the icon of St. Nicholas but in the second that is the main room saw that the whole front wall was laden with sculptured and painted idols and beautiful, some of which are depicted in exactly that form, in which the evil spirits are drown. <...> Old Taisha secretly feels even hostile feeling towards Christianity”. When proposed to get rid of the “idols” immediately by means of giving them to one of his sons who became a lama, a former Taisha “resolutely refused <...> and answered that he would never part with his idols-patrons” [ibid., l. 13-14].

Suspicion towards alien religion forced the defenders of Orthodoxy to look for subversive elements in Buddhism. Of course, to do this it was necessary to learn in some degree the
basics of doctrine that was undertaken by both the priests of the diocese and the Orthodox missionaries. Looking for hostile sense implied not only the activities of the Buddhist clergy but also the soteriological sense of Buddhism. It is noteworthy that even those Christians who lived near Buryats for a long time and watched their practical life making efforts to understand the Buddhist culture also were looking for accusatory malicious content of the Buddhist sermons and prayers. For example, the Irkutsk priest Innokenty Podgornbusky known for his exceptional knowledge of Buryats and the author of numerous works on Buddhism and shamanism harshly criticized the prayers composed by Hambo Lama Gomboev for the longevity and prosperity of the Romanovs’ dynasty. In 1891, Podgornbusky presented his arguments in the “Irkutsk Eparchial Gazette” concerning the question whether the head of the Buryat Buddhists expressed sincere religious feelings and Russian patriotism: “Buddhists are still praying for what in their doctrine is the highest good, i.e. they are praying for the better reincarnation that would put them on the path to Nirvana, that is non-existence or, at least, unconscious being and for achievement of proper Nirvana. Dumpil Gomboevich, on the contrary, is praying with that aim the Supreme God Buddha and the Almighty God, the giver of immortality, gave the Sovereign Emperor and Heir-Tsarevich a longstanding life, i.e., he is praying exactly for the aim that from the Buddhist point of view is considered the greatest misfortune. Thus, this brings to one of two conclusions: either the author of prayer wishes the greatest misfortune to the Emperor and Heir-Tsarevich under the guise of happiness or denies most basic teachings of Buddhism for something else that consciously is his personal life, and asks the Buddha to give him what The Buddha didn’t allow to ask for. <…> To wish Emperor the Nirvana is of course inconvenient and indecent. Meanwhile, it is necessary because of certain goals to attract attention to the Hambo lama and to the entire corporation of lamas as patriots. And the head of the Buryat Buddhism who is obliged to take care of its integrity is the first who sacrifices his religion to some selfish calculations” [8].

It is remarkable that such considering of Buddhist soteriology in relation to the realities of cultural interaction has angered even the newspaper-journal on literature and politics ‘Citizen’ that was famous for its extreme monarchism. In the publication ‘About the rudeness and tactlessness of the Eparchial Gazette’, Podgornbusky’s speech was called the most daring and the most flagrant manifestation of “on the one hand, ignorance and, on the other hand, irrational intolerance passing all limits”. The ‘Citizen’ reinforces its point of view with the evidence of Buryats’ loyalty. In modern terms, it was about the undoubted Russian identity of the Buryat Buddhists expressed in adoration and deification of the royal persons by the broad masses of Buryats that was proved in particular by the fact that during the Heir Nicholas’ journey by the Buryat territories “where for many days He was surrounded by the crowds of Buddhists”, the Buryats were His coachmen and he was guarded by the Buryats-riders and “hundreds of Buryats rushed to the Tsarevich’s carriage and not daring to touch Him took sand from the wheels and carried away kissing as a holy thing. <…> And these Buddhists or Buryats were praying for the safe journey of the Heir to the Russian throne and sincerity of their prayers was rather confirmed by the sincerity of all manifestations of not only order, not only loyalty but also adoration” [ibid., l. 206-208].

The undeniable Russian identity of the Buryats is also proved by the desire and tempos how they mastered the Russian language as well as execution of the most important political function on protecting imperial borders that was fulfilled by the Buryats-Cossacks. The Ts. Zhamtsarano’s Archive contains abstracts from the article in the St. Petersburg’s ‘Official Gazette’ for 1892, which shows a general (although certainly incomplete) picture of how the Buddhist religion contributed to the education of Russian patriotism among Buryats. Having
made a preliminary conclusion that the “militant Buddhism does not exist among our lamas and encouraging it at public expense is even less”, the ‘Official Gazette’ names the notable and active russification of Buryats as “unsophisticated and naturally rational” that makes the Buryats “not inert and anti-cultural mass but the conductors of Russian influence in Central Asia, unshakably loyal servants of the deified by them White Tsar, and exemplary performers of civic duties”. As for relations between Buddhism and Orthodoxy, the ‘Official Gazette’ drawn a quite positive picture having written that the Buryat Buddhist “are people of unusual tolerance”, “the missionary churches in Eastern Siberia are supported by Buryat pagans who attend Orthodox churches and learn Christian prayers”. When comparing Buryats with other followers of Buddhism in Russia, the Kalmyks, the newspaper marked that the Buryats have reached a higher level of loyalty to the Russian state: “If we compare the conditions of the East Siberian Buddhists with those in which our European Kalmyks are, the latter will be in a much more favorable conditions. But the degree of russification among Kalmyks is much lower than this in the Baikal territories. Meanwhile, nothing is written about this though Kalmyks live in only three-day travel from Moscow” [ibid. l. 211].

If not approving but at least understanding the fact that the Buddhist religion does not harm the Russian identity of the Buryats (“You can see: they are more honest and loyal then thousands of the Orthodox only by name”) the Russian authorities still thought that the most effective and productive steps in this direction was russification through Christianization and Russian-speaking school education as well as restrictive measures in relation to Buddhism. This seemed so important that in response to the proposals that were put forward by the Amur governor-general A. Korf on ‘Facilitating spread of Christianity in Trans-Baikalia’, a special meeting was held in St. Petersburg held aimed to develop special legislative measures to restrict the activities of the Buddhist clergy and promote full implementation of primary education in Russian among Buryats (with indispensable teaching the Law of God). The level of representation at the meeting was high and showed how serious were the intentions of the central authorities: the Minister of State Property, the chief procurator of the Synod, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Amur Governor-General, the manager of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The taken decision was in line with the A. Korf’s proposals and included support for distribution of general education among Transbaikalian Buryats “as a measure that is most useful for rapprochement of Buryats with the Russian population. For this purpose it is highly desirable to recognize to open as many as possible public schools in the Trans-Baikal region”. Besides, Korf proposed to improve on the structure of missionaries and to arrange well the missionary churches. Also Korf proposed to change some conditions of religious rites because the existed ones prevented “the pagans to take holy baptism”.

**Interreligious understanding as a mutual rapprochement**

It is important to note that sane fighters against Buddhist influence understood that though Christian preaching and baptism policy were very important but this could not bring to the desired results. Success could be achieved only by means of the steps towards coming closer to the culture of the natives. And these steps were to be undertaken by the Orthodox preachers: “The servants of Christ when going to the pagans made every effort to educate them with the light of the Gospel teachings; but what could they do, especially lacking knowledge about language, beliefs and way of life of the inorodets? Some of the fathers-missionaries at the age of 30 and 40 began to study languages. However, having no manuals and research studies they were guided only by their personal experience and comprehension; they unwittingly made up one-sided and often completely perverse ideas about both separate
words and integer expressions and this was so sad that the aforementioned one-sidedness was to relate not to everyday objects but namely the notions relating to metaphysical and transcendental concepts. From time immemorial and mainly, two outstanding by their number ethnic groups attracted the attention of pastors of our Church; in general, we call these ethnic groups Tatar, professing Islam, and Mongolian, devoted to the faith of the Buddha; and among both peoples our activities at first seemed quite the same” [9].

Leaving aside the arguments of the outstanding orientalist about the need to struggle against Buddhism (“If the idea of the benefits and the need to pay the first activity of the newly discovered Missionary Institute to fight Buddhism among Mongolian generations won sympathy, then <...> what exactly should be the program of this institute, what shall its activities consist of and what should be its character for achieving the greatest success in the work?"), let us pay attention to the strategic plan aimed, first, at mastering the culture of aliens, and then, second, the gradual penetration into their minds the idea of superiority of Christianity over Buddhism. Having no knowledge of other religion it is impossible to resist such, for example, judgment expressed by the head of the Kuytinski inorodets department Tsyaryan Tuhaev in response to the accusation that despite a high official position he did not accept Orthodoxy: “because my religion teaches to love our neighbor, to do good, to tell the truth, not to slander and so on” [10].

Thus, regardless the ultimate purposes, Alexei Pozdneev encourages the students of the Missionary Institute to master Buryat culture and to achieve mutual understanding and trust between Christians and Buddhists. To do this, A. Pozdneev, a prominent researcher of Buddhism and Mongolian written monuments, advised the young missionaries to make every effort to become high professionals possessing in-depth knowledge that would help to convince non-Christians to reject their beliefs. The Missionary Institute had to respond to such demands, namely “putting his aim as training those who will spread the Gospel teaching among the inorodets who speak Mongolian, the Missionary Institute should give its students the opportunity <...> to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge of the language of inorodets”. Incidentally, as early as in 1840 the Irkutsk Archbishop Nil in the letter sent to the Synod marked the importance of a good knowledge of the language, traditions and way of life of the Buryats.

This was not peculiar to the Orthodox missionaries while the English missionaries around city of Selenginsk “attract the respectful attention of the people, are well aware of the language and customs of the Mongols, possess Mongolian printing press, have at hand men for execution of instructions, maintain schools for Buryat children and supply them; being prosperous they are in state to give shelter to the poor and to help”.

As for Buddhism, “the subject of their future struggles”, to explain “the failure of its doctrine”, Alexei Pozdneev advised to study not Buddhism in general but specifically that its form, which was common among the Buryats. In other words, the scholar proposed to study Buryat religiosity considering the realities of the Buryat folk Buddhism: “Such a statement may seem strange in view how numerous the Buddhism studies are, produced by the British, French and finally Russian scholars, in the works written by Professors Vasiliev, Minaev and others. <. ...> Buddhism studied by them is actually Sakyamunism and Mahayana, i.e. Buddhism manifesting in the forms in which, according to the beliefs of Buddhists, it came out the mouth of the Buddha Sakyamuni and the first interpreters of his doctrines. <...> In the confession of our natives we meet another Buddhism – Buddhism that was reformed by Tsongkhapa and which is actually called Lamaism. The latter Buddhism has been studied neither in Russian, nor in European literature; whereas it certainly must make a separate
subject of study, for Buddha’s and Tsongkhapa’s teachings came not only from different but even opposing bases. That is why their doctrines were established on an entirely different basis and in the course of their development they came to the result that the ultimate goals of one doctrine are almost entirely ignored by the other” [9]. The last consideration has an important sense in the context of our study. Recognizing a really existing difference of the Buryat Buddhist cultural complex from the other ones, mainly in the field of rituals, Alexei Pozdneev points to the need not only to get acquainted with the dogmatic foundations but also with the entire set of specific religious beliefs and practices that form the ethnic cosmology and, most importantly, the political conception on world order.

A. Pozdneev’s appeals the study the religious culture of others he understood as rapprochement between ethnocultural communities and further, he suggested, religious homogenization, by which he meant Orthodoxy – the stronghold of Russian identity.

Orthodoxy as the only state religion of the Russian Empire in every way sought to narrow social base of Buddhism by increasing the number of baptized Buryats. The failure of this activity resulted from a number of reasons: firstly, the missionaries did not speak the Buryat language and therefore had to resort to translators who were ordinary people who could not convey “the most original truths of faith”. To overcome this difficulty in communication between missionaries and Buryats, the Irkutsk bishop Eusebius offered to select seven or eight young people who received higher or secondary education in the seminary, as well as children of the baptized Buryats, in order they get full missionary and university education in the Mongolian language. Secondly, the missionaries could not convincingly present the advantages of Christian soteriology in comparison with Buddhism, because they had no idea of the Buddhist path and Buddhist conceptual apparatus, and therefore were not been able to preach among the Buryat Buddhists in terms of their religion. Irkutsk bishop Parthenius appointed in 1860 immediately embarked on a difficult journey around the diocese including its remote parts. It was new that Parthenius not only inspected the missionary camps (incidentally, he was extremely dissatisfied with their work) and gathered information on the number of newly baptized but also tried to reveal how the Buryats treated Christianity and how the enemies of Christianity express their opposition as well as “to look for people, both Christians and non-Christians who could be helpful in the work of converting the Buryats to Christianity”. “For better control over natives” and for better contact with Buddhists, Parthenius invited a missionary archpriest Dorontev who was a Buryat and former Buddhist lama. The latter managed to make a missionary preaching successful: “he undertook several very big trips <...> in order to collect data about natives in relation to their disposition to Christianity <...>; in the course of one year he turned to Christ more than 50 people and collected some data useful for establishing new missions” [11].

Perseverance of the non-Christian natives, named in the Empire pagans and idolaters, in their attachment to Buddhism is largely determined by the emerging ethnocultural and ethnonational identity. Nikolai Tsyrempilov marks the reason why the Buryat Buddhist community was sustainable: “As a matter of fact, the Buryat ethnic identity actualized within the system of Buddhist monastic parishes while the tribal bodies of self management, in contrast, divided people by clan lines. Being a part of the empire, in which Orthodox Christianity occupied absolute dominant position, Buryats saw in Buddhism the most powerful core around which they could mobilize their ethnic identity” [12].

At the same time, in spite of the very painful process of formation and consolidation of the Buddhist community in times of restrictive laws, the institutionalized Buddhism in Buryatia always sought to show and prove its loyalty to the Empire and brought in its followers a sense
of loyalty to the monarchy and Russian state. Thus, the Buddhist religious identity of Buryats became inseparable from the Russian identity. At the same time one should take into consideration formerly existed and currently existing idea about cultural space, according to which the Orthodox Church is the religion of Russians while Buddhism is the religion of Buryats. Religion promotes strengthening ethnic identity and belonging to a group that provides not only the translation of traditions from generation to generation but also a sense of security on the personal level. It is worth considering that rapprochement of Buryats with the Russians (by means of Christianization, knowledge of Russian, European education, following Russian model in everyday life, for example, wearing European clothes) did not guarantee equality to Buryats. One example is very illustrative that was recorded in 1904 in the diaries of the orientalist Bazar Baradin who made an expedition to Transbaikalia on behalf of the Russian Committee (an organization on oriental studies created by the orientalists of different specialties). Together with his group equipped with a photo camera, in the hotel he faced the ‘concern’ of several Russian officers because “by our appearance we were not similar to ordinary Buryats <…> Also they were much surprised with the absence of kowtowing to them from our side as usually they used to expect from almost every Buryat they meet. <…> Of course, we would have no difficulty to calm them down, but we didn’t do this because of feeling of resentment that even such intelligent Russian people cannot look at Buryats slightly wider and nicer” [13].

At first sight, this episode that reflects the overall picture of the relation of ethnic and cultural majority to the minority in the Russian Empire is not directly related to the issue of religious identity. However, it explains the reasons for politicization of the Buddhist religion in the period of the Buryat revival at the end of the XIX century when the ethnonational leaders used Buryat cultural heritage in the aims of Buryat consolidation and education of ethnonational spirit.

Conclusion
The rapprochement between the Orthodox and Buddhist communities in Buryatia was taking place at the popular level for a long period of history and eventually led to the formation in Buryatia a peculiar religious syncretism. So different and distant from each other religions – Abrahamic and Dharmic – consistently coexist in the folk representations although mainly at the level of religious rites. However, there is a deeper world view connection. On the one hand, the Buryats are the most russified and for this reason culturally christianized non-Russian ethnic group in Siberia. On the other hand, the territorial cultural text consisting of interweaved traditions of Orthodoxy, Buddhism, shamanism and Old Belief is creating the regional identity that is the closest to the residents of Buryatia component of the Russian identity. It is important that in today’s Russia although the law specially marks Orthodoxy the principle of equality of religions is observed and this plays an important role in maintaining stability and interethnic peace. In Buryatia where majority of the population is nominally Orthodox, humanitarian and geographic image of the space is defined by the traditions of Buddhism and shamanism. The Orthodox Church reacts to this by rapid increase of its official status in Buryatia from the part of Irkutsk eparchy to Buryat and Ulan-Ude Metropolis. The common to both churches is performing along with the worldview function the most important social functions, among which invariably present support to the state and demonstration of loyalty to the authorities.
References

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