



# The Impact of Political and Cultural Trends on the Spread of Buddhism in Russia

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## Abstract

Buddhism in Russia was known as a traditional religion of several ethnic minorities from the 17th century A.D. and since then has been influenced by complex cultural and political processes. Not least, religion in Buddhist regions and interest in Buddhism among people from non-Buddhist backgrounds throughout history was heavily influenced, if not defined, by the state. This article examines how Buddhism is represented within the framework of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, and which trends in cultural and political life had the major influence that shaped its modern appearance. While territorial expansion and political agenda in the East had encouraged oriental studies and brought first research dedicated to the Buddhist teaching and culture, hardline anti-religious policy during the times of the Soviet Union led to suspension of Buddhism-related research and destruction of traditional Buddhist culture in the three Buddhist regions of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. For three decades now, the country is experiencing a period of religious revival, which involves not only traditional religions but a diversity of religious groups that historically have never existed within Russian borders.

**Keywords:** Buddhism in Russia, Culture, Politics

## **The Diverse Representations of Buddhism in Contemporary Russia**

Diverse forms of Buddhism in modern Russia can be divided into two groups: 1) the traditional form of organized religious life – mainly in the republics of Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia – which is centered in the monasteries, and 2) small communities belonging to different Buddhist schools, whose activities are mainly based in non-Buddhist areas of Russia.

Buddhism as one of the traditional religions has a long history in the country. It spread to Russia in the 16th-17th centuries A.D. from Mongolia through Kalmyk tribes that eventually settled in the northern Caspian region and in the area of present-day Buryatia (Burdo, 2004). In Russian Buddhist studies and other Buddhism-related literature, there is a reference to the decree of 1741, which is considered by many researchers to be the most important milestone in the history of Buddhism in Russia. In essence, the decree legitimized the Buddhist clergy, recognized their Russian citizenship and granted some privileges, which in essence can be interpreted as an indirect recognition of the Buddhist religion within Russian borders (Tsyrempilov, 2014).

In 1914, Tuva became a protectorate of Russia, which made it the third and the last region where Buddhism was professed by the majority of population. Thus, Buddhism in Russia is the traditional religion of three ethnic minorities – Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvans. All Buddhist organizations in these regions belong to Tibetan Buddhism, also widely known in Russia as Lamaism. Until the end of the XIX century, Buddhism remained solely the religion of these minorities. Russians began to develop interest for Buddhism in the late XIX century. The ground for the emergence of first Russian Buddhists was prepared by the growing scientific interest to the East in general and Buddhism in particular. This interest was partly initiated by the tasks of the Christian mission and the political interests of Russia in the East.

By 2018, 264 Buddhist organizations were included in the Russian state registry, while many communities continue to operate without a formal registration. Whereas originally only Tibetan Buddhism was practiced in the country, due to increasing cultural interaction all major schools became represented at present. To date Buddhist communities exist in major Russian cities, with their largest number located in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Tibetan Buddhism in its different manifestations was often examined and described in the works of Russian religious scholars, while the activities of Buddhist organizations belonging to other Buddhist schools have not yet attracted in-depth research due to their novelty and small presence. In particular, an attempt to conduct a research dedicated to Theravada Buddhism in Russia was undertaken by the author for the first time.

Segregation and lack of unity between the diverse communities became one of the indicative features of Buddhism in Russia. Agreement upon how Buddhism should be developed within the cultural space of the country has not been achieved even among the ethnic Buddhist leaders. There is no central organization that would regulate religious affairs in the three Buddhist republics, all of which belong to the same school of Tibetan Buddhism. Communities formed by new, non-ethnic Buddhists, as a rule, function autonomously and do not forge links with the traditional Sangha. The lack of cooperation and sometimes conflicts between local Buddhist leaders and their supporters, even within the same school, may be one of the main factors holding back the growth of Buddhism at present.

## **Buddhism and State throughout the Russian History**

Throughout history, the fate of Buddhism in Russia has been closely linked with the political interests of the state. In order to support its foreign policy in the East and ensure control over Transbaikalia region (inhabited by the Buryats), which entered the country in the XVII century, the Russian state provided significant support to the Buddhist Sangha on the basis of its administrative dependence from the central and provincial authorities.

Russian Buddhist studies as part of oriental studies emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Again, the need to study Buddhism was recognized in Russian science under the influence of geopolitical processes. At that time, scientific interest in Buddhism gave rise to first research expeditions, when orientalist traveled to Buddhist countries in order to collect research materials for the first time. Suspension of Buddhism-related research was also associated with the political processes in the USSR in the first half of the 20th century. In the late 20s, as a part of anti-religious communist policy, government authorities began to close and then destroy Buddhist temples, disrobe and arrest the lamas. By the time this campaign was completed in 1939-1940, most of the monasteries and temples of Buryatia and Kalmykia were destroyed. Only few of them remained as the buildings could be used for other purposes. The property of Buddhist temples was mostly destroyed, burned, or sent to museums. By the end of the 30s, Buddhist culture in Buryatia and Kalmykia officially ceased to exist. Revival of Buddhist studies in the USSR reoccurs in the second half of the 20th century, as anti-religious policy became less hardline.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is considered to be the beginning of genuine religious freedom and revival. It was surprising that the national revival of almost all Russian peoples occurred under religious banners, and not within the framework of secular ideologies. (Filatov, 2009). The Russian political ideology, emphasizing the unity of the Russian nation, should have predetermined religious uniformity, is it may seem.

However, the public was able to accept religious pluralism based on ethnic diversity, just as the government recognized the rights of ethnic minorities to profess their traditional faith. This in particular gave rise to a rapid revival of Buddhist culture in republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. Taking this development into account, the government adopted a specific model of cooperation between the state and religious institutions, designed primarily to legitimize the policy of the state and regulate ethnic tensions through interfaith dialogue. By its nature this model attempts to impose an unbreakable binding between ethnicity and religious affiliation (Curanović, 2014).

On the other hand, the connection between ethnicity and religious affiliation, which is often stressed by political and religious leaders, is becoming less rigid in real life. Religious scholars also agree that the spread over the past 30 years of new religious movements that are not associated with any Russian ethnic group is an essential phenomenon in the modern religious space. Nowadays many Buddhist communities, established by Russians from non-Buddhist cultural backgrounds, belonging to schools that historically never existed within Russian borders, provide ample evidence of that. Considering the modern state's ambition to take increasing control over religious life, it can be concluded that religion is growing in importance as a political tool.

## **Buddhism within the Framework of a Multi-Confessional State**

Russia is a multi-confessional state with different religions having unequal sphere of influence and distribution due to historical reasons. The Orthodox Christianity has an exclusive place in the history and life of modern society, and there is a growing influence of Islam, which is the second most common religion in the country. In their missionary work, both within the country and in the neighboring states of the Far East, Orthodox Russians met with almost all known religions including Buddhism, which they studied in order to comprehend the essence of their doctrine. Orthodox missionary priests were among the first to introduce Russian readers to Buddhism.

Since the 19th century, Orthodox authors were significantly influencing the perception of Buddhism within Russian society through a large number of works aimed at criticizing the Buddhist doctrine. Certain ideas about Buddhism were and still being repeated in order to reduce interest in Buddhism among Russian population. Main principles of Buddhism, as explained by Christian scholars, include: 1) the absence of a soul; 2) negative understanding of spiritual perfection as the destruction of the individual; 3) seeing the goal of spiritual cultivation — Nibbana — as merely extinction, the cessation of being; 4) denial of God and,

moreover, the idea of supramundane. Apparently, such description of Tibetan Buddhism, which was the only school represented in Russia until recently, was not credible. However, this point of view became widely accepted in science and remained dominant for a long time (Nesterkin, 2009).

Although Orthodox criticism towards Buddhism developed over time, the works of Orthodox authors on Buddhism are aimed at demonstrating the superiority of Christianity over non-Christian religions through criticism of Buddhism as an “alien” religion. The Orthodox authors understood Buddhist ideas by altering their original meaning and transferring Christian meanings on them instead. Buddhist terms were appropriated by orthodox-oriented authors to build a historic foundation, where Orthodoxy plays a vital and comprehensive role (Zhukov, Zhukova, Vlasova, 2013) With the development and wide spread of communication technology this criticism has been extended to cover the area of telecasting and Internet. A number of interviews with former Buddhists who returned to Orthodox faith can be seen as illustration. These articles may contain descriptions of certain Tibetan beliefs, figures and rituals, which most certainly will appear frightening to a common reader. For instance, in one of the interviews, a man recalled “human sacrifices” in Tibet, as well as the Chöd ritual, where the practitioner offers one’s body to be torn apart and eaten by demons.

Although in Russia there is no visible confrontation between Muslims and Buddhists, conflicts on religious grounds may arise as it was shown by several events. Thus, in 2016, a video of desecrating a Buddha statue in Kalmykia was published by a Muslim man; later, a group of enraged citizens found him and forced to ask for forgiveness in a humiliating manner. Spiritual leaders are struggling to mitigate such conflicts, as they are dangerous for Russia due to the possibility of causing a massive inter-ethnic confrontation. Maintaining peaceful coexistence within the multi-confessional space is one of the important concerns of the government. Thus, a tendency to engage in dialogue to promote peaceful coexistence of religions in the country is supported by the state. The importance of such a dialogue in Russia is due to the state strategy of using religious institutions to resolve inter-ethnic conflicts, since various ethnic groups are nominally associated with their traditional religions.

## **Buddhism Within the Cultural Space of Russia**

A set of views called culturalism or cultural racism is common among certain conservative Russian groups. In the narrative of culturalism, cultural differences are emphasized and politicized; and since culture is deemed as an important factor of internal

and national security, the protection of national culture and identity should be one of the objectives of government policy. Culture is thought to be an objective factor which determines behavior and development of nations. Each individual is said to be born into a concrete culture; as a consequence, identity is not a matter of an individual's choice but is an objective condition which marks the individual for life (Schnirelman, 2011). In a country where some people are convinced of the need to protect their culture, which is often seen as based on Orthodox Christian tradition, the fact of propagating Buddhism among Russians can cause xenophobia. Xenophobia could be defined as "various expressions of intolerance towards groups which are perceived in the public consciousness as strangers". And strangers in today's Russia do seem disturbing to many (Curanović, 2014). It should be understood that representatives of the same ethnic group may perceive one as alien on the basis of cultural differences. In practical life, this applies primarily to Buddhist monks, whose "otherness" is conveyed through their appearance. In one of the interviews conducted in 2013, a Russian Theravada monk admitted he was subjected to threats and intimidation because of his appearance. Later, in 2016, he stated that "the level of xenophobia and the increasing level of aggression in Russia are disturbing."

The manifestation of this trend can be observed even at the legislative level. In 2016, the State Duma adopted amendments to the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations", which put strict limitations on missionary and religious activities. The adopted law caused fears among human right activists and socially active believers, especially those belonging to religious minorities. In essence, this regulatory legal act has violated the fundamental rights of its citizens and does not comply, according to some experts, with the current Constitution of the Russian Federation (Andreev, 2016). Because being broadly defined and vaguely worded, the mentioned law is believed to be a convenient tool that can be applied to suppress any person or religious group.

However, the sociocultural space of Russia has historically been shaped as a poly-confessional, polyethnic, and multicultural formation. An important feature of the sociocultural space of Russia is dialogue, which involves not only the peaceful coexistence of various peoples, religions and civilizations, but also the possibility of their dialogical interaction. The possibility of a dialogue can be illustrated with the ongoing construction of the First Buddhist Temple in Moscow, which "will be a home for all Russian Buddhists regardless of their schools, lineages, traditions and nationality." The Temple Complex will be located near the existing Orthodox Church with a Chapel, the Muslim Mosques and the Jewish Synagogue, thus, completing a complex representing the temples of traditional religions of Russia.

However, there are prerequisites for the growth of Buddhism in Russia which are not directly related to the country's religious history. There is a trend among atheistic scholars and scientist-oriented public to interpret Buddhism as a philosophical and ethical system. In some works, the features that brought Buddhism closer to science were uncritically absolutized. Buddhism was seen as the most ancient and authoritative spiritual tradition — an ally of the new scientific thought, completely alien to blind faith. Such interpretations of Buddhism are still in demand and supported in the works of modern authors. 48 Buddhism, like any religious system, has special sources of knowledge different from those accepted in classical science, such as the insight knowledge. However, it uses a methodology and procedure almost identical to that of science to prove its points. The tenets of Buddhism are derived from direct sensory knowledge of an individual with full-fledged senses, and a correct logical procedure. Reference to an authority figure or text cannot be put forward as an argument in a dispute (except in cases where authority is recognized by both sides). Constructive criticism was sanctioned by the Buddha, who urged his followers to critically examine any teaching before accepting it. 49 Apart from methodological aspects, considering particular features of scientific model, the most common are the ideas of determinism and evolution. In addition, many concepts of modern science find parallels in Buddhist thought. All this suggests that Buddhism has common ground with the Russian mental culture, which creates certain prerequisites for its organic entry into the cultural environment of Russia.

## **Conclusion**

The fact of Russia being a secular democratic state needs clarification for those who are aiming at exploring its religious life. For most of its history, the Russian state and culture were closely related to Orthodox Christianity, and at present the state follows a model of cooperation with traditional religions, primarily Orthodoxy, to support the legitimacy of authorities and control ethnic tensions. The policy of isolation and opposition to globalization processes, which is primarily supported by the Church, leads to an increase in aggression and cultural xenophobia. Xenophobia is easily triggered by religious expressions, since religion is often thought of as the basis of culture. Religious works of Orthodox writers are aimed at alienating Buddhism in general as an illogical, irrelevant, and negative worldview. However, many still believe that Buddhism as an alternative ethical and religious system can be integrated in Russian cultural and religious environment due to its long history of development within the Russian borders and certain features which make it more adaptable to modern democratic values and scientific worldview.

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