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RUSSIA: What should Tuvan children believe?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva, bordering north-west Mongolia, closed a Christian children's home, Forum 18 News Service was told by a religious affairs official, as "the children go to church and pray without the permission of their parents or guardians." This is disputed by a former resident, Anna Mongush, who told Forum 18 that the real reason for the closure was that the only non-Christian staff member alleged in court that the home was a "sect," after she was sacked for theft, and the state authorities "thought they could get something from its closure." Highlighting broader confusion over religious education policy, Bible translator Vitali Voinov noted that neither Russia's Constitution, nor the religion law, allow for faith-based orphanages and that much in school religious education depends upon individual teachers. Some tell pupils that they should be Buddhists and visit shamans, while forbidding them from attending Christian churches. Foundations of Orthodox Culture is an optional school subject and this causes controversy, the head of the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims told Forum 18.

Local authorities in the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva, bordering north-west Mongolia, have closed down a Christian children's home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The republic still feels the effects of the authorities' actions, former Gentle Hands Christian children's home resident Anna Mongush told Forum 18 News Service, on 5 July in the neighbouring Russian republic of Khakassia.

The authorities closed down Gentle Hands children's home approximately a year ago, because its staff insisted "that the children go to church and pray without the permission of their parents or guardians," religious affairs official Kambaa Biche-Ool maintained to Forum 18. Speaking in his office in the Tuvan capital Kyzyl on 1 July, Biche-Ool said that parents and guardians had voluntarily transferred their children to the Gentle Hands Children's Home while being unaware of its religious connections. Set up in Kyzyl in 2001 by Grace of Christ Pentecostal Church, both the children's home and church were founded by Norwegian missionary Tor Arild Svanes.

However, Anna Mongush rejected Biche-Ool's allegations, stressing that Tuva was still feeling the loss of a specifically Christian children's home. A Christian before she entered the home at the age of 14, Mongush told Forum 18 on 5 July that the 16 residents' parents took no interest in their children and had willingly given them over to the home - in the full knowledge that it was Christian - after seeing its excellent living conditions. A resident throughout the home's three-year period of operation, Mongush also pointed out to Forum 18 that children who did not like its ethos were able to and sometimes did leave: "Nothing was forced upon us. It was heaven, like living in a family."

The real reason for Gentle Hands' closure, according to Mongush, was that the only non-Christian staff member alleged in court that the home was a "sect" brainwashing the children after she was sacked for theft, and the state authorities "thought they could get something from its closure." Following court liquidation, she said, the children went to live with either church members or alcoholic relatives, or were moved to state orphanages, and the up to 100 Grace of Christ members now attend different Kyzyl churches. Her version of events concurred with that given to Forum 18 on 1 July by Vitali Voinov, a member of the Kyzyl-based Gospel Light Baptist Church and translator of the Bible into Tuvan. Forum 18 has not received a response from either Tor Arild Svanes, or his colleague Gretha Raddum.

Voinov told Forum 18 that he was concerned that there is nothing in Russia's Constitution or religion law to allow for faith-based orphanages. This highlights broader confusion about religious education in Russia. While regional educational authorities have been able to introduce Foundations of Orthodox Culture as an optional school subject in recent years, Russia's 1992 education law continues to assert that "state education policy is to be based upon secular principles". In Tuva, according to Voinov, much depends upon individual teachers, with some "very open" to Christian churches and others regularly taking pupils to Buddhist temples or shaman centres to be blessed.

Religious affairs official Biche-Ool told Forum 18 that, while Tuva has no Foundations of Buddhist Culture subject, its schools use works on shamanism by shaman society president Kenin-Lopsan Mongush as textbooks for the Customs and Traditions of the Tuvan People subject. He added that Mongush was currently devising a syllabus covering what schoolchildren of various ages ought to know about shamanism.

At Good News (formerly Sun Bok Ym) Charismatic Church on 1 July, elder preacher Buyan Khomushku told Forum 18 that Customs and Traditions of the Tuvan People was compulsory only in schools where there is a particular emphasis on the Tuvan language, of which there are two in Kyzyl. While he thought that it did not have a specifically religious content, Khomushku did say that many schoolteachers tell Tuvan pupils that they should be Buddhists and visit shamans, while forbidding them from attending Christian churches. Although not aware of any expulsions, he also told Forum 18 that there were "many threats", and maintained that a Christian teacher in the far western Bai-Taiga kozhuun (district) of Tuva is still without work four years after being sacked for her beliefs.

The Good News Charismatic Church, Tuva's largest Christian church, has disbanded following official attempts to liquidate it. But the church hopes to be re-registered, following local Justice Ministry promises not to oppose a re-registration application (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609).

In his annual address to Russia's Federal Assembly on 25 April, President Vladimir Putin urged those present – including religious leaders – not to forget, in the words of one Russian philosopher, that "the state cannot demand of its citizens faith, prayer, love, kindness or convictions". Speaking to Forum 18 in Saratov on 5 June, however, head of the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims Mukaddas Bibarsov said that since its introduction in Saratov region in September 2004, the controversial Foundations of Orthodox Culture subject has in practice turned out not to be optional: "Older pupils can choose but the younger ones end up going." If the course dealt simply with topics such as church architecture, he said, the Muslim community would have no issue with it, "but it isn't being put into the curriculum to teach about architecture – in practice it is mission, the Christianisation of our children."

Bibarsov pointed Forum 18 to the April 2005 issue of the directorate's newspaper, in which one Muslim mother recalls how she found in her 12-year-old son's Foundations of Orthodox Culture exercise book the phrases: "As one of the branches of Christianity, Orthodoxy is today considered the most perfect religion" and "the Koran orders the killing of infidels, that is, non-Muslims". The evening before her son celebrated his birthday at home in December 2004, she added, he asked her not to tell classmate party guests that the family was Muslim.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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