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## ЦЕРКОВЬ «СЕМЬЯ БОЖИЯ»: СЛУЧАЙ ЛОКАЛЬНОГО МЕССИАНИЗМА

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Показаны роль и особенности местного религиозного пророчества в Прикамье России. Это пророчество стало основой для создания новой религиозной общины «Семья Божия», имеющей ряд характерных черт. Пророк Владимир Белодед имел откровение и впоследствии сосредоточил вокруг себя духовную жизнь своих последователей и их семей. Он был объявлен их духовным отцом, а затем и небесным отцом. Мессианская идея определяла содержание священных книг и структуру общины. Религиозная деятельность включала проведение ритуалов, медитацию и организацию семинаров. Церковь «Семья Божия» сочетала два типа религиозных общин. В этой церкви была религиозная иерархия и сильная ритуальная система, как и в традиционной христианской церкви, но в то же время признавались такие феномены, как реинкарнация, медитация и видение. Деятельность верующих была связана с обрядами (крещение, бракосочетание, причащение), в то же время предполагались применение автоматического письма, самосозерцание и преображение души, как в традиционных мистических группах. Эта церковь не является популярной в Прикамье и не имеет ответвлений в других частях России. Выделяются три причины этой непопулярности. Эволюция религиозного учения стимулировала создание мифологического сознания и появление узкомыслящих верующих.

**Ключевые слова:** современная религиозность; новые религии; Прикамье; местный мессия; религиозная община.

## THE «GOD'S FAMILY» CHURCH: A CASE OF LOCAL MESSIANISM

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This article aims to demonstrate the role and features of a local religious prophecy in the Kama region of Russia. This prophecy initiated a new religious community «God's Family» that is characterised by the following important features. There is a prophet, Vladimir Beloded, who had a revelation and subsequently concentrated the spiritual life of his followers and their families around himself. He was announced as Spiritual Father and latterly as Heavenly Father. Messianic idea determined the content of sacred books and the structure of the community. Religious activity was centred around a special education that included rituals, meditation and seminars. The church «God's Family» consisted of a combination of two types of religious community. This church had a religious hierarchy and strong ritual system, much as the traditional Christian church does, at the same time recognising reincarnation, meditation and vision. Half of the believers' activities were connected with rituals (baptism, marriage, communion) while the other half was based on automatic writing, self-contemplation and transformation of the soul, in a way similar to traditional mystical groups. This church is not popular in the Kama region and has no offshoots in other parts of Russia, and the author proposes three reasons for this. The evolution of religious doctrine inspired the creation of a mythological consciousness and the appearance of narrow-minded believers.

**Keywords:** contemporary religiosity; new religions; Kama region; local messiah; religious community.

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## Introduction

Christianity, according to N. Berdyaev, is a religion of redemption and salvation for all mankind [1, p. 6]. As per this interpretation, Christ is a messiah who came to, and for, all people. Contemporary history features many emerging and new Christian and quasi-Christian religions, which are built on the idea of a messiah as a saviour. M. Gorbachev's post-Soviet Russia, with its new liberal policies, liberties, and freedoms, was open to non-habitual religions. With the pressure valve removed, pent-up religious interest emerged with full force, and Russia experienced a torrent of new religions, messiahs, and prophets.

This article offers a narrative of the emergence and evolution of local messianism in post-Soviet Russia. It refers to «messianism» as a specific spiritual complex that includes the ideas of redemption and suffering experienced by the people [2, p. 3], ideas that have been traditionally popular and widespread not only in Russia but also throughout the world of the Abrahamic religions. The word «messianism» comes from «Messiah», which, in turn, has its roots in the Hebrew word «mashiah», meaning 'the anointed one'. The characteristic feature of all the new messianic movements is the concept of an anointed or chosen individuals or people, land or group [2, p. 6]. The necessary person at the centre of this idea is a messiah figure who embraces the main values of redemption and suffering. In the case under study this is local because the doctrines sanctify Russia and specific local regions.

Some new churches and religious groups of post-Soviet Russia had Russian roots, for example, «White Brotherhood», «Centre of the Virgin Mary», «Church of the Last Testament», the followers of Porfiry Ivanov, and others. Some of these religions became quite popular and saw their networks spread throughout Russia. Most of them offered their own messiahs. These new messiahs were usually men who were each declared a Christ in a New Advent by their respective churches, although women were not completely excluded. For example Maria Devi Christos was presented to Orthodox believers as a matriarchal variant of the male Christ. All these messiahs were united by the same core idea, i. e. the end is near and only new knowledge can provide redemption to human beings [3]. The messiah, in these new religions, was conceived as the only and unique channel through which to connect with God. After the death of such leaders, the churches usually dissociate themselves from them and change their religious doctrines, or seek a new prophet.

P. Duncan offers a detailed review of the history of Russian messianism with references to Hebrew and Christian traditions, wherein he has analysed the phenomenon and its numerous variants through the case of a «local» church. V. Beloded and his church «God's Family», represented a new variant of revelation which was localised and spread at the same time. I refer to it as local because the events that led to the creation of

this church and its creator were localised in and local to the Kama region, part of the Western Ural. Most importantly, it is local because it sanctified Kama region.

This research is based on two series of semi-structured anonymous (except for the leaders of the church) interviews with the believers and the heads of the community (1995–1996, 2018–2019), a set of short interview questions about religion with the founder of the church (2007–2008), observation of participants during religious meetings (1995, 2018), and analysis of the sacred books of this faith community. For additional verification and triangulation this paper uses information from the social network group named «Beloded Vladimir Konstantinovich» (VKontakte), texts from V. Beloded's lectures, poetry, and remembrances about the leader of church, and the foundation documents of the Church of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene, the name given to V. Beloded's church by its new leaders following his death.

Before describing the details of the church «God's Family» and the characteristics that separate it from other contemporary religious groups, I would like to locate and place this community in the religious space of Russia and the world. With its no-strings-attached approach and doctrine, its self-identification and cult practices, the church «God's Family» cannot be included in the category of the established traditional religions. The relatively new appearance of this community of believers in the Kama region in mid-1990s allows us to categorise it among the new religious movements [4] or alternative («oppositional») religions [5]. The phrase «new religious movement» (NRM) is an umbrella term. It is not used in any deteriorative sense [6], but for identification within the wider field of faith, for the sake of systematic interpretation and discussion [7; 8], to enquire about the features of these religious entities. It is necessary to classify the objects of this research and to establish its specific scope.

Contemporary researchers recognise the most evident characteristics of NRM as depicted by B. Wilson, i. e. an exotic origin, new lifestyle, the stage and level of involvement in the movement, and charismatic leadership [9]. D. Stone and B. A. Campbell add to B. Wilson's assumptions the characteristic features of new sacred power in the ordinary lives of people, new structures of social cohesion (new communes), new tasks and means of spiritual healing, a gearing-up for the arrival of a new age, anti-institutional and decentralised, an acceptance of the authority of science, pragmatic attitude, organisational openness and dualistic theology with an imminent end of unification with God and transcendent man [10; 11]. Most Russian research provides support for the existence of these characteristics [12–16]. Sometimes, the features of intensive proselytism [17;18], syncretism [19] or a secular character [20] are also added to the list of characteristics.

This article shows that the church «God's Family» is different in the sense that it challenges the stereotypical characteristics of «habitual» new Christian doctrines and groups. As explained above, this religious group is localised in the Kama region and has never stepped outside the boundaries of this region, other than one unsuccessful attempt to establish a new branch in Moscow. The creed of this religion has undergone intensive evolution (one can say transformation) over a relatively short period. Continuing as a charismatic organisation, the church «God's Family» was kept intact, as a group, even after the death of its founder. The development of the life history of its messiah in the religious doctrine includes the twin trends of, first, the evolution of its leader's image from biography of the founder to mythological, and second, from masculine leadership to feminine.

It is fair to assume that the church «God's Family» is close in content to the historical sects that became interesting research subjects for researchers from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, i. e., from pre-revolutionary authors, such as V. I. Dal' and N. I. Nadezhdin, to Soviet scientists N. M. Matorin, A. I. Klibanov, and finally post-Soviet authors T. G. Belkin and M. A. Bobrik (detailed review and analysis can be found in A. Panchenko) [21, p. 15–44]. We can see some elements of such doctrines in the vernacular Orthodox religiosity described by J. Kormina, S. Shtyrkov, O. Khristoforova, A. Moroz, etc. [22; 23].

### A new messiah: image and biography

V. Beloded (1927–2010) was the first person to claim to be a prophet in the Kama region. His mythologised biography became the ideal of Christian life and spiritual development for his followers. We can identify two variants of this new prophet's (later messiah's) biography, which were used at different stages of church life. First, V. Beloded constructed a description of his life journey himself. Nobody seems to know the exact nature of the prophet's early days. He used his own narrative to explain his bad education and long journey and efforts to gain spiritual enlightenment. According to his own official version of his life story he was born in Ukraine (without giving a precise place of birth) and lost his parents in early childhood. V. Beloded received only elementary education, explain why he later needed a linguistic reviewer for his books. During the nazi occupation of Ukraine, he was shot alongside other civilians but survived because of one old rabbi who provided cover for him. As a young man after the World War II he was in the army. He decided to visit an Orthodox temple where he met a woman. She came to V. Beloded and talked about her revelation. She told him that she had had a vision in which she saw that some men had nailed tablets to his and three followers' bodies. These tablets had the word «Apostle» inscribed on them. Then each of the four men who had tablets nailed to their bodies was sent to one of the four ends of the Earth to be a prophet and messenger of the new

In this article the term «sect» is used with a neutral connotation, referring to the process of insulation of some religious communities. They stand out in the traditional confessional space due to specific narratives, religious practices, and routine behaviour [21, p. 11] without much use of modern technological and communication innovations. Very often these religious groups have mystic features. They use special religious practices that permit believers to get a feeling of unity with God. The ways, rituals, and practices used to gain this feeling of union can differ from sect to sect, but the goal of such practices is the same. This position determines not only the set of rituals but also the organisational principles of such religious communities.

With regard to the church «God's Family», the time frame of the church's inception and its existence places it in the category of NRM. However, some of its other characteristics make a case for identifying it with some of the other categories of religious affiliation. This article hypothesises that the church «God's Family» combines the features of a NRM and historical Russian sects, while inspiring the origin of its specific localised variant of messianism. This messianism was influenced by the peculiar cultural context, the personality of the leader, and the specific circumstances pertaining to this case. The church has become irrelevant today because of these same influences.

revelation. V. Beloded received this message as a sign, and began to preach the Christian doctrine. A few years later he was arrested for religious activity. In prison the new prophet came to know some Baptist preachers who visited the prisoners. These believers influenced him and his perception of God, with their belief in the Holy Trinity and some of the other principles of worship. His work, which he believed was his ordained mission in life, took him to different parts of Russia, finally settling in the Kama region. V. Beloded never told anybody about his professional activity in Perm and the Perm region, but it is well known that he worked as a roofer at the Regional Museum of Local Lore. In 1992, he entered the ministry of the Underground Church, although he never acted as a priest in this organisation. All his leadership activities after 1992 were connected only with the church «God's Family».

After the death of the prophet, his life became the object of myths. Some books published by successors to V. Beloded were devoted to his life's journey. The hero of these texts is a man named Aleksey, who believed himself ordained to experience elements of sacred predestination. Like the cultural heroes of ancient myths, he had an extraordinary birth and early life. The authorities persecuted his parents; his mother gave birth to him in a small log cabin belonging to a kindly old woman, and died soon after his birth. His father left him with this old woman and the boy never knew his



parents, his family, or his ancestors. The old woman who raised him understood the sacred nature of the child. The boy could see angels as people in white clothes and had insights into men's hearts. Before her death the old woman sent Aleksey to the orphanage. There the boy found his second name when the head of the orphanage asked him about it, Aleksey remembered visions of «white people» in which one of them was an old man. Thus, the boy chose the second name Beloded (meaning 'a white old man' in Russian) [24, p. 50]. The appearance of the angels, in the book explains the way of revelation for all members of the church «God's Family», and thereby the texts describe the life of the prophet using analogies to Biblical characters.

The environment of the enchanted boy Aleksey is also notable. In the texts, both his well-wishers and enemies were simultaneously working through the various threads of his life. At each stage of Aleksey's life somebody wanted to eliminate him: the people who persecuted his parents, a watchman at the orphanage, the authorities, the nazis, the guards in the prison, and others. In each case, the messiah managed to escape, sometimes with the help of good people (for example when he was shot by the nazis, Aleksey was shielded by an old rabbi). Another sacred gift was regular meetings with the Virgin Mary in his dreams. Each vision explained and clarified his situation and showed a practical and perfect solution to the problems. Aleksey lived as a saint and as a martyr.

The life of the prophet, according to the church's books, comprises of a chain of miseries. His adoptive family was banished to Siberia and his adoptive father was shot by the nazis. Later, he was alleged to have collaborated with the nazi, was arrested and sent to a prison camp. During this time Aleksey performed good deeds. He defended his friends, helped the people and didn't take vengeance on his offenders. Once he called on the Virgin Mary to put an end to a big fight that he witnessed [24, p. 247].

These stories had the goal of not only forming an image of the new prophet – this was not necessary,

especially after his death – but also of creating a connection between Holy Writ and the real life of the messiah in order to contextualise the situation in the Kama region. It was no coincidence that at the end of the main biographical book, the Virgin Mary told Aleksey to be a roofer [24, p. 485]. This was the point at which the two realities met: the constructed reality of the ordinary life and the constructed reality of the mythological space.

The transformation of the biography is part of the doctrine's evolution. It is no coincidence that the church community published some books about religious ideas in the form of dialogues between Aleksey and the wise old man [25]. In these dialogues, the education and the enlightening of the enchanted man is a parallel to the enlightenment of the church and its believers. At the same time, the modified biography is an attempt to create a flexible religious system that is attractive to different believers. This system doesn't adhere to strict and inflexible dogma. The doctrinal and ritual innovations and their plastic nature were more useful under the conditions of the ever-changing modern world. The man of today can choose the objects and methods of worship [26]. Thus, being attractive to the modern man was an important consideration in the church's strategy. Another important consideration was the legitimization of the religious narrative for the everyday consciousness. This explains the temporal life features of the messiah's biographical texts – simplicity, traditional plots, and appellation and references to the real history of the country.

This approach was realised within the lifetime of V. Beloded. The image of the messiah had attractive and legitimising features. Followers mentioned a smooth and reassuring voice, kind eyes, a soft gaze, thoughtful speech, and slow movements [27, p. 114–135]. He was like a traditional Orthodox saint from hagiographical stories. In addition, V. Beloded had a high capacity for work, which came to him as a part of his sacred gift. After his death, the biography of the messiah became a pattern for the lifestyles and approach of the new leaders of the God's family church.

### The phases in the «God's Family» history

I have divided the history of the church «God's Family» into four phases: 1989–1992, when the members of a spiritual group who were interested in a new way of gaining insight into God's purpose received the revelation; 1992–1996, when a new religious organisation was set up on the basis of the revelation; 1996–2010, when the revelation was adopted within local culture; and 2010 to now, since V. Beloded passed away and new channels of the revelation were introduced.

The spiritual group was established in 1988–1989 in Perm and included 10–12 lecturers from different universities in the city. In 1989 this group gathered at Perm State Pedagogical Institute. According to the data of social networks this group was called «The laboratory

of suggestive linguistics, Vedium» under the authority of I. Cherepanova, a lecturer at the Perm State Pedagogical Institute. The name «Vedium» points to the use of the so-called neo-pagan ideas connected with pre-Slavic beliefs in Russia. Members of the group had no preferences for any specific spiritual practice. They investigated all the oriental Western doctrines and techniques they could explore. This was the period of their spiritual search. The leading approach of the investigation was psychological, because the group's leaders were professional psychologists. There was little to no discussion about faith or God. The main activities of the group were psychoanalysis and psychological training.

Thereafter, some members of the group began to have visions, which were interpreted as sacred revelations [28, p. 6]. The interpretation of the new information was conducted using Christian traditions, but no person was ready or thought himself or herself to be capable of understanding the details of all the aspects of the new spiritual experiences. V. Beloded became this person. One group participant engaged him to take part in the meeting. V. Beloded was a «wise elder» (starets) and an authority in providing explanations for spiritual problems. He was a faithful and he was sure that he had his heart set on mystical calling.

Due to V. Beloded, the spiritual group changed its *modus operandi*. There were three aspects to its innovation – a new choice of text for interpretation, the reformed structure of the community of the believers, and the creation of special religious practice.

The Bible became a new object for the transformed interpretation and exegesis. From 1989 to 1991, the new leader of the group and his followers tried to find an esoteric sense in the Biblical text. The main task of the exegesis was to develop a special spiritual alphabet in order to decipher new knowledge of God and man, based on rational discourse in light of the Bible. This approach had to be a way to provide fresh guidance for spiritual seekers.

Subsequently, important changes took place in the relationship among the participants. Gradually, the equality of the members was replaced by a new hierarchy. The community was divided into three parts, a spiritual leader as the centre and head, an internal circle that included people close to the spiritual leader, and finally the external circle of followers. With this structure, the organisation assumed the title of the Society of the spiritual enlightenment, and was perceived as a spiritual family by its members. From this time onward all members of the church were called the children of God with special ritual for this («Adoption of the Son»).

During this initial period, the complexes of the rituals of the new church were based on Orthodox traditions. A night ritual of baptism took place in the country, in the Kama River in the summer of 1992. V. Beloded stood in white clothes and a cross waist deep in the water. A baptised person came to the leader and answered the following question: «Do you believe?». After answering in the affirmative, the person kissed the cross and dipped themselves into the water three times. On that particular night all participants in the meeting had a vision. They saw a big star with a tail of tiny stars moving across the sky. This star was interpreted as the Virgin Mary, and the vision laid the foundation for the long chain of epistles from the Virgin Mary. After a few days, the first epistle was received by V. Beloded. This gave impetus to new kinds of religious practice, for example the study of new texts, glossolalia, special meditation,

the veneration of the spiritual leader as a prophet. Thereafter, previously unknown rituals appeared in practice, such as the kissing of a fellowman, automatic writing as a channel for the epistles, and meditation with the laying on of hands.

This was a phase of active growth in group membership, which rose to 80 people attending unified meetings. The meetings included individual self-reflection through relaxation, presentation of these reflections, listening to classical and spiritual music, meditation with the laying on hands, and a lecture. This resulted in a mystical experience for the participants, who were always commented on by the Father of the Family.

In the last year of this period, a very important event took place when representatives of the church «Gods' Family» took part in a conference at the Centre of the Virgin Mary. The similarity in the names of these religious organisations didn't lead to any partnership. The leader of the Centre of the Virgin Mary criticised the «God's Family» as a social institution. This criticism, instead of deterring, boosted the independent activity of V. Beloded's church and he became the only person within his church who retained a position of spiritual authority.

The next stage of church development (1992–1996) was concerned with the legal registration of the community. The Society of spiritual enlightenment received the status of social organisation in 1993. After registering again in 1994, the community was named the church «God's Family». The main goal of their religious activity was announced as an acceptance of Christ. V. Beloded's wife was granted the title Mother of the Family, while he was recognised as the Father of the Family. Thus the spiritual life of followers and their families revolved around V. Beloded himself.

Simultaneously, there were some important innovations in doctrine and practice of worship with the object of worship changing. During 1993–1994 the core religious idea preached and developed by the spiritual leader was the salvation of the soul. It was explained that the best way to achieve salvation was to be born again “in the Holy Spirit”. The exegetic interpretation of Bible's mystical verses was proclaimed as the most effective way to achieve spiritual re-birth. Knowledge was understood to be the basis of mystical interpretation because only knowledge mediates between the external and internal worlds.

By 1996, the Virgin Mary had become the centre of worship. Jesus Christ was explained as a man who passed along all paths to spiritual evolution, found the image of God in himself, and became God's son. All the members of the church had to follow this path towards reunification with God. V. Beloded as a gifted speaker and a unique interpreter of the Virgin Mary's epistles, became considered a messiah (interview with 65 years old man, 18.05.2019<sup>1</sup>). Messianic ideals

<sup>1</sup>All the interviews used in the article are taken from the author's archive.

changed the content of the sacred books and the structure of the community. We will discuss this new theology next, but first we will understand the «external» innovations.

Home groups became an important part of the church during this period. Every home group had its own leader, who was initially elected, later only Sacred Parents could appoint leaders. These «home leaders» were respected and revered, like V. Beloded and his wife, and had the same names Father or Mother. They played the role of mediators between the Heavenly Father and members of the church. The home communities began to develop laborious activities to improve integration among the believers. The second task of these groups was to study the epistles as the Word of the Virgin Mary. This «home education» replaced personal contact with V. Beloded. God's Mother played the role of mediator too, although only for neophytes. There were three special groups for teenagers, called the «Young brotherhoods». Believers were considered children and hence communication with followers was based on a special spiritual pedagogy suitable for children. The Heavenly Parents created a new interpretation of the dogma as the Holy Trinity. On this basis, God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit gave birth to the Heavenly Family on Earth – the Heavenly Father, the Heavenly Mother, and the Heavenly Son (explanatory note to the organisation charter of the church «God's Family», p. 2).

From these new religious and mystical ideas new rituals and activities emerged for the religious community. The ritual of the adoption of the Son took the new name of the Son of the Supreme God, with a new style. The new adoption of the Son ritual was realised through a long liturgy which included several steps, i. e., collective singing of special psalms, a bowing tribute of a towel to the Mother of the Family, kneeling to an alternative son of God, parting words of the Mother of the Family, three repetitions of the phrase «In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit» accompanied by the sign of the cross, and congratulations to other family members. Usually, after these actions, the Heavenly Father read a new epistle from the Virgin Mary to the Family and individual epistles to the consecrated people.

The community also created its own rituals, and a ceremony for marriage. The rite of communion with wine and bread was augmented by with spiritual chants of «accept the Body of Christ» from believers who stood in «brother circles». Wedding ceremonies similar to the «Adoption of the Son» were organised, although they consisted of more elements. These elements included chanting of a special wedding song, lighting wedding candles, congratulations and parting words from the Mother of the Family to the kneeling couple, the blessing of the Heavenly Father, reading of the Heaven Epistle from the Virgin Mary or apostles, and registration in the church book. This rite was perceived not only as

a wedding but also as a new spiritual birth. It is very interesting to note that only V. Beloded could choose partners for sacred marriages, dictating, and deeply interfering with, the private lives of his followers.

This period can be referred to as the time of the birth of the organised church. This new religious organisation developed its own spiritual practice and structure and found not only its own messiah but also his wife. The idea of the sacred couple was not new, it was inherited from heretical doctrines and ancient myths. The messiah with a partner became the visiting card of the new religions. Sun Myung Mun had a wife, Maria Devi Christos after release from prison announced one of her «apostles» as her husband. In the church «God's Family» a marriage partner had a sacred status, and the marriage and family determined and defined the community to a great extent. These new rituals captured the situation and created the face of the new church. It was revealed that in this period, the first book with the sermons of the Heavenly Father was published.

The next period from 1996 to 2010 can be characterised by two trends. The first was the strengthening of V. Beloded's messianism. The second manifested itself as adaptation to Orthodox traditions. Both trends generally involved worship and some kind of social activity. During this time, the church had a membership of about 200 and had a large youth segment. It published its own gospels and theological tracts that developed new trends.

All the newly published books included some concepts relating to the way to redemption. The figure of the Virgin Mary was enhanced and the image of Sofia, Heavenly Wisdom, was superimposed. This was connected with a renewed interpretation of dogma relating to the Holy Trinity. The idea of spiritual birth came to mean Holy Russia as an ideal state, which must be revived.

All these innovations influenced the religious practices of the believers. The religious community of this period began to celebrate new holidays. One of them was the Birthday of the Heavenly Father, the main holiday for the church. Usually it took place in mid-January and was devoted to the sacred status of the Heavenly Father and his spiritual activity. This event included a strong ritual structure throughout its duration, i. e., collective singing of a special hymn devoted to the Father («O God! We give thanks for all...»), reading and interpretation of a new Heaven Epistle (from the Wisdom of God, the apostle John or a famous Russian writer), and a theatrical performance by every home group and the «Young brotherhoods», which were created in 1997 for the children of the believers. These performances had different genres but only one goal: worship of the Sacred Father.

In 2000, both trends in the trajectory of the church's development were to be found just in this event alone. Orthodox adaptation declared itself in the chanting of



traditional hymns «My Soul, bless a God», «Your Christmas, Christ, our God», «Ave Mother of God, the Virgin Mary», and others. The messianic trend was apparent in the sermon of the Heavenly Father and in phrases such as, «all mankind are my descendants», «there comes a time when the personality of the Father will be strongly pronounced», etc. Members of the community began to use specific predicates for their leader: «God», «Our merciful and all-seeing Heaven», «Sun», «Heavenly Spirit», «Creator», and others. These were the elements of the popular theology of the church, which were transformed after the death of the leader into a strong system of ritual and structure [27, p. 114–135].

The birthday of «God's Family», which was established around 1999, reflected an active inclusion of Orthodox tradition. It took place in summer, on the same day that believers received the first sacred epistle. This holiday usually included a wedding, a baptism, and an «Adoption of the Son». The Sacred Parents and some members of the church wore traditional Russian costumes. The religious service was followed by cult objects, including a cross, a censer, and the communion cup. The «Our Father» prayer and the scenery of Holy Russia symbolised the variety of church doctrine and its loyalty to old customs.

There were some additional creations in the development of the new church. One innovation was based on the extension of the meaning of religious activity. A new epistle from the Virgin Mary about Russian culture (1996) introduced the idea of the sacred nature of the famous fairy tales and literary stories of Russia. The children of God became the children of culture. One can see an attempt to root a new religious doctrine in the world's cultural heritage, through this extension of meaning. A. Pushkin and H. C. Andersen were announced as early channels for the Heavenly Epistles. Famous stories and novels were added to by new fairy tales, fables, poetries, oracles, and play scripts. All the texts were received in much the same way as the epistles and became new objects of learning. Members of the church supposed that the plot of every literary text was destined to give a solution to «God's Family» problems. Some fairy tales were interpreted as symbolic, connected with the sacred nature of the church. Even new chapters of the novel «Eugene Onegin», which the Father of the Family received from A. Pushkin confidentially in 2007, were analysed as esoteric sacred information.

It is interesting to note that this deviation of church doctrine toward the literature had no traces of external influence. There were no new legislative acts about freedom of conscience (the religious freedom and faith-based organisations act was adopted in 1997), which could have changed the legal status of religions. At the same time, including H. C. Andersen's stories in the canonical texts as par with A. Pushkin suggests a desire to make the doctrine more attractive to parishioners. L. L. Dawson marks the new religious consciousness as

a «more syncretistic, accepting relativism, and tolerant of other religious perspectives» [29, p. 139]. In our case, we can see the intensification of syncretism due to new authors of divine afflation and esoteric information. The syncretism of religious doctrine gives an opportunity to make the canons more modern and interesting for non-educated believers (who made up the majority of newcomers to new religious communities at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Simultaneously, new content and religious ideas allowed for beliefs about the new prophecy.

These new forms of religious public activity reflected a new approach to the sacred literature too. The religious community used to organise many events and took part in secular conferences and seminars. The most striking examples of this were holidays devoted to the bicentenary of A. Pushkin, public lectures on the Russian idea and the Decembrists, public speaking at «The dialogue» and «The brother's ring» philosophical clubs, etc.

The «Brother's ring» was organised in 1996 under the command of the Family's Mother. The main goal of this new organisation was the integration of the community and the development of love between members of «God's Family» by «growing the Son of God in themselves» (interview with Maria Turysheva, 01.12.2018). Activities took place throughout the year and were inclusive of not only the individual members of the church, but also the home groups. During «Brother's ring» group meetings, people chanted, there was group leading, and the epistles were read and interpreted. This event usually highlighted the accomplishments of the religious house that was situated at Tchaikovskaya station (Nytva region, Perm krai).

Music became the other key new religious activity. Slavic musical traditions were in focus, so the members of the church established a Russian folk orchestra and an assembly of Russian Radunitsa chanting, a name that alludes to an Orthodox holiday devoted to remembrance of the dead. Some of the musicians had no musical education, although this didn't change the plans of the church administration. Musical events were oriented toward the spiritual education of V. Beloded's followers as a way of developing simplicity and sincerity in each member of the community through Russian musical heritage.

Another important point that deserves mentioning was the divorce of the Heavenly parents. From 2000 until 2002 God's Mother gradually moved away from the church's activities. When she left the community, and divorced her husband, she was accused of betrayal and she lost her sacred status. The new leader of the church from 2011 onward was Maria Turysheva who said that many church members were glad when the former Heavenly Mother left the organisation because she was picky about religious activities (interview with Maria Turysheva, 01.12.2018). In this situation, we can see the process of desacralisation. Being sacred became

the outcome of a voluntary choice to stay connected with the church's social and spiritual life, instead of a stand-alone achievement through spiritual reflection. It is possible to call this period a cleansing phase. From this time onward, many church members were eliminated from the church as «infected». Usually these people were believers who held high authority in the community or were very popular (interview with 42 years old woman, 11.04.2019; interview with 42 years old man, 26.04.2019). The church began to act as a closed community with controllable membership, and to look more and more like a sect. Strict centralisation and unification of church life strengthened this impression as much as for some members as for external observers (interview with 42 years old woman, 11.04.2019). It is very interesting to note that most of those punished by the leader in this way did not pretend they thought this action was correct.

A new phase of the church's life began after the death of V. Beloded in 2010. This event was the most significant crisis so far for the faith community. Some believers left the Sacred Family and maintained no relationship with other V. Beloded's followers. Nevertheless, M. Turysheva, with her husband Oleg, united some believers into a new organisation (interview with M. Turysheva, 01.12.2018) within a year. She became a member of «God's Family» when she was a philosophy student and worked with V. Beloded as an editor, manager, and sometimes driver. She helped him organise church life in every way, and he nominated Maria as his successor. Her ability have visions was an optional element of this decision. The death of the messiah helped her to realise and establish herself as the new leader.

Maria's husband became an important partner in the church's revival and his role in this is worth mentioning. Formally, his wife had been a «God's Family» leader and led every meeting of the believers, wrote many books about religious doctrine (gospels, fairy tales, poetry), and acted as the representative of the church in dealings with the authorities. O. Turyshev in turn provided various kinds of support and supervision for the financial management of the church. He owned a bee garden, a small honey processing enterprise, and a publishing house. These became important because the church had no other source of income. According to M. Turysheva, her husband regulated the private religious life of their family. She said that her husband allowed her not to fast while she was breastfeeding. In difficult situations, only O. Turyshev accompanied his wife and received all the necessary information<sup>2</sup>. He was the power behind the throne of this church.

In 2012, M. Turysheva gathered the church members, but only 11 people were ready to recognise the new prophet. According to M. Turysheva, the group in the

new variant of the church resolved to withdraw its official registration. This solution was presented by the so-called church council because of the low number of the members in the new group. Official registration entailed the necessity of sending annual reports to the Justice Ministry of Perm krai (interview with M. Turysheva, 01.12.2018). It was not connected with any external circumstances or even with allegations of cultic doctrine from previous members of the church<sup>3</sup>, which was not possible with low human and financial resources. They left intact some features of the old church – meetings, rituals, and musicianship. The new leader said that the religious doctrine was the same as when the messiah was alive. However this new community changed its title. Today, it is called «The Church Family of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene» and it was officially registered in November 2018 upon reaching more than 50 members. M. Turysheva explained that the new name came about through a new stage of revelation and that a church with new members had no right to keep the old title (speech by M. Turysheva, 10.11.2018). There is contradiction between preserving past religious ideas and ushering in a new phase in church's life. This author did not find any official explanation for using two names in the title of the new variant of the church. Apparently, this sacred couple, as long-term subjects of cult practices, understood the necessity of having Heavenly Parents (explanatory note to the statute of Perm local Christian organisation «The Church Family of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene», p. 1). M. Turysheva and her husband, as parents of Church Family, had special sacred sanctions represented by the apostle John and Mary Magdalene as more popular and attractive people from the New Testament. The heads of the new church confirmed that they received evangelic revelation from these Sacred Spirits, had taken their saintly protection, and named the new church in their honour (additional explanatory note to the statute of Perm local Christian organisation «The Church Family of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalena», p. 3).

We can see some new elements too in the activities of the religious life of the church members. The Turyshevs produced various goods from honey and herbs. Their products included a special activator of health called «Davir» (according to M. Turysheva, a sacred place). Their catalogue described this activator as a unique energetic complex recognised as «the programme of the universe, the infusive force of nature, the beauty and harmony of the macrocosm». M. Turysheva said that many illnesses could be healed if people used «Davir» as a bandage or drank energised water (interview with M. Turysheva, 01.12.2018). It is interesting to note that church members used «Davir» to repair vehicles, household appliances, and computing equipment. Although

<sup>2</sup>After the interview, the Turyshevs feared that I would publish uncontrolled information in a newspaper and called me to make this situation clear.

<sup>3</sup>Spiritual pool [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://anticekta.ru/?p=1742> (date of access: 08.02.2023) (in Russ.).



the Turyshevs declared that they kept V. Beloded's religious tradition intact, the fact remains that new myths were made and established.

The church received a new temple for worship too. It was situated on the Turyshevs' property, near their enterprise close to Tchaikovskaya train station. Thus, a new family of prophets concentrated the spiritual life of the community around them, as V. Beloded and his former wife had. M. Turysheva recognised a common characteristic of revelation but mentioned that other church members were not ready to understand and describe their visions in order to create new sacred books. Only she had this gift, and consequently she played the role of the new messiah. The revelatory redemption of the early stages of the church's life was transformed into revelatory management, which structured the new religion's space. If prior believers needed a messiah, the messiah conversely needed followers in this new religion to realise his or her plans and ambitions.

At the same time, there were two other groups of V. Beloded's followers in the Kama region. The first was the community of home groups, situated in one district of Perm City. Its head was one of the oldest members of the church that didn't recognise the new prophetess,

and instead he became the leader of his small community. Sometimes, this group organises brief rituals on the shore of Kama River, listens to records of V. Beloded's sermons, and reads V. Beloded's book. One of these group members explained that the reason for the non-attachment of this community to the M. Turysheva's church was their dislike of the new moral system. M. Turysheva gave her followers instructions to break contact with those who remained outside her church (interview with 65 years old man, 18.05.2019). This entailed breaking relationships with relatives and friends. However, in more recent times, the head of the other group began to communicate with M. Turysheva in the virtual VKontakte group because «they are our brothers and sisters in the family of the Heavenly Father and God's Mother» (interview with 65 years old man, 18.05.2019).

The second group includes those ex-members of «God's Family» church who would like to be members of «The Church of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene», but the new prophetess didn't permit them to visit the community. There was a recent attempt to reach an agreement for entry for this group into the new church, although what will result is anyone's guess.

### **The church «God's Family» as a religious community: features and doctrine**

It is evident that the church «God's Family» acted as a mystic group, but with messianic elements. It consisted of the combination of two types of religious community. The first type was connected with the features of traditional Christian churches. These organisations had a strict religious hierarchy and a strong ritual system that can be observed in the Perm messianic community. Under V. Beloded's leadership, there were some special segments of the organisation that used to be responsible for its spiritual and economic activities. The church had the Common Family Council as its decision-making body, as well as the Council of Elders, which included education and labour groups. They managed the home groups («small families») and tried to spread the clerical structure to other cities (Moscow, Yeisk). At present, the church is in a revival phase, and its structure is not very developed. However, the main principles of administration and the basis of religious life are intact. For an ordinary observer, the «God's Family» church looks like any other new religion, with some Christian elements.

The second set of features places the church in close quarters with esoteric and mystic groups, as well as historical sects and cults. V. Beloded and his followers always recognised reincarnation, meditation, and visions. Only one part of the believers' activity was connected with Christian rituals (baptism, the marriage ceremony, communion), while the substantive part was based on automatic writing, self-contemplation, and the transformation of the soul, as with traditional mystic groups. Each meeting of the church's members began

with a special meditative practice. All books published in the church were devoted to mystic visions (visits from the Virgin Mary and angels). The social environment and nature were enchanted and saturated with different mystical symbols and images.

The second set of features of the church «God's Family» also included revelation as the main part of religious experience for all the members of the organisation. V. Beloded was not the first mystic in this religious community. He was only considered the best interpreter of sacred visions and texts. After V. Beloded's death, revelation continued through other members of the church. Thus revelation was treated as inherited, descending from fathers to children.

However, within the lifetime of the founder, and later, all interpretations of this revelation were monopolised by the leaders of the community. The messianism and mysticism were realised inside the church structure where a living messiah, who was recognised and legitimised, became the centre of spiritual and cultic life. He or she determined the boundaries of religious experience and suppressed all attempts at independent action within the church. There was a situation in 1996 when two members of the community decided to follow the path taken by Joseph and the Virgin Mary and to give birth to a God. As a result they were removed from the Family for three months. The statement of M. Turysheva about the incompetence of other church members to interpret revelation was of the same nature. The sacral texts of «God's Family» had certain identifying features

too. The leaders of church «God's Family» declared that the Christian essence of their doctrine was neither Catholic nor Protestant nor Orthodox. Some Christian dogmas were incorporated by actively using Christian symbols. Jesus Christ was portrayed as a simple man who became Christ due to the activity of the Holy Spirit within him. Consequently, each man could be like Christ and was capable of becoming the son of God. The main element of «God's Family» doctrine was the idea of spiritual birth, received through Heavenly revelation (explanatory note to the organisation charter of the «God's Family» church, p. 3). The founder and his successors interpreted this spiritual birth as a process of brain rejuvenation and catharsis [30, p. 150]. The best way to achieve this was through membership of the spiritual family. A true believer had to follow the commandments and prescriptions of God because they provide people with the information about their numinous origins and show the path to development (explanatory note to the organisation charter of the «God's Family» church, p. 1).

Members of the church didn't believe in the last day or the Last Judgment in its traditional interpretation [30, p. 150]. Followers of V. Beloded accentuated the idea of God's election of the people who were chosen for salvation through divine mercy [30, p. 204]. The Last Judgment was understood as the enlightenment of people and the Judgment of Love [30, p. 69]. The Kingdom of God was interpreted as the Kingdom of Knowledge where Jesus Christ ruled [30, p. 125]. Perm Society of spiritual enlightenment and the «God's Family» church were notable as schools that educated according to the Law of Goodness and Justness. This meant that the last days had come and the Last Judgment was already taking place, i. e. the days had started just after Christ's coming [31, p. 62].

These statements were completed with mythological symbols. V. Beloded corrected and updated Christian dogma to justify his status as the messiah. Since the epistles of the Virgin Mary contained the idea of the Heavenly Fatherhood and Motherhood V. Beloded proposed himself as the logical result of the ideas of the sons of God, suggesting a story about a new Holy Family. The Virgin Mary and the Heavenly Father came to the Earth to create the first spiritual family the Holy Trinity, and formed a race of God's sons. The Holy Trinity was thus interpreted as the Heavenly Father, Heavenly Mother, and Heavenly Child, each a potential member of the church [32, p. 317].

According to this doctrine, the second coming of Christ would not be in the physical world but through his birth in the soul of each person. This spiritual Christ would become an adult and lead his soul as his wife to Pax Ecclesia. Within this context the soul was interpreted as a female organ or faith which became impregnated with the Word of God to give birth to baby Jesus.

The idea of female essence as the basic idea for redemption took shape gradually. The first of V. Beloded's

published texts and sermons centred on interpretation of Bible [33], the image of Jesus Christ, and salvation through spiritual catharsis. All motifs and images were taken from the Bible and accentuated the idea of Holy Love, just like the popular statements of other charismatic churches. The founder of the «God's Family» church used a lot of scientific terms and strict logic in argumentation. In later books, religious doctrine was completed by the idea of the Holy Family, which included the image of the Virgin Mary. For believers, the Virgin Mary had the role of a mediator between profane and sacred worlds. After the death of V. Beloded this image was seen as a cure-all. In the books of the Turyshevs, the Mother of Christ became the centre of worship and example of conduct for the ideal believer [24; 32; 34; 35]. It can be said that this innovation was aimed at legitimising M. Turysheva as the new messiah. She attempted to match the image of the saintly woman that had been acceptable in most people's everyday consciousness – very thin, sallow, with a long head and a reproving gaze. The renewed doctrine supported the activities of the new messiah and explained the change in gender.

Other features of «God's Family» church doctrine had no messianic ideas. They were based on mythological consciousness and proclaimed the exclusiveness of Russian culture and soul and the sacred nature of the Urals. According to V. Beloded, only the Slavic soul can see God Himself [31; 36, p. 20–21]. Only the Russian soul has the mission to enlighten other nations, because it is able to gain insights into Holy Wisdom. God gave birth to Russians to perform creative services for Him and to do peaceable things. The saintly life of the Russian soul is open to God due to its pious nature [36, p. 30–32].

V. Beloded's successors developed this mythological element of the doctrine. The idea of Holy Russia is one of the main points in all the books by both V. Beloded and the Turyshevs. Only Russia was called God's Daughter, and they stated that the name Slav meant «singing God's carols» [34, p. 323–326]. The traditional pre-Christian god Rod was brought into a relationship with the Heavenly Parents, who were his guardian [34, p. 165–166], while Svyatogor-bogatyr was interpreted as the Holy Spirit [25, p. 15]. It is interesting to note that according to the Turyshevs, God combined in himself both good and evil. This was a feature typical to most of ancient mythologies [25, p. 34]. The Turyshevs confirmed that there were numerous wise people in Russia who had at least some sacred knowledge [32, p. 324]. Thereby Holy Russia seems to be a charismatic territory.

The Urals, as a region, occupied a special place in this doctrine, too. According to the last church's texts, it was an animate object with a heart, pulse and soul [24, p. 326]. This is the holiest territory on the Earth and the centre of the world [24, p. 327] and the place of God's Glory [24, p. 330]. The ancient texts of prophecies were kept in the Ural Mountains [24, p. 344]. The

Kama River was an eternal embodiment of the Holy Love [24, p. 329]. Thus, we can see the realisation of a mythological outlook that divided the world in two parts – a cosmic one with a sacred centre, and a chaotic one. The followers of V. Beloded's church were placed in the sacred centre and named the ancestors of a new generation of people [24, p. 343].

The chaotic part of the world includes modern civilisation with its «streams of godless information» [32, p. 237]. In our opinion, the status of the Urals as the chosen place for the perception of God [24, p. 330] and opposition to the external world became an impediment to the expansion of this new doctrine outside of the Kama region.

### Conclusions

We can see that messianism was the only core idea and the most important part of the doctrine and religious practices in the first stage of development of the «God's Family» church. Revelation as a way of redemption and salvation was added gradually through mythological statements that helped to save the community after the death of its founder, this then became the basis for the localisation of the new church. In its first stage this new religious movement transformed into a historical sect closed with regard to external communication for the purpose of intensive doctrinal development.

Today, the «God's Family» church is not popular in the Kama region and it has no branches in other parts of Russia, although the application of its doctrine and religious practice does sometimes take place. Some basic statements of this new religion are very simple. All sacred books are adapted for understanding the doctrines. Their authors use traditional images from the Bible, fairy tales, and local legends. To external onlookers the ideas of V. Beloded and the Turyshevs appear similar to Orthodox ideas. This fact would ensure the attractiveness of the new church to a person who is not well-versed in the history and doctrines of Orthodox Christianity but wants to be a Christian believer in the contemporary world. The «God's Family» community has no strict demands on lifestyle and food in its religious doctrine. Each member of the church can choose whether, where, how, and when, he or she wants to pray, fast, and attend religious services. Meetings of followers take place only once a week, which is comfortable and practical for city dwellers. The understanding of the Ural and the Kama region as a holy territory is also very attractive to the locals.

Nevertheless, the «God's Family» church of «The Church Family of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene» has no growth in membership. This religious community had about 180–200 members in between 1995 and 1997, of which only 50 remain, including children. There could be three reasons for this. The first reason is that the evolution of the church's religious doctrine inspired the addition of mythological components,

then the growth of messianic ideas and the relegation of myth to the backstage. Charismatic speeches were replaced by traditional meetings. Due to this change in doctrine, mythological elements in believers' consciousness intensified, leading to the appearance of narrow-minded believers. This new church became a variant similar to religious ghettos, such as historical sects or cults. «The Church Family of the Apostle John and Mary Magdalene» had always had those features, which remained to this day.

The second reason is that there is no person who can be as attractive to seekers of new spirituality as a religious leader. The new head of the church is not as intellectually attractive as V. Beloded was, and she can offer no interesting ideas. M. Turysheva and her husband use the heritage of the church's founder through the advertisement of his books, mentioning them when it is profitable and useful. At this stage of the community's existence, they can only maintain their small number of church members. The rush of some ex-members back to the community can sometimes be explained by their desire to keep the principles of the first church (interview with 65 years old man, 18.05.2019). In some instances, the Turyshevs say the applicants might have to enter into an agreement to accept the opinions of, and be loyal to, the community (interview with 28 years old woman, 09.07.2019). This circumstance became the main obstacle to the active growth of the church.

The third reason is the cultural situation in the Kama region and in Russia in general. Since the turbulent years of the 1990s, with the emergence of new political parties, unions, and religious movements, the Russian people have adopted other preferences, i. e. stability and tradition [37, p. 95–99]. We can see stagnation in membership of Protestant churches, the return of some believers to traditional churches, and the downsizing of the new religious communities. Older new religions have to exist in their own niche and search for new approaches to preservation and growth. One can say that the epoch of messianic communities has been replaced by a time of religious weariness and spiritual stability.

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