

# PILGRIMS, PRIEST AND LOCAL RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: CONTESTED RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a case study of one rural sacred place in North-West Russia. It focuses on the folklore related to this particular sacred place, that is, narratives told by different groups of believers to confirm the sanctity of the shrine. These groups (pilgrims who come from urban centres, a local priest and church activists, local common people and migrants) choose different types of stories, or even genres, when they talk about the sacred. Thus, in contemporary Russian provinces one could find different styles of religiosity, or different religious cultures, which coexist and sometimes compete with each other.

**Keywords:** competing discourses, folk narrative, local religion, pilgrimage, Russia-contemporary

In their much-quoted introduction to the book “Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage” John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (1991) state that a shrine is a spiritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices. These meanings ascribed to local sacred places are constructed and transmitted by groups and institutions, which have control over a shrine. One such institution in contemporary Russia is the Orthodox Church. It is evident that representatives of the Church try to unify worshipping of sacred places both in respect of narrative tradition and ritual practices. If, for some reason, the Church’s control over a shrine is weak, different groups of visitors attach meanings of their own to it. In this case a situation of competing religious discourses arises that can be observed both on the level of religious practices and narratives related to the sacred place.

This article presents a case study of one rural sacred place in North-West Russia conducted in 1999–2002 by the research group of the Ethnology Department of the European University at St. Petersburg. My colleagues and I interviewed local people, priests and pilgrims,

and made firsthand observation during a religious procession to and celebration at the local sacred place in years 2001 and 2002. I consider worship at this shrine as a space for competing religious (and not only religious) discourses. The study focuses on the folklore related to this particular sacred place, that is, narratives told by different groups of believers to confirm the sanctity of the shrine. My aim is to show that people choose different types of stories, or even genres, when they talk about the sacred, and each of these groups has a more or less stable narrative repertoire. In the article I will discuss (1) the narratives of pilgrims, (2) the narratives of local people, and (3) the narratives of a local priest and his close parishioners.

### THE HISTORY AND LOCATION OF THE SHRINE

The rural sacred place called *Peshchorka* ‘Little Cave’ is located in the Gdov region of Pskov province not far from the north-western shore of Lake Peipus (Chudskoe Ozero) about ten kilometres from the Russian-Estonian border. In the 1930s there were many Estonian farmsteads in this territory and the shrine was located in the area where Russian villages and Estonian farmsteads were situated alternately. *Peshchorka* did not belong at that time to any particular village, as it does now. At the present it is “a property” of the village of Trutnevo that was founded in the 1930s as a collective-farm centre. An extensive cattle-breeding farm was built soon after on the bank of a small river, the Kuna, very close to the sacred place. Before the churches were closed in the 1920s by Soviet officials, once a year on the Sixth Friday after Easter<sup>1</sup> people organized religious processions from the church in the village of Kunest’ to this place (the distance between the church and the cave is about 10 kilometres). According to some evidence, these processions and services were organized after World War II by local religious activists, that is, women who assumed the role of priests as a result of anti-religious campaign. Later on people continued to venerate this place without a priest, church services or religious processions.

The inner topography of *Peshchorka* is a combination of a stone with “God’s footprint” on it, a stream, and a cave, which is rather



**Photo 1.** *Father Constantine with parish activists. Two of them are “keepers” of Peshcherka. Feast of Sixth Friday (Shestaia piatnitsa) in 2001.*

typical for local sacred sites in North-West Russia (see Panchenko 1998: 77). The walls of the cave (it is red sandstone) are completely covered with engravings. These are names written mostly in Cyrillic and in some cases in Latin alphabet, containing certain dates (see Photo 4). The earliest inscription we found dated to the end of the 19th century. It must be noted that none of the local inhabitants said that he or she had ever written their name on the wall. Most likely these graffiti were made by pilgrims, and they could serve as an evidence of popularity of this place as early as at the end of the 19th century. Local inhabitants considered these inscriptions to be just “letters”, sometimes even “sacred letters”, “non-Russian letters” and not names. Probably telling this they had in mind a text of a Prayer of the Repentant Sinner “Pomiani mia, Gosподи, vo tsarstvii tvoem” (“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” Luke 23: 42) which had been engraved on the wall of the cave with big letters in Old Russian spelling. Local inhabitants had no idea of how and when these letters emerged. Some local people told that when hooligan teenagers or adult atheists tried to rub these letters off the engravings appeared miraculously again.



**Photo 2.** A boy places a candle into the box of sand near the stone with Our Lady's footprint. Feast of Kazanskaia (Feast of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan'). July 21, 2000.

## PILGRIMS

Until recently, pilgrimage has remained an unexplored aspect of religious life in modern Russia. Over the last decade some historical investigations on pilgrimage have been carried out,<sup>2</sup> but the anthropological study of pilgrimage in Russia is still at the very beginning of its development. The study of pilgrimage was influenced by certain shift in anthropology, which began with the publication of Victor and Edith Turner's monograph "Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture" (1978) and continued some years later with many articles and books on the subject (for the discussion on ideas and approaches concerning anthropology of pilgrimage see Coleman 2002).

In contemporary Russia one can observe different styles of pilgrimage. The differences depend, first of all, on the institution that organizes the trip – this can, for example, be a travel agency which sells religious trips the same way as other types of leisure, or an independent pilgrimage agency which, as a rule, organizes short-term pilgrimages by bus, or activists of a certain parish or religious

society. Thus, we can even speak about a market for services in religious travel in present-day Russia. The travellers' choice depends on a variety of reasons such as their personal aims, peculiarities of their religious culture, previous travel experiences, etc.

Pilgrims who visit *Peshchorka* on the Sixth Friday are mainly women in their forties-fifties who live in the neighbouring towns of Gdov and Slantzy. It seems that in this case modern pilgrimage has in some respects followed the organised tourist trips typical of the Soviet period. People arrive at the shrine in buses ordered specially for this pilgrimage – the same way as in Soviet times they travelled to Estonia to shop by bus arranged by the trade union or simply by some single activist. Besides the similarities in the mode of travel, Soviet tourism and contemporary pilgrimage share a similar function – in both cases the tour serves as a collective experience and a means of socialisation.

The pilgrimage groups travelling by bus differ from traditional pilgrims who come by car or on foot from neighbouring villages. Traditional pilgrims visited shrines because they made a vow (*po obetu*) and had to keep their spiritual promise (see Shchepanskaia 1995: 118–126). It seems that this kind of practice of an individual vow is



**Photo 3.** A service at *Peshcherka* on the Feast of *Kazanskaya* (Feast of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan'). July 21, 2000.

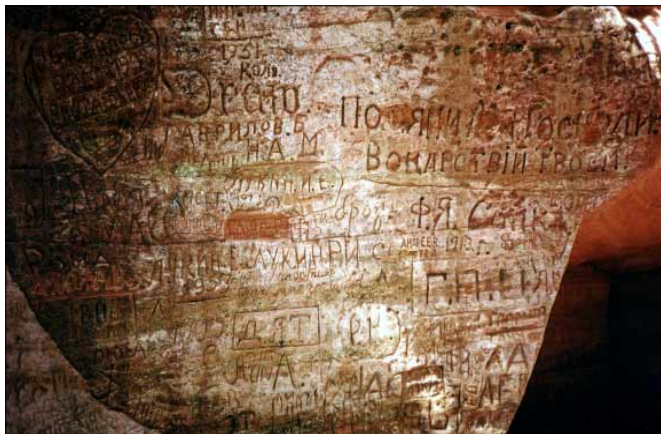


Photo 4. A fragment of a wall of the cave with inscriptions in 2000.

one of the very important differences between traditional pilgrimage and modern religious tourism.<sup>3</sup> Most contemporary pilgrims coming from neighbouring towns have a previous experience of pilgrimage; they consider this particular local shrine as one among many other places of the sort. The aim of the trip is to collect impressions, experience local exotica and restore one's health. Therefore, it is quite logical, that the core narrative repertoire of pilgrims (and for pilgrims as well) consists of stories about miraculous healing that took place at a sacred place.

In the case of *Peshchorka* this is a story of a woman called Nina (now in her seventies) from the town of Slantzy. She got hurt in a mining accident and was miraculously healed at *Peshchorka* at the beginning of the 1970s. This case was described in a local newspaper "Gdovskaia zaria" at the end of the 1990s (Egorov 1997). Even now Nina comes to *Peshchorka* from time to time and she is a highly respected person there. According to the words of the local priest, some "Christian cameraman" made even a video recording (ca 40 minutes) of her storytelling. Narratives like Nina's are oriented to pilgrims and at the same time they are transmitted by pilgrims (Shtyrkov 2002: 92–93). Simultaneously, these stories advertise the place (the church, the parish, the village or town) and help to rise

its value on the emergent market of sacred places, or, as William Christian wrote, to put it on the map (Christian 1981: 105).

In transmitting and supporting this story the “keepers” of the shrine play a very important role. These are people who take care of the shrine and at the same time they endeavour to achieve the status of religious experts and to gain control over the sacred place. “Keepers” manifest to know how and why to worship at the shrine. Usually they live near the shrine. “Keepers” appear if a shrine becomes a place of pilgrimage from afar (see Shchepanskaia 1995), and they play an active part in advertising the sacred place.

## **LOCAL PEOPLE**

To maintain a tradition of worship people need at least (1) a sacred object, (2) the date of celebration of the sacred place, (3) knowledge of how to act at the sacred place, in other words, knowledge of its function, and (4) a narrative confirming the sanctity of the object. In other words, myth (narratives) and ritual (practices of worship) are necessary. During the years of anti-religious campaign the Soviet authorities mainly struggled against religious practices. They started physical destruction of the “objects of religious cult”. Thus, in Trutnevo the stone with a God’s footprint was turned over and moved from its original place. A dairy-farm and pigsty were constructed on the bank of the stream near *Peshchorka*. In this way Soviet authorities violated the sanctity of the place following the same pattern of breaking the norm manifested in historical legends about foreign invaders who stabled their horses in churches. In addition, authorities refused to allow a holiday on the Sixth Friday. On the other hand, the anti-religious activities of the Soviet authorities assisted in keeping the tradition of worshipping at sacred places alive. In contemporary peasant culture narratives about punishment following the sacrilege often serve as a “myth” that sanctions the worship of a sacred locus. These stories are known almost all over Russia. Though their popularity is based on historical occurrences, the stories with specific plots and rhetoric appeared in religious folklore because the narrative scheme used in them already existed in folk tradition (see Shtyrkov 2001). It is quite possible that before the Soviet period, the ritual practices carried out at

the sacred site were explained and sanctioned by the etiological legends maintained and transmitted by religious specialists, “keepers” of a given shrine.

The plot of these stories is very simple: a person (or persons) violates the sanctity of a sacred place (it could be a church, a chapel, a holy tree, a spring, etc.) and later on he (or sometimes she) is punished (dies or suffers from some accident or illness). For example, a person who chops an icon in two with an axe is then himself chopped into halves by a train. A girl who is the first to go and dance in a village club, opened in the former church, becomes paralyzed. In the folklore of *Peshchorka* the “heroes” of such stories are struck dumb. For example, one of the legends is about a certain person, named Iakovlev, who was a collective farm director and went on the Sixth Friday to *Peshchorka* to forbid people to visit the place. He swore at believers and when he was paralyzed he could say nothing but obscene words.

In all such stories the persons who commit sacrilege at *Peshcherka* are inhabitants of the village of Trutnevo. These narratives stress that the sacred place is a part of the intimate life of the village, and that it belongs to the community. The folklore related to the sacred place reflects local history – the times of building the collective farm, anti-religious campaigns, the German occupation, as well as the restoration of churches. It also preserves family histories – for example, that of Iakovlev’s family. Thus, a sacred place may function as the carrier of objectified memory. At the same time local inhabitants may use it in order to construct and represent their collective identity. An Estonian woman (born 1927), who lives in Trutnevo, told us that when she was a child the family names written on the wall of the cave were Estonian. As the sand of the wall crumbled, these names disappeared. New (mainly Russian) names, which we can see now, were written later in the place of Estonian ones. This is way she stated that the sacred place belonged earlier to Estonians, as they were, according to her knowledge, the natives in the area.

For the local people a village sacred place may function as a substitute for a church. While strangers visit *Peshchorka* only on the Sixth Friday then local believers used to come and still come to the



shrine on other religious holidays and Sundays: “We go there like if it were a church, but without a priest” (woman, born in 1923). On Easter local people take water from the river near the shrine as if it is a holy water shared in the church after the service. It can be used to sanctify a house and a yard on this great religious holiday. It is no wonder that among narratives explaining the sanctity of the shrine there is the rather traditional motive of a church that fell through the earth.

*Informant: I've heard from Antonina Mikhailovna... of course she is an inventive soul, but still... she told that a church fell through the earth in very old times...*

*Researcher: On that place?*

*Informant: On that place. Since then there is a cave on that place... And people always go there to take some water in the sixth week after the Easter. (Woman, born in 1950s, arrived from Tver' region about 20 years ago).*

*You see, as the legend says... how they told this... my great grandmother would tell. So, they told that there was a church some time ago. And it fell through the earth. And – I think it happened as early as twenty years ago – a cross appeared at the top of the hill on the Sixth Friday. And what – they've taken it out. (Woman, born in 1922).*



*Photo 5. The stone with Our Lady's footprint in 2000.*

## PRIEST

Since the middle of the 1990s, the local priest Father Constantine has revitalised worship at *Peshchorka*. He has started to restore the church and conduct services in the village of Vetvennik. The village of Trutnevo belongs to his parish and he supports active worship at this sacred place. He organizes religious processions every year on Sixth Friday, arranges pilgrimage tours from towns and, what is the most interesting for us, tries to adapt existing practices of worshipping to the church canon. He is concerned about the fact that the holiness of the shrine is maintained only at the level of local folk tradition. He has not found yet any written evidence, which can be used as proof of the sanctity of the place. His aim now is to transform the current facts of oral tradition into canonical texts and practices, which would be accepted by the Orthodox Church. Father Constantine wishes to build a chapel in this place, and he actively propagates his own variant of the etiological narrative on the appearance of Our Lady's footprint on the stone in *Peshchorka*. He has published an article about this miracle in the local newspaper and he always tells his story during the sermons he gives at *Peshchorka*. He receives support in his activities from local religious activists and one of them even dreams of having an icon of Our Lady of Trutnevo painted.<sup>4</sup>

The priest's narrative is a story about the landlord Trutnev who decided to build a watermill on the small river near the cave. But his workers failed to make a dam: every morning the part that had been built was found destroyed. On the third night one of the workers decided to find out who was destroying the dam. He did not sleep and saw a lady in white with a child in her arms. Next morning this worker told the landlord about the scene he had seen and the old men said that this was a sign that the place was sacred. The dam was built then 300 meters away from the place of this vision.

The story of the local priest contains some common Christian motifs, such as the destroying of a building erected at a sacred place, or the apparition of the Virgin as a lady in white. At the same time the whole story sounds like a production of a local librarian or a history teacher rather than a religious legend. Thus, it is evident that in order to explain existing worshipping activities the priest

preferred to invent by himself a story about the origin of the footprint on the stone. He had some artefacts at his disposal (the stone, the ruins of the mill, the name of the village – Trutnevo), and some motifs borrowed from church literature. This story and in particular the motif of Our Lady as a woman in white is known only to the people in the priest's close circle. Local inhabitants do not know how to tell this story yet.

### **“KEEPERS” OF THE SHRINE**

The mission of the priest (and the church as a whole) is to educate his flock and teach peasants how to practice religion. Father Constantine's closest followers spread their new knowledge, including the etiological legend composed by the priest, among other local people. However, this task is hard because the majority of the parish activists are outsiders as far as the local inhabitants are concerned and do not have authority among them. I will mention here two parish activists, Agnessa and Lidia, who share the right to serve as the keepers of the sacred place. Both women claim to be responsible for the sacred place; both of them try to show their competence in respect of religious practices and beliefs connected with *Peshchorka*; both demonstrate their connections with pilgrims and above-mentioned Nina who was miraculously healed at this place.

Agnessa is an Estonian, born in 1930 in the farmstead in the area of Trutnevo. In her childhood she was baptized as a Lutheran, and only few years ago after her mother's death she asked the priest in Gdov to baptize her as an Orthodox. She was baptized, and got a new name Alla. As Fr. Constantine said, he and the people of his circle called her in jest “the keeper of *Peshchorka*”. Her house is located very close to this place; she keeps candles and sells them at *Peshchorka* on religious festivals. As Agnessa claims, Nina from Slanzy used to stay in her place when she visited *Peshchorka*. She is opposed to local people because of her ethnic background and religious behaviour. Agnessa knows well the local narrative tradition concerning the sacred place (the punishment for sacrilege), but at the same time her repertoire includes narratives about pilgrims (miraculous healing), and these stories told by the priest. It is interesting that she has produced her own variant of the story about

the apparition of a lady in white at *Peshchorka* experienced by a young girl. These narratives are in fact based on a very typical motive spread in both Orthodox and Catholic tradition. The fact that apparitions recur from time to time proves the actual sanctity of the shrine.

Researcher: *Does Our Lady appear to anybody at present?*

Informant: *Well... I do not know, nobody tells such stories now. Not now... When my sister was a child – she was born in 1943 – have you seen that big stone on the left side? She told she had gathered flowers, raised her head and saw a lady in white. She was in white from the head to the feet. My sister was scared and ran away. She was a child, you know, children are innocent, they can have apparitions...*

Lidia (born in the late 1930s), the second candidate for the position of the “keeper” of *Peshchorka*, came to Trutnevo six or seven years ago from Ukraine (Rovno province). She shares a rather different folklore and religious tradition. While in her native village in Ukraine she used to go to church every Sunday and on holidays, at her new place she has not had such an opportunity. The distance between her house and the nearest church is about 10 kilometres and there is no regular transport connection. At the same time there were no rural sacred places in her native village and therefore she does not know such an important practice typical of religious folklore of north-western Russia as *zavet* ‘a holy vow’. Nevertheless, she participates actively in taking care of the sacred place. Her sons erected a big wooden cross on the bank of the river and a table for icons in the cave. Obviously, she does not know local narrative tradition and cannot tell stories about sacrilege. She knows the pilgrims’ stories of Nina’s healing and the priest’s story about apparition of the Lady in white.

Paradoxically, these women try to use religion and church for socialisation as well as to achieve social position and prestige, but in fact they have reached the opposite result. To be too close to the church means to be a stranger in the opinion of local people. As a matter of fact, nowadays in many cases in rural areas the church is almost the only official institution which works properly, and priests together with activists of parishes take care not only of the souls of their parishioners but also solve practical everyday problems of the

village. Perhaps, those people who in Soviet times would have done social work as members of the Communist Party or trade union activists, now do it in the name of church. Church gives a chance to take an active part in social life that is especially important for people with a weak social position like migrants or representatives of minorities.

### **THE CASE OF MARIA**

Maria was born in 1930, and arrived in the Gdov region from the Bryansk province twenty years ago. She does not pretend to be a religious leader as Agnessa and especially Lidia do. Like Lidia, before coming to Gdov region, she lived in an area where people used to go to church in the Soviet times. Though she is Russian ethnically, she speaks a south-Russian dialect that differs from north-Russian dialect and, of course, she has a specific cultural background. Characteristically, she was amazed that local people were unwilling to help the priest to restore their church and do not attend services on religious festivals. She gathered money in villages for the church restoration (the priest asked her to do this); she keeps fasts, gives towels and mats to the church. She does not compare *Peshchorka* with a church. Her vows (work on the restoration or decoration, the bringing of flowers and towels) are always connected with churches, not with the village sacred place as it is for local people. It is important to note that the local inhabitants criticize her for her piety. Such a life style, keeping the fasts and going to the church differs considerably from that of local people. Incidentally, she is the only person whose etiological legend about *Peshchorka* locates it in the Christian sacred history. She says that when King Herod gave orders to slaughter all the innocent children, Our Lady with her child (he was about three or four years old; according to her story, he could walk) had hidden herself in the cowshed. It was a *kolkhoz* cowshed in Trutnevo, located just by the cave. They left their footprints on the stone there. In her story Maria reproduces a very typical motive for her native folk tradition about the escape to Egypt reflected in various folklore texts and in *vertep*<sup>5</sup> performances of folk theatre.

Maria has not adopted local narratives about the shrine – the fact that proves that she has not been integrated into local society. She remains a migrant living in a kind of isolation. Her voice is not audible in the choir narrating the sanctity of the shrine because of at least two reasons. First, she is too ill to participate in pilgrimage and thus she cannot reproduce regularly her story for other people as the priest or Agnessa do. Second, she is a stranger and has not enough authority to draw attention to her version of the story. However, she holds her own variant of the legend and insists that she learned it from local women with whom they worked as milkmaids at the cowshed in Trutnevo.

## CONCLUSION

In our case study of the rural sacred place *Peshchorka* we found different styles of religiosity, or different religious cultures, which coexist and sometimes compete with each other. They are present in both the narrative repertoire and the religious practices of people who worship at the same sacred place. Probably, this diversity of religious discourses recognizable in contemporary Russian Orthodox Church could be explained as the result of weak control by the institution (the Church) of how its flock practices religion. At the same time this diversity is quite normal (see examples in MacClancy & Parkin 1997; Frey 1998; Chulos 1999). People believe that the locus they venerate is sacred. It is the task of a priest to dress the sacred in a proper style. He has to accommodate folk religiosity to official religion. Thus, he tries to turn a stone with some “God’s footprint” on it into one among the many sacred stones avowed by Russian Orthodox Church. This “God” receives a name, and a sacred place receives its written history. The priest interprets the sacred place according to the rules of religious discourse he shares. So do other visitors of the shrine. They attach different meanings to it using their own strategies of interpretation.

## Comments

<sup>1</sup> The church did not celebrate *Shestaia piatnitsa* ‘the Sixth Friday’ as a holiday. It is a folk tradition to choose Fridays to venerate the local shrine or as a day to celebrate *prestol’nyi prazdnik* of the village.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Chulos 1999, Vedernikova 2002, Poplavskaja 2001, Tarabukina 2000, Shchepanskaia 1995.

<sup>3</sup> The individual holy vow as a traditional religious practice exists in different parts of the Christian world. See, for example, *promesas* in Italy (Frey 1998: 32), *táma* in Greece (Dubisch 1990: 126–127), *zavety* in Russia (Shchepanskaia 1995: 118–120; Panchenko 1998: 82).

<sup>4</sup> One pilgrimage agency in St. Petersburg on its leaders’ own initiative, without any consultation with local priest or “keepers”, ordered a priest in Leningrad province to paint an icon of Our Lady of Trutnevo. This agency has included Peshchorka in its list of sacred places for pilgrimage destinations. The organizers (two women) gathered money from pilgrims and paid the painter, but at the time when this article was written he had not yet finished his work.

<sup>5</sup> *Vertep* is a Christmas folk puppet show, which was spread in the Ukraine, Belorussia, in some regions of Russia, Poland, Czech, etc. *Vertep* performances represented Christmas events (birth of Jesus Christ, worship of shepherds and wizards, slaughter of the innocent children), and King Herod was one of the main characters of these performances.

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