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Sibgatullina, G.

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# Chapter 6

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## **Daniil Sysoev: Mission and Martyrdom**

Part II of this thesis examines the process of how the Tatar language is being transformed to accommodate the religious needs not only of Muslims but also of Christians, and looks at the main powers behind this transformation. The first case study<sup>1</sup> in this part zooms in on the linguistic and discursive strategies of another religious entrepreneur, Orthodox Christian priest Daniil Sysoev, who in the early 2000s embodied the new type of Orthodox mission, more assertive and proselytism-oriented. Sysoev operated at the margins of the ROC and aimed to reintroduce the practices of Orthodox Christian brotherhoods working in the nineteenth-century Volga-Ural region; Sysoev and his followers actively engaged in missionary activities among Tatars and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, placing great emphasis on the translation of religious literature into vernaculars. Sysoev, I argue, was a harbinger of future transformations within the Church, when an intrusive Orthodox Christian activism developed from being a marginal practice into a mainstream practice.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published as G. Sibgatullina, "Daniil Sysoev: Mission and Martyrdom," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28:2 (2017), 163-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0959-6410.2017.1287484>.

## 6.1 Introduction

Like the previous case study on Polosin, this case study focuses on a religious entrepreneur and his rhetorical and linguistic practices, which influenced the mainstream discourse on religion. In this chapter, I will discuss the life and works of a charismatic and sharp-tongued preacher, Daniil Sysoev (1974-2009) (Figure 4),<sup>1</sup> who was exceptionally productive as a writer, lecturer and blogger. He was instrumental in the conversion of a number of people to Orthodox Christianity, and today some of his serious followers, such as Dmitrii Tsorionov, represent the ROC's ultra-conservative wing. Yet Sysoev's hard-line approach also made him some serious enemies, and in 2009 he was gunned down by unknown assailants. Sysoev's ambiguous personality and his provocative contribution to Muslim-Christian relations in post-Soviet Russia continues to feed disputes in both academic circles and religious communities: was he a radical Orthodox zealot or a true devotee who died as a martyr? Did he transform the Church tradition from a narrow ethnic subculture into a broader home accessible not only for *russkie*, but also for Muslim-born Tatars, migrants from Central Asia and even foreigners? Or, on the contrary, was he the *enfant terrible* of the ROC,<sup>2</sup> who undermined its carefully constructed image as a tolerant big brother in relation to Russia's other "traditional" religions?

Like Polosin, Sysoev started at the margins of the religious community. In Patriarch Aleksii's time, he advocated that the Church should take a more assertive approach to mission. He criticized the ROC for what he believed was its inappropriately mild stance in interreligious relations; he actively translated literature into the languages of ethnic minorities and confronted non-believers and adherents of other faiths in personal and public debates. In hindsight, Sysoev appears to have been a trailblazer for a change in the ROC's strategy. However, this view obscures the fact that Sysoev's criticism of the ROC was much more fundamental and more comprehensive than just a different position on mission strategy, as this chapter will demonstrate.

The ROC's new policy seems to indicate a return to the Orthodox Christian mission of the Tsarist era, when mission focused primarily on "Russification", that is, on the assimilation of the *inorodtsy* – the old umbrella term for non-Christian peoples of the Volga-Ural region and the North Caucasus – and on preventing apostasy among social groups that had been baptized over the centuries, such as the Kräshen Tatars.

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<sup>1</sup> The photo source: *PravMir.ru*, <[www.pravmir.ru/10-besed-svyashhennika-daniila-sysoeva-video/](http://www.pravmir.ru/10-besed-svyashhennika-daniila-sysoeva-video/)> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy*, p. 129.

Today, the Missionary Department of the ROC targets Muslim immigrants from Central Asia, using Orthodox Christian teaching to motivate them to integrate into Russian society.



Figure 4. Daniil Sysoev (1974–2009)

Section 6.2 sketches Sysoev's image in the eyes of posterity, as shaped by the memoirs of his family members, friends and followers. They portray him as a faithful Orthodox Christian who died at the hands of an unbeliever. This hagiographical trend contrasts with information acquired through interviews with two academics who knew him. Section 6.3 discusses Sysoev's ideology of "uranopolitism", and its relation to the official patriotic discourse of the ROC and the state. Sysoev's evangelism among Muslims is analysed in Section 6.4 6.4 Evangelism among Muslims which argues that he adopted many of the strategies employed by missionaries of the Kazan Theological Seminary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for work among Russia's Muslims, in particular the use of Muslims' vernacular languages in church rites and sermons, and the engagement of Muslim opponents in theological disputes.<sup>3</sup> As Sysoev appears to have pioneered a new form of Church-society interaction, the last section of

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<sup>3</sup> Geraci, *Window on the East*; P.W. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); M.W. Johnson, *Imperial Commission for Orthodox Mission: Nikolai Il'minskii's Work among the Tatars of Kazan, 1862-1891* (PhD thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2005); D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Know Thine Enemy: The Travails of the Kazan School of Russian Missionary Orientalology", in *Religion and Identity in Russia and the Soviet Union: a Festschrift for Paul Bushkovitch*, ed. N. Chrissidis et al. (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2011), 145-64; among others.

the chapter situates him in the context of the increasing Church-state rapprochement under Patriarch Kirill.

## 6.2 The making of a saint

Born in Moscow in 1974, Daniil Sysoev descended from a family with strong religious convictions. His maternal great-grandfather had reportedly been a Tatar *imām* who traced his genealogy back to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>4</sup> Sysoev's parents accepted baptism in 1977, in the period of "deep stagnation (*zastoi*), when everyone seemed to have forgotten about the Church".<sup>5</sup> His father, Aleksei Sysoev, eventually became a priest, and is still serving in the St Peter and St Paul Church in a southern district of Moscow, where in 1990 he established the Radonezh-Iasenovo Orthodox classical gymnasium.<sup>6</sup>

According to family members, even as a child Daniil Sysoev was fascinated by religious rites: "Instead of children's games he had liturgies and sermons; he used to stand in the middle of the room preaching to hanging towels".<sup>7</sup> In 1991, he enrolled at the Moscow Theological Seminary (*Moskovskaia dukhovnaia seminariia*). His classmates remember that he was regarded as a fast learner (*samouchka*), but also as a parvenu (*vyskochka*) and even a dogmatist (*nachetchik*): a hot-head who refused to accept the authority of teachers and clerics.<sup>8</sup>

Sysoev began his first missionary activities as early as 1993. With the Bible in hand, he preached on the streets, and started to have disputes with missionaries of what he called "false doctrines" or "sects", from Jehovah's Witnesses to Protestants to Satan worshippers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I. Sysoeva and T. Kuropatov, "Matushka Iuliia Sysoeva: Ob ottse Daniile, schast'e, chudesakh i muchenichestve", *Pravmir.ru*, 17 December 2009 <<http://www.pravmir.ru/matushka-yuliya-sysoeva-ob-otce-daniile-schaste-chudesax-i-muchenichestve/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>5</sup> A. Sysoeva, "Vospominaniia o detstve Daniila", in *Obrativshii mnogikh k pravde...*, ed. T. Podosinkina (Moscow: Prikhod khrama proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi "Tri Sestry", 2012), 5-24. Here p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Boris Knorre, associate professor at National Research University Higher School of Economics. Conducted in Moscow, 20 October 2014.

<sup>7</sup> E. Suprycheva, "Mat' ubitogo sviashchennika Daniila Sysoeva: 'On gotovil menia k svoiei smerti!'", *Blagovest-info*, 24 November 2009 <<http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=7&id=31046>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>8</sup> A. Lymarev, "Zhizn' za Khrista", in *Obrativshii mnogikh k pravde...*, ed. T. Podosinkina (Moscow: Prikhod khrama proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi, "Tri Sestry", 2012), 25-47. Here p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> O. Vladimirtsev, "Nekotorye aspekty missii sredi inovertsev na primere o. Daniila Sysoeva", *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 2011 <[http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2011/11/19/nekotorye\\_aspekty\\_missii\\_sredi\\_inovercev\\_na\\_primere\\_o\\_daniila\\_sysoeva](http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2011/11/19/nekotorye_aspekty_missii_sredi_inovercev_na_primere_o_daniila_sysoeva)> (Accessed on 21 November 2017).

After graduating in 1995, Sysoev was ordained as a deacon, and started conducting Bible-based conversations with people who had fallen under the influence of these “sects”. These meetings took place in an official institutional setting – the Krutitsy Patriarchal Metochion (*Krutitskoe Patriarshee podvor’e*). Sysoev later analysed the experience gained during these conversations for his candidate degree thesis (titled “Anthropology and Analysis of the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Watchtower Society”), which he defended in 2000 at the Moscow Ecclesiastical Academy (*Moskovskaia dukhovnaia akademiia*).<sup>10</sup> A year later he started to work as a priest.

His fellow students report that already as a seminarian, Sysoev longed for martyrdom. He used to say: “It is good to become a martyr or to retire in a monastery at the end of your life, so that you complete your life as one of the great hermits (*podvizhniki*)”.<sup>11</sup> Sysoev explained his attraction to martyrdom in his online book *Instruction for Immortals, or What to Do if You Die*: “The death of a martyr washes away (*smyvaet*) all sins, except heresy and schism. All other sins – like lechery, murder, adultery – [can] be forgiven”.<sup>12</sup> By a strange coincidence, Sysoev was acquainted with a priest who did become a martyr: in 1988, when he took part in restoration works at the Optina Monastery, he met hieromonk Vasilii (Rosliakov), one of three monks who would be murdered in 1993, for reasons that are unclear.<sup>13</sup>

On the night of 19 November 2009, Daniil Sysoev was himself shot dead after leading a service in St Thomas’s Church, a temporary wooden chapel that Sysoev had constructed in Moscow.<sup>14</sup> The investigative agencies saw a religious motive behind the murder, as Sysoev had repeatedly received death threats. Several weeks prior to his assassination, Sysoev stated in his LiveJournal blog:

I have some news again. You’ll laugh, but today Muslims again promised to kill me. This time on the phone. I am really tired of this. It is already the fourteenth time. [Such death threats] used to bother me, but I get used to that. Islam cannot hurt those who enjoy God’s help. But I ask you all to pray for me.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> D. Sysoev, “You Wish to See Many Miracles–You Should Become a Missionary or a Martyr”, *Orthodoxy and the World*, 25 November 2009 <[http://www.pravmir.com/article\\_793.html](http://www.pravmir.com/article_793.html)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Lymarev, “Zhizn’ za Khrista”, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> D. Sysoev, *Instruktsiia dlia bessmertnikh ili chto delat’, esli Vy vse-taki umerli* (Moscow: Blagovest, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Although Rosliakov and the other two monks have never been officially canonized, they are known as the ‘Optina martyrs’ (*Optinskie mucheniki*).

<sup>14</sup> Rosbalt, “Otvetstvennost’ za ubiistvo Daniila Sysoeva vziali islamisty”, *Rosbalt*, 26 December 2009 <<http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2009/12/26/700646.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>15</sup> D. Sysoev, “Dobrye musul’mane”, *LiveJournal*, 9 October 2009 <<https://pr-daniil.livejournal.com/56-054.html>> (Accessed on 2 June 2018). In his LiveJournal entry, Sysoev changed the Russian expression

The Russian media were initially very vague about the possible perpetrators, stating that they could come from among “radical Islamists or some sectarians, for example, pagans”.<sup>16</sup> But on 25 December 2009, radical Islamists associated with the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz) claimed responsibility for the “liquidation of Allāh’s enemy Sysoev”: “One of our brothers – a person who himself has never been to the Caucasus – made an oath of allegiance to Abu Usman [Dokku Umarov, the self-proclaimed leader of the Emirate], and expressed his desire to execute the damned Sysoev”. Anyone “who dares to open his mouth to defame Islam and Muslims will share Sysoev’s fate”.<sup>17</sup> Several months later, law enforcement officers in Makhachkala (Dagestan) killed a citizen of Kirgizstan, Beksultan Karibekov, when he resisted arrest. There were allegations that Karibekov had killed the priest in Moscow and was in contact with the well-known militant Islamist Said Buriatskii,<sup>18</sup> but the investigative agencies later denied this.<sup>19</sup> Some commentators even argued that Sysoev was assassinated because of a personal conflict with “representatives of construction business”, over the land where he had built his church.

The case of Sysoev’s death is still not closed, and neither is the debate about whether he should be regarded as a modern martyr. While his followers call for Sysoev’s official canonization as a saint, the relevant Synodical Commission (*Sinodal’naia komissiiia po kanonizatsii sviatykh*) prevaricates: the secretary of the Commission has argued that, due to the unclear circumstances of Sysoev’s murder, it cannot be determined with certainty whether he deliberately chose to die, which is a prerequisite for canonization.<sup>20</sup> Many churchmen and believers nevertheless revere him as a martyr, simply for the way he lived, and for the fact that he died a violent death. After all, the Russian word for ‘martyr’ (*muchenik*) is related to *muchenie* (‘torment’) and *muka* (‘torture’), highlighting the “physical” aspect of martyrdom, regardless of the victim’s intention. And even Patriarch Kirill, in his letter of condolence, called Sysoev

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*Bog ne vydash, svin’ia ne s’ est* (lit. ‘if God is merciful no swine will devour me’), replacing the word ‘swine’ with ‘Islam’.

<sup>16</sup> NewsRU, “Moskovskogo sviashchennika Daniila Sysoeva zastrelili po religiozным motivam, priznaiet SKP”, *NewsRu*, 20 November 2009 <<http://www.newsru.com/religy/20nov2009/sysoyev.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Hunafa, “Likvidatsiia vraga Allakha Sysoeva”, *Hunafa*, 25 December 2009 <<http://hunafa.com/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi?p=2522>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Garaev, “Jihad as Passionarity”.

<sup>19</sup> Interfax, “Ubiitsa ottsa Daniila Sysoeva mog vkhodit’ v bandu Saida Buriatskogo”, *Interfax*, 16 March 2010 <<http://www.interfax-russia.ru/South/main.asp?id=131347&p=20>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>20</sup> M. Maksimov, “Ubity, no ne proslavleny”, *Neskuchnyi sad*, 8 February 2011 <[http://www.religare.ru/2\\_83-226.html](http://www.religare.ru/2_83-226.html)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).



"a martyr for sharing the Evangelical message (*muchenik za delo Evangel'skogo Blagovestiia*)",<sup>21</sup> which implies that the canonization of Sysoev may just be a matter of time.<sup>22</sup>

### 6.3 *Uranopolitism* versus patriotism

In his approach to religious mission, Sysoev clearly departed from the official ROC line. In 1995, the Church published its "Conception for the Revival of ROC Missionary Activity" (*Kontseptsiiia vrozozhdeniia missionerskoi deiatel'nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*), and established a special Synodical Missionary Department (*Sinodal'nyi Missionerskii Otdel*), but programmatic documents on ROC missionary work remained very moderate in their tone and goals: a 2007 document, entitled "The Conception of Missionary Work of the Russian Orthodox Church" (*Kontseptsiiia missionerskoi deiatel'nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*), urged Orthodox Christians to conduct "a mission of dialogue" and "of reconciliation", based on "missionary friendliness, openness, social responsiveness", and without getting involved "in extremist activities".<sup>23</sup> The ROC was obviously anxious to avoid conflicts with the other major religions in Russia and emphasized its respect for the rules of the secular state.

The assertive style of Sysoev's missionary activities clearly placed him beyond the scope of these regulations. Sysoev disagreed with the "defensive" mode of the ROC in interfaith relations and rejected the established consensus that discouraged active evangelism as a means to spread the word of God.<sup>24</sup> For Sysoev, a good attack was the best defence.

Sysoev's criticism of the ROC is embodied in his concept of *uranopolitism*, with which he questioned the increasingly patriotic discourse of the ROC in Putin's Russia. According to Sysoev,<sup>25</sup> Christians are "just wanderers and aliens" in this world, because

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<sup>21</sup> Patriarch Kirill, "Patriarshee soboleznovanie v sviazi s gibel'iu sviashchennika Daniila Sysoeva", *The official website of the Moscow Patriarchate* 2009 <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/940065.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>22</sup> K. Sakharov, "Kanonizatsiia sviashchennika Daniila Sysoeva—delo vremeni", *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 26 November 2014 <[http://ruskline.ru/special\\_opinion/2014/11/kanonizaciya\\_svyawennika\\_daniila\\_sysoeva\\_de-lo\\_vremeni/](http://ruskline.ru/special_opinion/2014/11/kanonizaciya_svyawennika_daniila_sysoeva_de-lo_vremeni/)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Kontseptsiiia, "Kontseptsiiia missionerskoi deiatel'nosti Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi", *The official website of the Moscow Patriarchate*, 27 March 2007 <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/220922.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>24</sup> D. Sysoev, "Pokhvala prozelitizmu", *Missionerskii tsentr*, n.d. <<http://mail.mission-shop.com/index.php/ru/publicatsii/583-2009-12-30-00-52-53.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>25</sup> D. Sysoev, "Uranopolitizm i patriotism", *Uranopolitizm*, 2009 <<https://uranopolitizm.wordpress.com/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

their real citizenship will only come in Heaven. *Uranopolitism* (from Greek *ouranos* 'sky; heaven', and *polis* 'city') implies the supremacy of divine laws over terrestrial/secular legislation. Sysoev believed that the main and only kinship among people is "not blood or country of origin, but kinship in Christ".<sup>26</sup>

In denying any correlation between religion and ethnicity/nationality, Sysoev challenged one of the very fundamentals of Russian (*ruskii*) identity: since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Orthodoxy has been promoted as an important component of Russianness (see also the discussion in Section 2.3.1 of this thesis).<sup>27</sup> Sysoev challenged this conception by arguing that nations only result from the arrogance of "those who built the Tower [of Babel]"; a person who over-emphasizes his or her ethnic background and connection with a given country "builds the same Tower, namely the Terrestrial Kingdom".<sup>28</sup>

By insisting that the Orthodox Church must be open to all nationalities, Sysoev asserted that a firm believer must not be a patriot: one cannot be devoted to both the terrestrial motherland and God, for this would mean "serving two masters".<sup>29</sup> Such an idea could have many implications. If patriotism is not a religious virtue, Orthodox Christians should not condemn persons accused of having betrayed their native land. Sysoev elaborated on this with the examples of the White Army General Anton Denikin (1872–1947) and the Soviet defector to the Nazis, General Andrei Vlasov (1901–1946), both regarded in modern Russian historiography as traitors. According to Sysoev, the Bible does not include "high treason in its list of sins": even a person who has committed war crimes can be acquitted by God's mercy, and can enter Heaven, if he or she repents.<sup>30</sup>

While the official Church sees patriotism as an obligation for a believer,<sup>31</sup> Sysoev argued that these are false convictions that provoke God's anger. When in the summer

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church*; Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*.

<sup>28</sup> D. Sysoev, "Otvét Dmitrii Anatol'evichu (no ne Medvedevu)", *LiveJournal*, 18 October 2009 <<http://pr-daniil.livejournal.com/47465.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Sysoev, "Uranopolitizm i patriotism".

<sup>30</sup> D. Sysoev, "2 Mirovaia voina i chestnost'", *LiveJournal*, 10 September 2009 <<http://pr-daniil.livejournal.com/48610.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016); D. Sysoev, "Uranopoliticheskie kriterii otsenki istorii", *LiveJournal*, 7 September 2009 <<http://pr-daniil.livejournal.com/47465.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., O. Steniaev, "Khristianstvo i patriotism", *Pravoslavie.ru*, 14 June 2007 <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/94102.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

of 2009 bad maintenance led to a serious accident at the hydro-power station in Khakassia, Sysoev posted in his LiveJournal:

"Just as on 11 September 2001 God's anger struck at America's arrogance, in August 2009 God also started to punish Orthodox people for their arrogance, which in the contemporary mendacious language is called patriotism and nationalism".<sup>32</sup>

Sysoev's publications on *uranopolitism* provoked criticism from various ROC officials and clergy, and also from Andrei Kuraev, a Church intellectual operating on the liberal fringe of the ROC spectrum.<sup>33</sup> Equally upset were representatives of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church ("Old Believers"),<sup>34</sup> the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (*Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' Zagranitsej*)<sup>35</sup> and lay people.<sup>36</sup>

Although the ROC never obstructed Sysoev's missionary activities, it did not support him either. In 2003, in order to create his own platform independent of the ROC, Sysoev launched a project to establish the "Community of the Church in honour of Prophet Daniel". The goal was to build a stone church complex in southern Moscow, with space to accommodate 2,000 persons. The complex was intended to host a missionary school, to organize Bible lectures and lessons on Orthodox Christianity for migrant workers, and to offer psychological support for new converts. This church became Sysoev's life's project, as he hoped to establish his own "Opus Dei"<sup>37</sup> – a highly controversial institution based on the idea that an ordinary life is a path to sanctity.<sup>38</sup> Successful fundraising allowed Sysoev to start the project by constructing a temporary centre for his flock, in the form of a wooden church dedicated to St Thomas, where he

<sup>32</sup> D. Sysoev, "A Sud to nad pravoslavnyimi narodami uzhe nachalsia!", *LiveJournal*, 24 August 2009 <<http://pr-daniil.livejournal.com/45307.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>33</sup> A. Kuraev, "O Daniile Sysoeve". Video, distributed by *Protiv Eresi*, n.d. (Accessed on 7 February 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEl2GLFaM6k>>); A. Kuraev, "Diakon Andrei Kuraev o napadkakh ottsa Daniila Sysoeva na Osipova A.I.", 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghMNkLYZsC8>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>34</sup> V. Novozhilov and P. Shakhmatov, "Protoierei Valentin Novozhilov i Pavel Shakhmatov vs o. Daniil Sysoev", *Sovremennoe drevlepravoslavie*, 12 October 2007 <<https://staroobrad.ru/modules.php?name=News2&file=print&sid=220>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>35</sup> M. Nazarov, "Otvét ottsu Daniilu Sysoevu na ego stat'iu 'Zarubezhnaia tserkov': raskolili eres'?", *Izdatel'stvo "Russkaia Ideia"*, 26 December 2006 <<http://www.rusidea.org/?a=12034>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>36</sup> E.g., A. Malinina, "Kto na samom dele vedet sebja ne po-liudski", *Inform-religia*, 22 January <[http://www.inform-relig.ru/290110/analitika/220110\\_sysoev.html](http://www.inform-relig.ru/290110/analitika/220110_sysoev.html)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Skype interview with Aleksandr Egorov, associate professor at National Research University Higher School of Economics. Conducted in Leiden, 27 September 2014.

<sup>38</sup> R. Hutchinson, *Their Kingdom Come: Inside the Secret World of Opus Dei* (London: Thomas Dunne Books, 1999).

regularly held public prayers for the conversion of “the stray Muslims and other heretics”.<sup>39</sup>

## 6.4 Evangelism among Muslims

When in the early 2000s Sysoev made *uranopolitism* a central element of his discourse, he also shifted missionary activities: instead of targeting Christian evangelical denominations, Sysoev now turned to individual Muslims whom he found to be less attached to their Islamic faith. He also became involved in the Kräshen Tatars, the communities of baptized Tatars who had accepted Orthodox Christianity, either under coercion or voluntarily, in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and who found themselves in a vulnerable position between Orthodox Russians and Muslim Tatars (see Chapter 7).

According to Aleksandr Egorov (who attended Sysoev’s classes when the latter was still teaching at his father’s Orthodox gymnasium “Iasenevo”), Sysoev had already considered missionary work among Muslims in the mid-1990s, when he had reflected on the phenomenon of Kräshens and opportunities to conduct mission among Muslim Tatars.<sup>40</sup> By 2003, he had established contact with Christian Tatar activists in Moscow and organized a community of baptized representatives of Turkic nations from the post-Soviet area.

In “Contemporary Trends in Islam: An Orthodox Christian Evaluation”, Sysoev provides a rather simplified categorization of Islamic trends and communities. He distinguished five trends in Islam: 1) “everyday (*obikhodnyi*) Islam of Turkic peoples”; 2) “traditional Islam of peoples from the Caucasus”; 3) “Russian (*russskii*) Islam”, 4) “Wahhabism”, and finally 5) Shi’ism. His article was designed as a practical guide for other Orthodox Christian missionaries in Russia, outlining the specifics of the various groups.

Turkic people, Sysoev argued, profess a “soft Islam”: they adjust a given religion to their local traditions and give priority to the earthly (secular) legislation, not to divine (*Shari’a*) law. According to him, this group is not easy to engage in any theological dispute, because adherents of “soft Islam” believe that “all religions are one way to the same summit”, and they therefore avoid confrontation. Sysoev also reflected on Tatar Jadidism (Muslim modernism) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

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<sup>39</sup> B. Knorre, “Tragediia odnogo missionera, non-konformista i gumanista kak indikator rasstanovki radikalistskikh sil v Rossii”, in *Religia i rossiiskoe mnogoobrazie*, ed. S. Filatov (Moscow: Letnii Sad, 2011), 424–42.

<sup>40</sup> Skype interview with Aleksandr Egorov, associate professor at National Research University Higher School of Economics. Conducted in Leiden, 27 September 2014.

which in his opinion grew out of Turkic “everyday Islam”. He compared Jadidism to the Renovationist movement within the Orthodox Church and saw both as a negative deviation from the fundamentals of the respective confessions. Moreover, Sysoev saw a strong link between Turkic Islam and the nationalism that he abhorred: the Turkic peoples of the former USSR are driven by the idea that “being a Tatar or Uzbek means to be a Muslim”, which, Sysoev argued, leads to the growing Islamization of Turkic nations. On the whole, however, Sysoev considered Tatars an easy target for missionary work, claiming that in comparison with their co-religionists from the Caucasus, Muslims of the Volga-Ural region showed less fervour for Islam.<sup>41</sup>

Islam in the Caucasus was, in Sysoev’s view, characterized by a stricter observation of *Shari’a* laws, but also coupled with *‘ādāt* regulations. These were interpreted by Sysoev as “the customary law that is essentially pagan”. This explains, Sysoev continued, why the peoples of the Caucasus persist in indulging in blood feuds and other practices that contradict *Shari’a*. In a similar vein, he explained Sufi influences, especially the cult of saints and pilgrimages to holy places in the Caucasus. For Sysoev, such pagan elements in Islam proved that Islam is inferior to Christianity. Shiism seems to receive slightly less criticism from him, arguably because it has a cult of martyrs. However, while a Christian martyr is “a witness to Christ’s victory over death”, a martyr in Islam was for him “simply somebody who suffered for Allāh and wants to be rewarded for this”.<sup>42</sup>

But Sysoev was most concerned by the growing number of ethnic Russians who were converting to Islam (see Chapter 4). He argued that this phenomenon had its roots in the wars in Afghanistan (1979–1989) and Chechnya (1994–1996/1999–2009). Today “representatives of the Chechen diaspora and Arab preachers” in Russia “seduce Christians into the Muslim community (*musul’manstvo*)”.<sup>43</sup> Many *russkie* Muslims follow the “Wahhabism” variant of Islam, which Sysoev saw as “legalism” pure and simple; “Wahhabism” he described as an ideology for establishing a Terrestrial Kingdom that has nothing to do with the path toward salvation.

Sysoev concluded that, if cleverly approached, Islam’s variety of forms and its lack of a unifying authority were bound to facilitate Orthodox Christian mission. And indeed, Orthodox missionaries still employ Sysoev’s classification. Although they stress

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<sup>41</sup> D. Sysoev, “Sovremennyye tekheniia islama – pravoslavnaia otsenka”, 2006 <[fondiv.ru/articles/1/57/](http://fondiv.ru/articles/1/57/)> (Accessed on 6 February 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

their disagreement with the strategy of “excessive polemics”, they agree that Orthodox missionaries should not be too “soft” when engaging with Muslims.<sup>44</sup>

Christian activists often compare Sysoev to the missionaries from the Kazan Theological Seminary of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>45</sup> and he might indeed have taken his inspiration from his Tsarist-era predecessors. Although he never mentioned any direct connections with the Kazan Seminary, in his own mission Sysoev used similar strategies and identified similar target groups to those singled out by the Kazan missionaries in the Volga-Urals.

The first of these strategies is to employ native languages for missionary purposes. This feature was introduced by the well-known missionary Orientalist Nikolai Il'minskii (1822-1891). Il'minskii also advocated using priests from the local population to teach basic Orthodox tenets to the local population. He developed a special Cyrillic alphabet and a new Tatar grammar for the community of the baptized (Kräshen) Tatars (see also Section 7.2). The Kräshen language that Il'minskii designed was also understandable to Muslim Tatars but was relatively free of Arabic and Persian loanwords with Islamic semantics (see also Section 8.3 of this thesis).<sup>46</sup>

The second feature of Sysoev's missionary work – active disputation with Islamic authorities – was first advocated by the priest and scholar Efimii Malov (1835-1918), who confronted Russia's Muslims by organizing sophisticated anti-Islamic polemics.<sup>47</sup> Native-language teaching and theological disputes were meant to spread Christianity and to prevent apostasy within the baptized communities of the Volga-Ural region.

Sysoev, too, put a strong emphasis on missionary work among Tatars: “myself being half Russian and half Tatar, it would be a sin not to preach among Tatars”, as he

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<sup>44</sup> See A. Troshin, “Pravoslavnaia khristianskaia missiia v islamskoi srede v Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost'”, *The official website of the Mission department of the Moscow Patriarchate*, 2016 <<http://infomissia.ru/2016/09/24/pravoslavnaya-xristianskaya-missiia-v-islamskoj-srede-v-rossii-istoriia-i-sovremennost/>> (Accessed on 6 February 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Vladimirtsev, “Nekotorye aspekty missii sredi inovertsev na primere o. Daniila Sysoeva”; V. Ordynskii, “Kazan' reabilitiruet imia velikogo prosvetitel'ia”, *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 7 June 2012 <[http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2012/06/07/kazan\\_reabilitiruet\\_imya\\_velikogo\\_prosvetitelya/](http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2012/06/07/kazan_reabilitiruet_imya_velikogo_prosvetitelya/)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016); Troshin, “Pravoslavnaia khristianskaia missiia”. On Orthodox Christian mission among Muslims in the Volga-Ural region, see also Section 7.2 of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Geraci, *Window on the East*, p. 39; A. Kefeli, “The Tale of Joseph and Zulaykha on the Volga Frontier: The Struggle for Gender, Religious, and National Identity in Imperial and Postrevolutionary Russia,” *Slavic Review* 70:2 (2011), 373. Here pp. 397-98.

<sup>47</sup> D. Mardanov, *Polemika mezhdu musul'manami i khristianami v Povolzh'e v poslednei treti XIX veka* (MA thesis, European University at St Petersburg, 2016); also Geraci, *Window on the East*, pp. 90-97.

used to say.<sup>48</sup> He was proud of his Tatar stock and believed that “half-bloods” (*polukroovki*) were notable for their vital energy.<sup>49</sup> His aversion to nationalisms thus had much to do with his own mixed background, and under the umbrella of his uranopolitism he intended to show that representatives of any ethnic group can become firm Orthodox Christians.

Accompanied by his disciples, Sysoev regularly visited the Tatar cultural centre in Moscow, which, because of its “religious neutrality”, was seen as a good platform for a “dialogue” with Muslims.<sup>50</sup> Once he even preached on Sabantui, the traditional summer festival of Bashkirs and Tatars, which was regarded as a provocation by the Muslims who attended it.<sup>51</sup> In 2007, Sysoev headed a mission to Kräshen villages of Tatarstan; two years later he went on a mission to the town of Zainsk.<sup>52</sup>

But Sysoev was also interested in labour migrants from Central Asia, who in the late 1990s and 2000s came in huge numbers to Moscow and its suburbs; this led to the well-known rise of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant xenophobia in Russian society. Sysoev must have believed that the difference in religious norms was at the core of the conflict: in 2007, he planned to conduct lessons about religious morality among workers, which he hoped would be facilitated by their employers. These lessons would have the purpose of “convincing migrants that Russia is not a territory of war”; otherwise, according to Sysoev, “Islam allows a Muslim to do practically anything”.<sup>53</sup> However, he did not find the necessary financial support to teach such lessons. In 2008, Sysoev organized a missionary trip to the Republic of Kirgizia, where he managed to baptize several local citizens.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Interfax, “Sviashchennik Daniil Sysoev zaiavliaet, chto v ego adres postupaiut ugrozy fizicheskoi raspravy”, *Interfax-religia*, 19 February 2008 <<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=22955>> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Neizvestnyi, *Neizvestnyi Daniil. Vospominania o sviashennike Daniile Sysoeve* (Moscow: Blagotvoritel'nyi fond “Missionerskii tsentr imeni iereia Daniila Sysoeva”, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> L. Lapshina, “Pravoslavnye tatory proveli konferentsiiu v Moskve”, *Blagovest-Info*, 11 January 2006 <<http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=4&id=3768>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Neizvestnyi, *Neizvestnyi Daniil. Vospominania o sviashennike Daniile Sysoeve*.

<sup>52</sup> Vladimirtsev, “Nekotorye aspekty missii sredi inovertsev na primere o. Daniila Sysoeva”.

<sup>53</sup> E. Suprycheva, “Batiushku ubili za propovedi sredi musul'man?”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 20 November 2009 <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/24397/574542/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>54</sup> E. Stepanova, “Pamiati ottsa Daniila Sysoeva”, *Pravmir.ru*, 20 November 2009 <<http://www.pravmir.ru/po-sledam-apostola-fomy-missionery-v-kirgizii/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

There are no verified records about actual numbers, but some sources affirm that “during his life he [Sysoev] baptized about eighty Muslims”.<sup>55</sup> In fact, these converts from Islam became Sysoev’s most devoted followers: in his community, they found the support and understanding after their conversion that they lacked from their friends and family. They reported that many ordinary Orthodox parishes rejected new converts, on the grounds that they had betrayed their national (Turkic-Tatar) tradition.<sup>56</sup>

Sysoev believed that he could draw on the experience of the Kazan Seminary to create what he considered “a united Orthodox Christian mission for the Turkic-Ugric space”. He envisaged this mission as a platform for an even more ambitious enterprise: to establish a “Unit of Christians in the Caucasus”<sup>57</sup> to “solve spiritual problems” of the region.

#### 6.4.1 Mission in Islamic vernaculars

In his work with Tatars and other Turkic-speakers, Sysoev emphasized the need to address them in their native language. His publishing house produced prayer books in three languages: Kräshen Tatar, Tatar and Kyrgyz, which correspond to the major ethnic groups Sysoev was trying to reach.<sup>58</sup> These books contain “essential Christian prayers, psalms” and other ritual texts translated from Russian in its Church Slavonic variant.

Sysoev himself made an effort to learn Kräshen, a historical variant of the Tatar language spoken in Kräshen communities in the Volga area; these communities will be discussed in the next chapter. From 2003, when he organized a community of Orthodox Christian Tatars in Moscow, he led weekly collective prayers in both Kräshen and Russian. It should be noted that in contemporary Kräshen parishes in the Volga-Ural region, the Kräshen language relates to Tatar in the same way as Russian Church Slavonic relates to contemporary standard Russian: the former is reserved exclusively for liturgical purposes, whereas the latter is used as a language of (religious) communication (including conversations and writings about religious matters).

<sup>55</sup> Iu. Maksimov, “Siiať kak zvezda”, in *Obratishnii mnogikh k pravde...*, ed. T. Podosinkina (Moscow: Prikhod khrama proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi, “Tri Sestry”, 2012). Here p. 111.

<sup>56</sup> V. Emel’ianov, “Reportazh: Napravlennost’ pravoslavnoi missii–islam”, *Portal-Credo*, 5 January 2009 <<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=39419>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>57</sup> Lapshina, “Pravoslavnye tatarsy proveli konferentsiiu v Moskve”.

<sup>58</sup> Molitvoslov, *Pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na kriashenskom iazyke* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khrama Proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi, 2007); Molitvoslov, *Pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na tatarskom iazyke* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khrama Proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi, 2007); Molitvoslov, *Pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na kyrgyzskom iazyke* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khrama Proroka Daniila na Kantemirovskoi, 2008).



Sysoev's sermons were given Patriarch Aleksii's blessing, and this made him the first priest in Moscow to hold a special service in the Kräshen language.<sup>59</sup>

Members of Sysoev's community in Moscow wished to distinguish themselves from Muslim Tatars and preferred to be identified not as "Orthodox Christian/baptized Tatars" but as "Kräshens". By adopting this ethnonym, they established continuity with the centuries-long history and the rich cultural heritage of the Kräshen communities in the Volga-Ural region. The Kräshen spiritual mission in Tatarstan, however, refused to cooperate with Sysoev's group of "new Kräshens", and also criticized Sysoev's Kräshen translations, which they regarded as inappropriate (see discussion in Section 7.4).<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps in response to the opposition he met in Tatarstan, Sysoev gradually shifted from Kräshen to modern standard Tatar as the liturgical language in his community – that is, back to a language that has a significant Islamic lexicon. This shift was deemed necessary because the Tatar converts in his Moscow congregation complained that Kräshen was incomprehensible to them.<sup>61</sup> By adopting literary Tatar for translating Orthodox Christian sermons and prayers, Sysoev thus departed from the translation strategies of Il'minskii, who sought to purify the Kräshen language from Islamic lexical items; terms of Arabic and Persian origin were replaced by Russian alternatives.

The way that Sysoev and his collaborators employed terms of Arabic/Islamic origin can be demonstrated by the first sentence from the Creed, which starts with "I believe in God, the Father Almighty". In Tatar it begins as "I bring my faith to [...]", where the translators use the Arabic term *īmān* (which stands for 'faith' in Islam): *Iman kiterämen ber Alla Ataga...* (I bring my faith to the only God Father...)<sup>62</sup>

The word 'blessing' in the Holy Cross prayer in Tatar is rendered by *bäräkät* (Arabic *baraka*). In Tatar, this term carries associations with Islamic theology, and marks a kind of continuity of spiritual presence and power (and in addition to 'divine blessing' in an Islamic understanding, *bäräkät* also signifies 'prosperity'): *Äy xoday, xalkingi sakla häm yortinga bäräkät bir* (Oh Lord, save your people and give blessing to your house).<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Maksimov, "Siät' kak zvezda".

<sup>60</sup> From the author's interview with priest Dmitrii Sizov, the leader of the Kräshen spiritual mission at the archdiocese of Tatarstan. The interview was conducted on 18 July 2016 in Kriash Sreda, Tatarstan.

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with members of the Orthodox Tatar community in Moscow. Conducted at St Thomas's Church in Moscow, 23–24 October 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Molitvoslov, *Pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na tatarskom iazyke*, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

The translators also adopted the vocabulary used by Muslim Tatars to refer to the Supreme Being: in the first example above this is *Alla* (Arabic *Allāh*, ‘God’; the Russian variant used by the ROC is *Bog*), and in the second it is *xoday* (Persian *khodā*, ‘Lord’; Russian: *Gospod’*) (see also Section 8.3.1).

A similar approach can be found in the prayer book in Kyrgyz: e.g., the word ‘psalm’ is translated as *namaz-ır* (lit. ‘a *namaz*-song’),<sup>64</sup> which refers to the semantic field of *namāz* (of Persian origin, denoting an obligatory prayer in Islam). To take another example, the bowing element in Christian rituals (for example, after reading certain Christian prayers) is explained in Kyrgyz as *sezde qıluu* – lit. ‘to perform *sajda*’.<sup>65</sup> The word *sajda* usually means an act of prostration in the direction of the Ka‘ba, which is done by Muslims during their daily prayers (see also Section 8.3.2).

Remarkably, the Kyrgyz prayer book keeps the Russified variants of personal names, e.g., *Iisus Khristos* (Jesus Christ), whereas the translation in Tatar presents its Islamic variant *Gaisä Mäsikh* (Arabic *‘İsā Masīh*, ‘Jesus the Messiah’).

The above-mentioned words of Arabic and Persian origin may have a weaker connotation with Islam in languages used for more than one religion (e.g., in Arabic, which is also the language of Oriental Christians), but Tatar and Kyrgyz remain predominantly associated with Islam. And it should be noted that some Christian evangelical missions that entered the former Soviet Union space in the late 1980s also used Muslim terminology in Christian texts. In general, this vernacularization of Christian texts is believed to facilitate their acceptance in Muslim communities.<sup>66</sup>

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Sysoev and his followers made extensive use of Tatar, Kyrgyz and Tajik translations of Christian texts that had been produced by evangelical missions, such as the NT in Kyrgyz published by the Gideons International, an Uzbek version of the Gospel of Luke published by an organization called “Light of Hope”, and the NT in Tatar published by Jehovah’s Witnesses (see Section 8.2.2).<sup>67</sup> These and other books used for missionary work among Muslim peoples were shown to me during my interviews with members of the Orthodox Christian Tatar community in Moscow in 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Molitvoslov, *Pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na kyrgyzskom iazyke*, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> D.L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 32-34.

<sup>67</sup> Gideons International, *Injil/ Zabur* (Nashville, TN: The Gideons International, 2005), containing translations by the Institute of Bible Translation in Stockholm; Umid Nuri, *Mukaddas Khushkhabar* [Uzbek translation of the Gospel of Luke] (Umid Nuri, Al’ Salam, 2006); NWT, *Injil. Yanga dönya tärjemäse* (Selters: Wachtturm-Gesellschaft, 2013).

Although Sysoev started his missionary activities by addressing non-Orthodox Christian denominations, he repeatedly suggested copying their strategies.<sup>68</sup> He thus relied on the experience of his adversaries. In fact, neither he himself nor members of his community had sufficient training in any of the Islamic vernaculars to produce high-quality translations: the two little prayer books in Tatar and Kyrgyz that Sysoev's team compiled for Orthodox Christians have clear orthographic and stylistic shortcomings. And today, Sysoev's followers prefer to use books published by the Moscow branch of the Institute of Bible Translation for evangelism among Muslims.<sup>69</sup>

#### ***6.4.2 Disputes with Muslim authorities***

The second approach that Sysoev seems to have adopted from the Kazan Seminary was the readiness and eagerness to engage Muslims in public theological debates.

On 20 December 2005, the editors of the website *Islam.ru* organized a debate between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the conference hall of the prestigious Hotel Rossiya in Moscow.<sup>70</sup> Orthodox Christianity was represented by Daniil Sysoev as the main speaker, Andrei Redkozubov (at that time a student at St Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities) and the Orthodox theologian Aleksandr Lul'ka. Their opponents were headed by Ali Viacheslav Polosin (see Chapter 5). Polosin was supported by Askar Sabdin (a theologian who directs the information analysis centre "Ansar") and Iskander Iafisi (a Russian Muslim who participates in NORM, the National Organization of Russian Muslims). The topic of the discussion was "the Qur'ān and the Bible". Those present at the event reported that the audience was unevenly balanced: there were more Muslims in the hall, mostly young men, while Christianity was mainly represented by elderly women. In the eyes of the public, neither side won a convincing victory.<sup>71</sup>

A second round of the debate was organized on 3 February 2006 and dealt with the image of God in Christianity and Islam. This time Sysoev was backed up by Georgii

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Sysoev, "Pokhvala prozelitizmu".

<sup>69</sup> See the official website of the Mission Centre named after Daniil Sysoev at <<http://mission-center.com/gastrobaiters>> (Accessed on 7 February 2017).

<sup>70</sup> Radonezh, "Sostoialsia pervyi v Rossii publichnyi disput musul'man i pravoslavnykh", *Radonezh*, 21 December 2005 <<http://radonezh.ru/news/sostoyalsya-pervy-v-rossii-publichny-disput-musulman-i-pravoslavnykh-17196.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>71</sup> See RusIvan, "Teologicheskoe: po sledam sostoivshikhsia religioznykh debatov pravoslavnykh imusul'man", *LiveJournal*, 17 December 2005 <[http://lj.rossia.org/users/pyc\\_ivan/163821.html](http://lj.rossia.org/users/pyc_ivan/163821.html)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016); Vudit, "Sysoev vs. Polosin", *LiveJournal*, 17 December 2005 <<http://lj.rossia.org/users/vudit/71650.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

(Iurii) Maksimov (editor of the “Orthodoxy and Islam” website, and lecturer at the Moscow Theological Seminary) and ROC archpriest Oleg Steniaev. On the Muslim side, the main figure was still Polosin, but Iafisi was replaced by Polosin’s collaborator Aidyn Ali-Zade, a senior researcher of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan.

Both debates were covered by the national mass media, and various communities responded to the event. The religious-patriotic Union of Orthodox Citizens (*Soiuz pravoslavnykh grazhdan*) argued that such discussions threatened the country’s stability. Speakers of this organization also challenged the legitimacy of the debaters. In their view, the participants had no right to speak on behalf of Orthodox Christianity, or of the Muslim tradition: rather, they were from “purely marginal circles who are interested in conflict”.<sup>72</sup> This view was shared by the Union of Muslim Journalists of the SMR: in their view, the debates lacked mutual respect, as each side was only concerned with detecting hostile meanings in the other’s statements. The speakers did not find a common language, and therefore did not foster dialogue between the religions.<sup>73</sup>

A third round, expected to centre on “Muhammad and Christ”, did not take place. Both sides blamed the other for the failure. Sysoev stated that he was ready to engage with the best brains in Islamic theology and suggested the popular Islamic writer Shamil Aliautdinov (*imām* of Moscow’s Memorial Mosque on Poklonnaia Hill) as his most authoritative sparring partner.<sup>74</sup> Later he argued that further debates with Muslims were pointless as long as his opponents were not ready to question the essence of Muhammad’s divine ministry (*poslannichestvo*). He did not regret the first two debates, though, because they offered “a unique chance to preach Christ to Muslims”, in front of “a hostile audience”.<sup>75</sup>

In the public debates of 2005 and 2006, Sysoev developed the anti-Islamic critique that would guide his subsequent lectures and publications on Russia’s

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<sup>72</sup> Interfax, “Zaiavlenie Soiuz pravoslavnykh grazhdan v sviazi s obostreniem polemiki povoprosam pravoslavno-musul'manskogo dialoga”, *Interfax*, 23 December 2005 <<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/islam/?act=documents&div=302>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Sova, “SPG bespokoit sostoianii mezhreligioznogo dialoga v Rossii”, *Sova-Tsent*, 23 December 2005 <<http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/interfaith/christian-islam/2005/12/d6843/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>74</sup> D. Sysoev, “Spletni o islamo-khristianskom dispute”, *Pravoslavie i islam*, n.d. <<http://www.orthodoxy-islam.com/disput1.htm>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>75</sup> D. Sysoev, “Skaip-konferentsiia so sviashchennikom Daniilom Sysoevym”, *Stavros*, 15 June 2009 <<http://stavroskrest.ru/content/skaip-konferenciya-so-svyacshennikom-daniilom-sysoevym>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

Muslims. He focused on the image of Allāh in Islam, the personality of the Prophet Muhammad and the nature of the Qurʾān. He also challenged the main pillars of Islam, the concept of belief in angels and djinns, and specific points of *Sharīʿa* law.

Eventually, Sysoev rejected the idea that Muslims and Christians, as adherents of Abrahamic religions, share the same concept of God; he referred to the Council of Constantinople (1180), which laid down that the God of Christianity is not the same as Allāh.<sup>76</sup> For describing the Almighty in Christianity, Sysoev used terms such as *Bog* 'God', *Tvorets* 'Creator', *Gospod'* 'Lord', *Otets* 'Father', which all denote the various characteristics or actions of God; for him, God "is Love". But for the God of Islam, he uses only *Allāh* (of Muslims), who is "tyrannical, iniquitous, non-omniscient, artful, non-permanent" and cruel.<sup>77</sup> As the true (*istinnnyi*) God is only found in Christianity, Muslims are called upon to "come under His shroud (*pokrov*)".<sup>78</sup> In his later works and speeches, Sysoev argued that Muslims themselves have little knowledge about their faith,<sup>79</sup> and therefore did not recognize that Allāh was simply "a parody of the true God".<sup>80</sup> Allāh is a creature of the mind of Muhammad, who "simply misinterpreted narrations from the Old and New Testaments".<sup>81</sup>

In order to prove that Muhammad's claim was not credible, Sysoev referred to the places in the Bible where criteria of false prophecy are listed, and held that "Muhammad was not just a fraud (*zhulik*), but a man who entered a *sviaz'* ('connection'), although not with God but with Satan".<sup>82</sup> Sysoev also rejected the assumption that Muhammad was simply suffering from epilepsy, as some Western Orientalists have suggested; in his view, there are clear indications that Muhammad was possessed by demons.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>76</sup> D. Sysoev, *Islam. Pravoslavnyi vzgliad* (Moscow: Avtonomnaia nekommercheskaia organizatsiia "Dukhovnoe nasledie", 2011).

<sup>77</sup> D. Sysoev, *Brak s musul'maninom* (Moscow: Avtonomnaia nekommercheskaia organizatsiia "Dukhovnoe nasledie", 2011), p. 77. His references to the Qurʾān were based on Ignatii Krachkovskii's popular Russian Qurʾān translation, see Krachkovskii, *Koran*. For the discussion on Russian Qurʾān translations, see Section 5.3.1.

<sup>78</sup> Disput, "Predstavlenie o Boge v Khristianstve i Islame". Video, distributed by *Pravoslavnaia Biblioteka*, 2006 (Accessed on 7 February 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Amv6pBQSSQ>>), 44:10-44:20.

<sup>79</sup> Sysoev, *Islam. Pravoslavnyi vzgliad*, p. 15.

<sup>80</sup> Sysoev, *Brak s musul'maninom*, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> Sysoev, *Islam. Pravoslavnyi vzgliad*, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Film, "Fil'm-lektsia sviashchennika Daniila Sysoeva na temu: Pravoslavie i Musul'manstvo". Film, distributed by *Studia "Obitel'" Troitse Sergievoi Lavry*, 2008 (Accessed on 7 February 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUwOVomZAsU>>), 39:06-39:09.

<sup>83</sup> Sysoev, *Islam. Pravoslavnyi vzgliad*, p. 78.

As the Qur'ān was dictated by Satan himself, Muslims “have to fight with fire, terror and executions to maintain their delusion”. In Sysoev’s view, the Qur'ān not only fails to reach the highest degree of virtue (embodied in the Bible), but its “moral level is even lower than what is regarded as decency in Europe”, that is, among the Westerners “who lost their piety”.<sup>84</sup>

To stress the difference, Sysoev also uses different terms for elements and figures that are shared by Islam and Christianity. Thus, in his writings the angel Jibril (in his spelling, *Dzhabrail*), in the Arabic form, is not the same as Gabriel but opposed to him; and ‘Īsā in the Qur'ān cannot be Jesus, because, according to Sysoev, Muslims do not believe in his crucifixion. The only figure for whom Sysoev uses a common term is Satan: the Russian form *satana* (or *drevnii vrag* ‘ancient enemy’) occurs interchangeably with the Arabic/Qur’ānic *Iblīs*. Obviously, there is only one Satan – and it was Satan who formulated the Qur'ān, in which he himself figures.

In his debates, Sysoev was very careful with regard to Arabic-Islamic terminology. In his own statements, he did not personally bring up Arabic terms, obviously to avoid providing his opponents with ammunition. Only when a specific notion had already been introduced by the other side did Sysoev use it, but giving it his own interpretation. Thus, when his opponents started using the Arabic term *shirk* (in the sense of the sin of practising idolatry or polytheism), Sysoev used the term but defined it as “flagrant, unforgivable sin”: Muslims commit *shirk* when they attribute Satan’s qualities to the Creator.<sup>85</sup>

In his online lectures, sermons and public discussions, Sysoev referred to Islamic notions more often. Words such *āya*, *sūra*, *Shari‘a* and Qur'ān, as well as Sunnism, Sufism and Shiism, and even *murīd* (‘aspirant’) and *mu’adhdhin* (‘caller to prayer’), are used without translation, on the assumption that these terms are well known to both his Christian and Muslim audiences. Neither did he define such words as Wahhabi and jihād, using them as negative catch-all terms instead of providing the range of meanings that they cover.

Sometimes Sysoev used Islamic concepts only in their Russian translations, which led to obvious simplifications. For example, he claimed that according to the Qur'ān, “the World is divided into the territory of peace (*zemlia mira*) and the territory of war (*zemlia voiny*)”, and that the latter falls into the “territory of *jihād*” (*zemlia*

<sup>84</sup> D. Sysoev, “Mozhet li Koran pretendovat’ na to, chto on – eto slovo Boga”, *Missionerskii tsentr*, n.d. <<http://mission-center.com/publicatsii/175-koran>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Disput, “Predstavlenie o Boge v Khristianstve i Islame”, 42:30–42:36.

*dzhikhada*) and “the territory of truce” (*zemlia peremiriia*).<sup>86</sup> These concepts (Sysoev did not give the Arabic terms *Dār al-salām*, *Dār al-ḥarb*, *Dār al-‘ahd* etc.) do not, of course, occur in the Qur’ān, as he claimed, but were introduced by later scholars of Islamic legal traditions, and their definitions are much more complex. Incomplete or corrupted definitions can be detected in other cases, too, for instance when Sysoev defined *‘ādāt* ‘customary law’ as “a traditional Turkic code” (in spite of the fact that many Muslim peoples have *‘ādāt*), and “peaceful (*mirnyi*) *jihād*” as a kind of Islamic missionary work.<sup>87</sup>

These patterns show that Sysoev was acquainted with the basic Arabic-Islamic terminology, and by using it he tried to persuade the audience of his own competence in Islamic theology and law. However, his expertise was limited, and he tended to give Islamic terms the meanings that he wanted them to convey. To highlight his familiarity with Islam and Muslims, he also resorted to expressions such as “I have seen/heard/read with my own eyes/ears”, or “when I had another talk with a Muslim”. While in public debates Sysoev consistently addressed his opponents as “Muslims”, in his writings he often used labels such as *nevernyi* ‘infidel’, *neveruiushchii* ‘unbeliever’, and *inoverets* ‘adherent of a different faith’. Those who came to Islam consciously, at a mature age, he called *sovrativshiesia v Islam*, ‘those who have gone astray by entering Islam’. However, Sysoev deliberately refrained from using the highly pejorative notion of *Mahometans*, a term many Church authors used to indicate that Muslims follow the pseudo-prophecy of Muhammad.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, Sysoev’s works on Islam introduced a range of Arabic-Muslim terminology into the religious language of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>89</sup> He also shaped religious polemics with Muslims: Sysoev’s videos and publications inspired many

<sup>86</sup> Sysoev, *Islam. Pravoslavnyi vzgliad*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Sysoev, *Brak s musul‘maninom*, p. 180. In one chapter of this book, the term ‘Mahometans’ does indeed occur quite often, but the style of this chapter suggests that it was not written by Sysoev himself. This chapter differs from the rest of the book in its abundance of composite sentences, elevated style and the absence of imperatives; also, the reader is addressed in the second person plural, which is more formal than the singular form that Sysoev was accustomed to employ. Some parts of Sysoev’s published works might have been authored by his companion Georgii (Iurii) Maksimov, who often wrote on similar topics. See Iu. Maksimov, *Religiia Kresta i religiia Polumesiatsa* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskogo podvor’ia Sviato-Troitskoi Sergievoi lavry, 2004); Iu. Maksimov, “Pochemu khristiane ne schitaiut Mukhammeda prorokom. Chast’ 1”, *Pravoslavie.ru*, 23 July 2007 <<http://www.pravo-slavie.ru/put/070723175350.htm>> (Accessed on 1 August 2017); Iu. Maksimov, “Sviashchennoie Pisanie: Koran ili Bibliia?”, *Azbuka very*, n.d. <[https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Georgij\\_Maksimov/pravoslavie-i-islam/6](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Georgij_Maksimov/pravoslavie-i-islam/6)> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>89</sup> See Bugaeva, “Pravoslavnyi sotsiolekt” and the comments in the Introduction of this thesis.

Orthodox missionaries, who now use similar strategies in their own disputes with Muslims.<sup>90</sup>

While Sysoev thus seems to have followed the example of the Kazan Theological Seminary, there is one aspect in which he clearly departed from their model. When engaging Muslims in controversies on the Holy Scriptures, the Kazan theologian Efim Malov did not deny the divine nature of the Qur'ān, but argued that Muslims had simply misunderstood their own Scripture; in his opinion, the Qur'ān does not contradict the teaching of Christianity.<sup>91</sup> Sysoev, however, rejected the authenticity of the Qur'ān and of Muhammad's teachings, and attacked Muhammad as a person without morality, thus following the medieval tradition of anti-Islamic polemics.

The mission among Muslims brought Sysoev much public attention. Especially controversial was his booklet *Marriage to a Muslim*, first published in 2007,<sup>92</sup> in which he addressed Christian women who married Muslim men (or were tempted to do so) and admonished them to stay true to their faith. Mufti Nafigulla Ashirov, chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Administration of the Asiatic Part of Russia and co-chairman of the Council of Russia's Muftis, accused Sysoev of extremism, and the Tatar Muslim journalist Khalida Khamidullina even filed a lawsuit against him,<sup>93</sup> but no litigation was conducted. The Central Muslim Spiritual Board in Ufa (in competition with the Council of Muftis, and considered to be closer to the ROC and the government at that time) preferred to ignore Sysoev's work altogether.<sup>94</sup> Sysoev's position did not receive any official criticism from the ROC or the state, although it was against their rhetoric of harmony between Russia's "traditional religions".

Sysoev did not soften his polemical style and did not shy away from comparing Islam to diseases. In his eyes, interfaith dialogue in Russia meant nothing less than the "capitulation" of the ROC;<sup>95</sup> Muslims were seducing Christians to their faith "under a mask of spiritual AIDS".<sup>96</sup> Patience and tolerance he regarded as manifestations of

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<sup>90</sup> Steniaev, "Khristianstvo i patriotizm"; K. Morozov, "Dialog mezhdru pravoslavnyimi i musul'manami (1-aia peredacha)". Film, distributed by Internet channel "Telepartnerstvo", 2013 (Accessed on 7 February 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WA2wKFSqYs>>)

<sup>91</sup> Mardanova, *Polemika mezhdru musul'manami i khristianami*, p. 80.

<sup>92</sup> Sysoev, *Brak s musul'maninom*.

<sup>93</sup> Islam News, "Zaiavlenie protiv ierieia RPTS MP", *Islam News*, 29 January 2008 <<http://www.islam-news.ru/news-9428.html>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>94</sup> B. Knorre, "Sviashchennik Daniil Sysoev i pravoslavnaia missiia sredi rossiiskikh musul'man," *Religia i pravo* 44:1 (2008), 10-13.

<sup>95</sup> D. Sysoev, "O tolerantnosti". Video, distributor unknown, 2007 (Accessed on 7 February 2017 <[https://vk.com/video76284242\\_167821607](https://vk.com/video76284242_167821607)>), 0:48-0:50.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:13-1:24.



spiritual sickness, and as features of persons who have no aspiration to recognize the Truth.<sup>97</sup> The government was disregarding the “real Islam”, which was, in his opinion, “an inherently aggressive religion that is loaded by the bomb of *jihād*”.<sup>98</sup>

## 6.5 Conclusion

Sysoev was killed in 2009, the year when Kirill became head of the ROC. The new patriarch made the ROC more visible in public and drew it closer to the state. In contrast to his predecessor Aleksii II, Kirill supports the idea that the Church is under siege, or under attack, and he gives more freedom to initiatives from a laity that is eager to defend its religion against “an enemy from without” (*vneshnii vrag*),<sup>99</sup> an imagery that fully conforms to the political course of the government. When the state leadership was in need of social and electoral support (in the wake of the parliamentary elections in 2011, and the presidential elections in 2012), the ROC became a convenient mobilization force; being “a true believer” merged with “being a patriot”. Kirill gave ROC activists space to present the Church as an active institution that is able to protect itself against criticism.<sup>100</sup>

This new course is also leading to a re-positioning of the ROC toward Daniil Sysoev’s heritage. While Sysoev had little to no support from the official ROC during his lifetime, today he is seen as a trailblazer for initiatives from below. Most of Sysoev’s ardent supporters and followers – often called “Sysoevians” (*Sysoevtsy*), although they reject this attribution<sup>101</sup> – graduated from the “School of the Orthodox Missionary” (*Shkola pravoslavnogo missionera*) that Sysoev established in 2008. These disciples continue his activities in defending and spreading Orthodox Christianity: they engage in street preaching, publish the Gospels and produce religious pamphlets in Tatar, Uzbek, Kacessezakh, Tajik and other languages.

The most visible personality in this circle is Dmitrii Tsorionov (known as Enteo, b. 1989), who has adopted Sysoev’s ideas, strategies and aggressive attitude toward

<sup>97</sup> Sysoev, “Skaip-konferentsiia so sviashchennikom Daniilom Sysoevym”.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Knorre, “Rossiiskoe pravoslavie”, p. 80.

<sup>100</sup> B. Knorre, “Sotsial’noie sluzheniie sovremennoi Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi kak otrazheniie povedencheskikh stereotipov tserkovnogo sotsiuma”, in *Pravoslavnaia tserkov’ pri novom patriarkhe*, ed. A. Malashenko and S. Filatov (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2012), 60-120; “Rossiiskoe pravoslavie”, p. 85.

<sup>101</sup> Those who continue Sysoev’s activities claim that the name ‘Sysoevians’ is a token of disrespect toward their founding father; see Sysoevtsy, “Sysoevtsev ne sushchestvuet”, *Missionerskii tsentr im. liereya Daniila Sysoeva*, n.d. <<http://mail.mission-shop.com/publicatsii/16107-nosysoev>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

non-Orthodox believers. Tsorionov has also reportedly announced his readiness (and willingness?) to die in the name of Christ.<sup>102</sup> Although Orthodox clergy officially condemned Tsorionov's attacks on Muslim migrants in 2013-2014 (which at times included physical assaults), he is believed to enjoy support from within the ROC.<sup>103</sup> Other students of Sysoev seem to have taken a less aggressive stance; and Sysoev's closest disciples, Iurii Maksimov, Oleg Steniaev and Aleksandr Lul'ka, scaled down their missionary work among Muslims after Sysoev's death.

At the same time, Sysoev's arsenal of strategies to reach out to various target audiences has inspired Orthodox believers to conduct more active missionary work: today, there are numerous branches of his followers throughout the country. Sysoev's attempt to mobilize the laity for missionary work apparently coincides with the new programme of the Church under Patriarch Kirill, and in 2010 Sysoev's "School of the Orthodox Missionary" was officially included in the structure of the Synodical Missionary Department. Aleksandr Lul'ka claims that this inclusion has embedded Sysoev's methods within the official curriculum of the Belgorod Orthodox Theological Seminary, which has a strong emphasis on missionary training.<sup>104</sup> This is remarkable, because Sysoev adopted Protestant mission models and effectively adapted them for Orthodox Christian evangelism, despite the enmity of the ROC toward evangelical denominations. His books nevertheless still occupy whole shelves in Orthodox bookstores and are regularly republished with the blessing of the ROC leadership, including the Patriarch himself.

Despite all this, the ROC is hesitant to give in to calls for Sysoev's canonization. To declare him a saint, or to officially acknowledge him as a model, would mean a complete change in the ROC's stance toward Russia's other major religions, and the development of a missionary vision that would resemble those of the Protestant churches. The Sysoev groups still have a monopoly on missionary "shock therapy", and its results remain highly questionable.

Sysoev regarded the dissemination of Christian religious belief to Muslims as a fundamentally linguistic act; for him, the spread of religion entailed establishing

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<sup>102</sup> D. Tsorionov, "Dmitrii Tsorionov (Enteo), lider obshchestvennogo dvizheniia 'Bozh'ia Volia'", *Ekho Moskvy*, 28 June 2014 <<http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/oni/1349058-echo/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

<sup>103</sup> S. Solodovnik, "Rossiia: ofitsial'naia tserkov' vybiraet vlast'," *Pro et contra* 17:3-4 (2013), 6-26.

<sup>104</sup> K. Kirillova, "Missionerskaia shkola ottsa Daniila Sysoeva priobrela status fakul'teta Belgorodskoi dukhovnoi seminarii", *Pravmir.ru*, 14 February 2011 <<http://www.pravmir.ru/missionerskaya-shkola-otca-daniila-sysoeva-priobrela-status-fakulteta-belgorodskoj-duhovnoj-seminarii/>> (Accessed on 21 November 2016).

communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. He was among the first to use the Kräshen language in Church services beyond Tatarstan. Later he adopted a variant of Christian Tatar that was different from the language standardized by Orthodox Christian missionaries in imperial Russia, as Sysoev attempted to modernize it so that speakers of literary Tatar could also be addressed. His case demonstrates that the very choice of a language to be used in mission is an important factor that may have consequences for the identity construction of a religious community.<sup>105</sup> Sysoev's mission insisted on keeping the ethnic vernacular for preaching and liturgy, which distinguished his community from the rest of the Russian-speaking ROC flock. At the same time, the priest emphasized discontinuity in the cultural domain, as he challenged the ethnicity-religion connection among Tatars.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how Sysoev's mission in Kräshen villages in Tatarstan influenced the political discourse on recognition of this minority as a separate ethnic community; further, Chapter 7 will touch upon the development of Sysoev's community of baptized Tatars within the ROC under Patriarch Kirill.

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<sup>105</sup> Liddicoat, "Language Planning as an Element of Religious Practice".

