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Protestantism in the Far East of Russia: history, status and problems

This article is devoted to the history and the present state of Protestantism in the Far East of Russia. Protestant community celebrates 500 years in 2017 since the beginning of the Reformation. The article emphasizes that Protestantism in Russia was, on the one hand, a religion of foreign origin and on the other – Russia had parallel religious movements, similar to Western Protestantism. A data shows the place of Protestantism in the confessional picture of the Far Eastern Federal District. The features of the Protestant dogma and cult are outlined. Attention is paid to the social position of Protestant churches, the moral image of Protestants, their socially significant activities. The problems of violation of citizens' rights to freedom of conscience and religious freedom, the ideas about the need of religious studies and awareness of the authorities are indicated.

Keywords: religion, Protestantism, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

Протестантизм на Дальнем Востоке России: история, современное состояние и проблемы

Данная статья посвящена истории и современному состоянию протестантизма на Дальнем Востоке России. В 2017 г. протестантское сообщество отмечает 500 лет с начала Реформации. В статье подчеркивается, что протестантизм в России был, с одной стороны, религией иностранного происхождения, а с другой – в России параллельно возникали религиозные движения, сходные с западным протестантизмом. Приведены данные о месте протестантизма в конфессиональной картине Дальневосточного федерального округа (далее – ДФО), сделаны некоторые выводы относительно религиозной жизни в субъектах ДФО. Изложены особенности протестантского вероучения и культа. Уделяется внимание социальной позиции протестантских церквей, нравственному облику протестантов, их социально значимой деятельности. Также обозначены проблемы нарушения прав граждан на свободу совести и свободу вероисповедания, высказываются идеи о необходимости религиозоведческого образования и просвещения представителей власти.

***Ключевые слова:** религия, протестантизм, свобода совести и свобода вероисповедания.*

Each major religious movement has its own sacral date, from which it counts its existence. For Protestantism it is October 31, 1517. That day Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the doors of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. These theses criticized the theological teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. For five hundred years of its existence, Protestantism has become a broad movement, which now covers more than 800 million of people, who are unite in several dozen of denominations. There are about 3 million Protestants in Russia, according to field research in 2014 [6].

Protestantism in Russia was a religion of foreigners for more than three centuries. Numerous foreign specialists, especially doctors, pharmacists, gunsmiths, traders, artists, military men, began to come to Russia during the XVI – XVII centuries. They came from the countries of Western Europe and professed mainly Lutheranism. Lately, the number of Lutherans and other Protestants began to increase due to the inclusion of the Baltic States and Finland in the composition of Russia. The population of these territories was almost Protestant.

However, the own religious movements, whose teachings and principles of confession of faith were surprisingly similar to European Protestantism: Strigolniki, Subbotniks, Dukhobors, Molokans, began to develop in XIV century. The adherents of these religious movements gave special authority to the Holy Scripture and denied the church tradition in contrast to the official Orthodox faith. In addition, they did not recognize the authority of the Orthodox Church hierarchy and, in general, all external religiosity. They emphasized the equality of all members of the community in matters of personal responsibility to God, focused on moral purity and holiness.

Two waves of Protestantism in Russia, which represented parallel tendencies in the XIX century, led to a significant strengthening of the positions of Protestantism. Historians note that German colonists and Russian peasants did not communicate with each other and did not show any interest in the religious believes of each other. Moreover, foreigners were allowed to profess their faith, but it was forbidden to conduct missionary activity among the Orthodox population. Russian Protestantism did not grow out of Lutheranism; it was its own, domestic movement.

Protestantism appeared at the Russian Far East in the second half of the XIX century. There was a demographic explosion in the southern and central provinces of the Russian Empire, there was not enough territory for a rapidly growing population. The government facilitated the mass migration of peasants to the Far East, where it allocated the large tracts of land to the settlers. The authorities of the Russian Empire sought to get rid of Protestants because they were considered to be gentiles and sectarians. They settled and based their communities in Primorskiy Region, southern districts of the Khabarovsk Region, the Amur Region.

Protestants significantly intensified their activities throughout Russia and, in particular, in the Far East after February 1917. Religious non-

Orthodox associations were free despite the confusion and material difficulties. The Far Eastern authorities changed quickly and did not interfere in the confessional sphere. The number of residents of the Far East, who accepted Protestantism, reached about 10 thousand by the middle of 1920's. Communities organized effective work, established connections with foreign co-religionists, issued periodicals.

The evaluation of Protestants as "the conductors of the United States" prevailed in Soviet historical and political science. Said, that the intervention and missionary practice of foreigners played a decisive role in spreading Protestantism in the Russian Far East. The process of development of the evangelical movement was presented as artificial, imposed from the outside and pursuing non-religious, but exclusively geopolitical goals. Historian N.V. Potapova from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk University, who studied this issue, considers such estimates as unjustified. She found that missionary programs for Russia of the period of the deepest military and political crisis in the USA, Canada, European countries of 1917 – 1922, were initiated by believing emigrants who came from Russia and Ukraine. They sought to provide them with spiritual and material support including in the matter of spreading the dogma because they sincerely empathizing with their fates. N.V. Potapova concluded that there is no connection between governmental and business circles of the USA and the missionary programs of the Baptists of Russia, particularly in the Far East. The assistance was private and voluntary. The scale of this aid were not as significant as they were claimed in the Soviets' propaganda literature, was not systematic. Donations were collected and sent to the Far East to resolve specific issues of daily life of communities and the needs of the mission [11, pp. 215 – 216].

The Protestants of the Far East shared the tragic fate of adherents of religion in the 1930's. Repressive policies had carried out against all faiths in the USSR. The number of Protestants in the region had increased significantly, because they have enriched the contingent of prisoners. Many of them stayed here later. Despite of the hard trials, these people have been remained committed to their faith. The situation stayed the same for many years: many believers had not possibilities to legalize their religious activities. There were only 5 registered religious organizations in Khabarovsk Region in 1946, 2 of them were Protestant (Evangelical Christians-Baptists). This ratio remained unchanged for the next 20 years. There were about 20 unregistered communities in the province at the end of the 1940's [1, page 41], which regularly held prayer meetings. The situation was similar in the Amur Region: there were only 2 religious organizations registered in the post-war years (in the early 1960's) and more than 30 communities were without registration. The authorities at that time treated them more or less loyal. However, there is an increase in atheistic work and at the same time – pressure on religious associations to prevent their registration in the future. The authors of the monograph "Power and religion. The history of relations (1941 – 1990)" give us numerous examples of unreasonable and far-fetched refusals of Protestant religious associations' registration. For example, the Evangelical Christians-Baptists of the Pereyaslavka (village in Khabarovsk Region) applied for registration on September

28, 1966, but the positive decision about their official registration was given only after three and a half years. The arguments of the refusal are puzzling: "Not enough believers". According to the Russian law, religious association could not file documents for registration without a certain number of participants. The second argument was next: "There is already a registered community in the district". The Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Sakhalin Region noted in 1967 that the formal right to register Evangelical Christians-Baptists religious community in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Aleksandrovsk is long overdue, but the regional executive committee did not give permission [1, pp. 92 – 93]. At the same time, there are many examples of registration without any special obstacles (Chegdomyn (1969), Vyazemsky (1970), the city of Komsomolsk-on-Amur (1979)). It is obvious that the authorities took decisions subjectively at that time.

The chairperson of the Council for Religious Affairs A.A. Puzin noted in 1965 that representatives of the authorities had allowed numerous violations of the law: unlawful refusal to register religious communities, broke up of prayer meetings, arbitrary searches in believers' apartments and in prayer houses, confiscation of religious literature, illegal arrests of believers, deprivation of believers of parental rights. The main cause of these violations was considered as next: "many officials have formed wrong ideas about sectarians and ways to combat sectarian doctrines. All sects are often portrayed as moral monsters and parasites" [quoted on 1: pp. 85 – 86]. After all of this, religious associations continued to function, believers gathered in prayer meetings, raised children in their faith, read and tried to spread the Bible.

But what motivated these people, where did they get this perseverance in faith and the willingness to suffer for it? You can understand this by referring to the interpretations of the faith of Protestant theologians. Many of them describe the state of faith by the phrase, which was introduced by Paul Tillich¹: "unconditional grip". "Capture implies that something touched, captured me, that it has immeasurable value for me, that I live it ... that I focus all my life on it. The word "unconditional" is an important addition here. Of course, it means that it is an absolute value. The value on which my life and death depend. It is a question of what is above life and death, which gives life and death its meaning. It is about what to live for and what to die for" [13, pp. 49 – 50]. The author emphasizes that what has been said does not mean fanaticism: "fanaticism should be rejected as something inhuman. Unconditional means that it retains its power even when other emotions or thoughts overwhelm us, that it does not depend on our actual state, what will remain even when all our other passions pass, when all our other hopes are destroyed " [13, p. 52].

The religious life is becoming more active, including in the Far East, in the context of socio-political transformations in the country since the 1980's. The number of registered religious associations, their social and missionary activity is

¹ Tillich, P.J. (1886 – 1965) was a German-American Protestant theologian and an existentialist philosopher known for his works "Courage to Be", "Dynamics of Faith" and "Systematic Theology". He substantiated the individual experience of the foundations of culture, which leads to absolute value dimensions of being, to the comprehension of the man of God as his own true essence.

increasing. Moreover, there is an increase in civil and patriotic sentiments among believers. Today Protestant organizations in the Far East represent a significant segment of the confessional picture of the region.

The number of registered Protestant religious organizations is presented in the Table 1 (data was presented on December 18, 2017):

Table 1

	Republic of Sakha	Kamchatsk iy Region	Primorsky Region	Khabarovs k Region	Amurskiy Region	Jewish Autonomo us Region	Magadan Region	Sakhalin Region	Chukotsky Autonomo us District	the Far the Eastern
Total number of registered	155	62	322	187	132	59	44	139	11	1111
Number of registered, related to Protestantism	49	15	179	96	46	15	15	63	5	483
% of total number	31.6	24.2	55.6	51.3	34.8	25.4	34.1	45.3	45.5	43.5
Number of registered, including centralized religious organizations	2	1	5	3	4	1	1	2	-	19
Evangelical Christians-Baptists	-	2	13	17	12	5	3	4	-	56
Evangelical Christians of other denominations	32	-	37	6	7	1	-	4	1	88
Christians of the Evangelical faith, Pentecostals	1	8	10	19	9	1	1	1	-	50
Christians of the Evangelical faith of other denominations	8	4	40	24	11	5	7	30	4	133
Seventh Day Adventists	4	1	19	9	6	2	1	6	-	48

Presbyterians	-	-	46	12	1	1	-	16	-	76
Methodists	-	-	5	3	-	-	-	-	-	8
Lutherans	-	-	2	3	-	-	1	-	-	6
Other Christian organizations (Mormons, New Apostolic Church, etc.)	4	-	7	3	-	-	2	2	-	18

As it can be seen from the data in the table, the most active religious life is observed among the Protestants of the Primorsky and Khabarovsk Regions, where the number of Protestant religious organizations is more than half of all registered religious organizations. Several centralized religious organizations are also registered in these regions of the Russian Federation, as well as in the Amur Region: for example, the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches of the Amur Region, the Union of Christian Presbyterian Churches of Primorsky Region, and others.

An analysis of the distribution of religious organizations across the territory of the Far Eastern Federal District makes it possible to see the differences between the subjects of the Russian Federation. Thus, Protestant organizations are scattered all over the Primorsky Region. There are slightly over 30% of religious organizations in Vladivostok, but the list of settlements where religious organizations are registered is very extensive. Religious life is also scattered around settlements in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiya): there are only two centralized and nine local religious organizations in the republican center from forty nine registered Protestant religious organizations. Evangelical Christians led active propaganda in 2003 – 2008. They created more than ten local religious organizations in Yakutsk and in other cities (Neryungri, Vilyuysk, Aldan), as well as in some villages. On the contrary, 73% (70 out of 96) of Protestant organizations, registered in the Khabarovsk Region, are concentrated in Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-on-Amur. Two-thirds of Jewish Autonomous Region's registered religious organizations are in Birobidzhan.

The registration of Protestant religious organizations over the years also gives an interesting picture. According to the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" No. 125-FL, adopted in September 1997, all religious organizations of Russia had to pass again the procedure of state registration. It was done in order to prevent the legalization of numerous non-traditional associations that arose in the 1990's and destabilized the spiritual climate in the country. According the the data of the Ministry of Justice (2003) the registration procedure was passed by an absolute majority (almost 70%) of the current Protestant religious organizations of the Far East. The stable confessional situation is observed in the Magadan Region and in the Chukotka Autonomous District (Table 2). But Protestant organizations continued to appear in

the remaining subjects of the Far Eastern Federal District until 2017. Among almost active there are: the Presbyterian churches of Primorsky Region, the Evangelical Christians are Pentecostals of the Amur Region, the Church of the Full Gospel in a number of subjects of the Far Eastern Federal District.

Table 2

	Republic of Sakha	Kamchatsk iy Region	Primorsky Region	Khabarovs k Region	Amurskiy Region	Autonomo us Region Magadan Region	Sakhalin Region	Autonomo us District the Far Eastern		
The number of registered Protestant religious organizations	49	15	179	96	46	15	15	63	5	483
Registered in 1998-2001	11	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	4	19
2002	19	9	50	46	28	9	10	39	-	210
2003	2	-	69	19	5	1	3	7	-	106
2004	3	-	12	4	-	1	-	4	-	24
2005	-	1	3	6	-	-	-	-	-	10
2006	5	-	3	-	3	1	-	-	-	12
2007	3	1	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	9
2008	4	-	6	2	1	-	-	2	1	16
2009	-	1	6	3	3	1	-	6	-	20
2010	-	1	6	1	3	-	-	-	-	11
2011	1	-	8	3	2	1	-	1	-	16
2012	1	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	5
2013	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
2014	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	1	-	4
2015	-	2	1	2	-	-	-	1	-	6
2016	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	2
2017	-	-	6	3	-	-	-	2	-	11

The presence of such a large number of Protestant organizations gave rise to the authors of the analytical report for the Government of the Russian Federation, prepared in 2015 by faculty members of the RANEPa branches, to express concern about the confessional situation in the Far East. The practice of missionary work of Protestant denominations has great flexibility and the ability to adapt to various conditions, especially through the creation of unregistered groups, according to the report. The authors made the assumption that it is possible to "play a religious card" in order to increase political and social tensions in the

region in the process of implementation by some foreign countries of a geopolitical strategy aimed at alienating the Far East from the Russian Federation.

It may seem that these fears are justified but the analysis of the number of registered religious organizations does not give a complete objective confessional picture of the region. It is necessary to have an information about the number of organizations. There are 32 – 38% of people, who call themselves religious, according to the data of sociological researches in the Far East. This number is significantly less than the average Russia number and especially for the western regions of the country (over 85% of respondents).

Long-term inter-field research of religiosity among Russian people allowed determining the approximate number of religious associations. It ranges from 300 to 500 congregation for the Russian Orthodox Church, and from 100 to 300 members for others (except Muslim). Even if the focus is on the average number of two hundred people over one Protestant organization it turns out that the Protestant organization Far East account for about 96 thousands people with the population of the Far Eastern Federal District of 6.3 million people (1.5% of the Far Eastern population). A little more than 1% of the respondents consider themselves as Protestants (Far Eastern Consulting Center, n=1800, 2009), and 46.6% as Orthodox. So "the dominance of Protestantism" in the Russian Far East – no more than an appearance.

It should be said that there is still a certain prejudice against Protestantism in modern society: many people say that it is "non-traditional" religion and use the word "sect". From the perspective of the sociology of religion, sect is separated from the existing religions direction with their accents in doctrine and cult features. The features of the sect are voluntary and conscious entry, absence of ecclesiastical hierarchy, less formalized and worship that is more emotional. An American theologian R. Niebuhr² concluded that the religious sect has no longer the life of the first generation, in the second-generation life it goes into a denomination form. Russian Protestantism at the stage of its formation had the features of sectarian movements, but in the paths of its existence, it had lost its traits. Major of Russian Christian churches can be considered as already traditional for our country if it is still correct to divide religions on "traditional" and "nontraditional". The leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith Christians Church – Seventh-day Adventists are the part of the Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations under the President of the Russian Federation. Similar community councils operate with the governors of regions of the Russian Federation: there are representatives of Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists in the Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the Governor of the Khabarovsk Region. Levtsenyuk V.A., senior presbyter of the centralized religious organization "Association of Evangelical Churches of the Far East Christians-Baptists", observed tolerance and

² Niebuhr, R. (1892-1971) – an American Protestant theologian of German origin, author of the books "Moral man and immoral society", "Nature and destiny of man", "Christianity and war".

constructive interaction with religious organizations managers and employees of Regional Government in a personal conversation with the author of this article.

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