



## ACADEMIC RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND ANTICOLONIAL PROTEST: THE CASE OF OSSETIAN NATIVIST ACTIVISM

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**Abstract:** The article analyses the critique of the concept of ‘religion’ in two different intellectual projects. The first was undertaken by the social anthropologist Talal Asad, who constructed his examination of the conceptual apparatus of modern anthropology as a protest against the Eurocentrism of the contemporary social sciences and humanities. This critique made Asad a public intellectual, but not a social activist. The second case studied is the activity of Daurbek Makeev, and activist of the nativist religious movement in North Ossetia, who works on a revision of the dominant understanding of religion in Russian society. In the course of this work he treads a path from ethnic activist to public intellectual, with the prospect of occupying the social position of a regular academic student of religion. In conditions of an acute polemic with representatives of more powerful religious institutions, like some other activists of ethnic religions he seeks for new methods of legitimising his project in the eyes of society at large. These foundations are discovered in the existing academic practices of reviewing those academic positions which examine any religion from the perspective of its correspondence to a normatively understood Christianity. Reproducing to a large extent the arguments of the postcolonial critique of culture, Makeev seeks in the area of social sciences those theories of religion that could remove the opposition between the spheres of the religious and the secular, the individual and the social. He finds his theory in the approaches which discursively blur the boundary between academic practices and the techniques of spiritual searching and self-improvement, specifically in transpersonal psychology, which places scientist argumentation within the field of the spiritual searching of the New Age.

**Keywords:** concept of religion, postcolonial critique, religious nativism, transpersonal psychology, Talal Asad, Daurbek Makeev, the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania.

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## **Academic Religious Studies and Anticolonial Protest: The Case of Ossetian Nativist Activism**

The article analyses the critique of the concept of 'religion' in two different intellectual projects. The first was undertaken by the social anthropologist Talal Asad, who constructed his examination of the conceptual apparatus of modern anthropology as a protest against the Eurocentrism of the contemporary social sciences and humanities. This critique made Asad a public intellectual, but not a social activist. The second case studied is the activity of Daurbek Makeev, and activist of the nativist religious movement in North Ossetia, who works on a revision of the dominant understanding of religion in Russian society. In the course of this work he treads a path from ethnic activist to public intellectual, with the prospect of occupying the social position of a regular academic student of religion. In conditions of an acute polemic with representatives of more powerful religious institutions, like some other activists of ethnic religions he seeks for new methods of legitimising his project in the eyes of society at large. These foundations are discovered in the existing academic practices of reviewing those academic positions which examine any religion from the perspective of its correspondence to a normatively understood Christianity. Reproducing to a large extent the arguments of the postcolonial critique of culture, Makeev seeks in the area of social sciences those theories of religion that could remove the opposition between the spheres of the religious and the secular, the individual and the social. He finds his theory in the approaches which discursively blur the boundary between academic practices and the techniques of spiritual searching and self-improvement, specifically in transpersonal psychology, which places scientist argumentation within the field of the spiritual searching of the New Age.

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Definitions of religion are not single, completed definitive acts; they extend over time and work themselves through practices. They are modified and elaborated with continuous use [Martin, Asad 2014: 13].

In November 2019 I was invited to take part in an academic and practical conference on questions of religious traditionalism. The conference was to take place in a town where I had been doing field research for several years, and was on a subject that was not only interesting to me, but directly connected with my current project. I was delighted, and at the same time baffled, by the invitation. The conference was being organised by people whose lives and views I had been studying. And I understood that they were expecting me to tell them about their own lives and views. It was clear that they knew a lot more about all that than I did. So why had they invited me? I had no clear answer to that question.

Of course I went to the conference, and read a paper which was, incidentally, about the main

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hero of the present article. This man was supposed to be present at the conference, but had been unable to come, so that I did not get the immediate response that I had been counting on. My short talk left most of the audience indifferent, and after the end of the session I went back to my hotel without having found an answer to my question. I could, obviously, seek it in several directions, beginning with the reasonable admission that my academic affiliation might have served to make the academic and practical conference academic as well as practical. But the straightest answer, from my point of view, may have been this: I was invited so that they could hear what would be said about the local traditionalist projects by someone who knew something about them but at the same time was not obliged by his / her position openly to criticise them. The people who had invited me were interested in what people who were 'close but different' would say about them, and above all how, using what language, they would say it. Perhaps the words they used would come in handy?

In this article I shall attempt to say something about the problem of searching for suitable words, and how the vectors of ambition of people who seem to live in two different worlds meet at a point which only someone who lives (or at least, spends time) in both of them can see. In the present case, me.

### 'Religion' in Asad's projection

An article came out in 1983 that changed a great deal in the field of the study of religion by the methods of social anthropology [Asad 1983]. Its author, Talal Asad, gave a critical interpretation of the academic practice of seeking a universal definition of the phenomenon of religion, i.e. a definition which would suit all societies in which something which from our point of view resembled religion was to be found. In this article, and in his subsequent words dealing with similar problems, Asad indicated that by defining some phenomenon (belief, practice) as religious, we tacitly ascribe to it the qualities that we expect to find in it. In other words, together with the word 'religion' (and its derivatives) we receive a system of ideological assumptions invisible to us, and, most importantly, an unreflective understanding of the norm with which we shall approach the examination and evaluation of other people's behaviour.

When we call certain phenomena a religion, we tacitly assume that that use of language is a neutral act of denomination referring our hearers or readers to objectively existing realities. It is supposed that by observing those phenomena, which exist outside our own consciousness, we form an idea of what religion is as an integral and widespread social phenomenon, and likewise of the place religion occupies in a particular society at a given moment in time, and what forms it takes there.

Talal Asad, and other authors inspired by his critical approach, have tried to demolish this picture. They have indicated that our knowledge of what religion is precedes the process of recognising the religious sphere in one society or another. In other words, we have an idea of what the nature of a real religion is, where it is situated in the social space, and, accordingly, where we should look for it. According to this logic, the average European associates religion with the inner spiritual (psychological) life of the individual, and regards it more as an object of deliberate choice than of compulsion. Furthermore, the average European assumes that religion is something associated with belief. Religious belief is hidden within a person (in heart, or soul, or head) and is by its very nature inaccessible to direct observation, even though it does have external (and, therefore, logically secondary) manifestations (see, for example: [Nongbri 2013: 19]). In this way genuine religious life (or religious life as such) is seen as an autonomous sphere of people's (or, better, a particular person's) intellectual and emotional life.

By this reasoning Asad came to the following conclusions. Such an understanding of religion is neither universal nor objective. With its accent on questions of belief it is in principle, and consistently, centred on Christianity, for in many non-European and non-Christian societies questions of belief are not central to what we could call the spiritual life. However, this is also true of some Christian societies.

Asad continues: the placing of 'real' religion in the sphere of the inner intellectual and emotional life of the individual is based not simply on a general Christian, but on a specifically Protestant habit of stressing that the individual faith of each person in the salvific mission of Christ is essential to the salvation of the soul (which is regarded, also in a manner centred on Christianity, as the basic aim and meaning of the religious life). In other words, when we base our understanding of the subject on these presuppositions, we reproduce a manifestly preconceived and exceedingly limited view of what we call religion. According to Asad, this view was formed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the Early Modern period) in a Europe that was experiencing the Reformation and the wars of religion.

This conclusion of Asad's, perfectly academic in its basic content, that the concept of religion used in the social sciences came into being in particular historical conditions and therefore has limited application to societies that are unlike European societies of the Modern period, has had a serious influence on the study of religion through the methods of the social sciences and humanities. Asad 'historicised' the concept of religion and called upon his colleagues to pay more attention to the historical circumstances of its application. This is how he formulated his idea in a later work:

*The reason there cannot be a universal conception of religion is not because religious phenomena are infinitely varied — although there is in fact great variety in the way people live in the world with their religious beliefs. Nor is it the case that there is no such thing, really, as religion. It is that defining is a historical act and when the definition is deployed, it does different things at different times and in different circumstances, and responds to different questions, needs, and pressures. The concept ‘religion’ is not merely a word: it belongs to vocabularies that bring persons and things, desires and practices together in particular traditions in distinctive ways [Asad 2012: 38–39].*

In other words, there is no religion for the social researcher, nor can there be. But there is ‘religion’, *religion* or so-called religion, that is emic concepts that have as their sole field of existence only certain modern social contexts and which we thoughtlessly and irresponsibly project on to all other non-Western and non-modern societies. When we study religion, we can, and indeed must observe how people use these concepts in different situations, and what place they occupy in their social imagination. ‘So what one has to look for, in other words, is the ways in which, as circumstances change, people constantly try, as it were, to gather together elements that they think belong, or *should* belong, to the notion of religion’ [italics in the original. — S.Sh.] [Asad 2007: 205].<sup>1</sup>

### ‘Religion’ and the postcolonial critique

There is one aspect of Asad’s reasoning that is important for understanding the social consequences of using the concept that interests us. Following the logic of the analysis of discursive activity proposed by Michel Foucault, and inspired by the anticolonialist critique of Edward Said, Asad made the following observation. What we define as religion and regard as the result of objective observation and unprejudiced analysis, or even as simply a statement of obvious facts, is an act of power. We forcibly ascribe to people those qualities which we want and are ready to discover in them. In this we are trying to conform social worlds which are neither modern nor European to our explicatory models, without questioning the intellectual or political legitimacy of this procedure.

One of these explicatory models is this. The notional average European knows that different forms of social life are subject to different kinds of logic: one is secular, the other religious. This picture of reality includes the habit of separating ‘real’ religious life from economics, politics, rational science, and the invasion of the

<sup>1</sup> See the recent survey of the state of affairs in the discussion of this subject: [Nye 2019: 14–17].

religious sphere by elements of these deprives it of its desired purity and is tacitly condemned as an infringement of the norm, the principle of the natural segmentation of social life. If this distinct separation is absent from some society, this is perceived as a transgression of the ideal norm of the distribution of spheres of responsibility — between state and church, secular science and theology, rational economic logic directed towards extracting the maximum material advantage from the production and distribution of goods, and the irrational (though extremely laudable) practice of voluntary poverty. Societies where these ideal models of institutions and practices are not separated are archaic from the point of view of such an understanding of religion.

There may be different treatments of this fact. Some, possessed by antimodern enthusiasm, might simply dream of living in such a society. But usually the conclusion is tacitly drawn that religion that is not confined within specific bounds and occurs in social locations that are unexpected for our notional modern European (in state schools, for example) is a reason for the backwardness in its socioeconomic development of that society in which this disorder is discovered (or rather, to which it is ascribed). Moreover, the absence of the supposed clear and consistent division of social life into religious and the secular (i.e. religion-free) components may be perceived as a threat to other, 'proper' societies. This thought was particularly important to Asad, because when the problem is seen like that, the use in the public sphere of a Eurocentric concept of religion in respect of non-European societies is a direct act of colonialism, that is not only a sign of dominance, but a practice of subordinating some societies by others.

How this mechanism works is well illustrated by considering the role of Christian missions in creating non-European religions. According to this line of the postcolonial critique, before a certain time the concept of 'religion' corresponding to that which had established itself in Europe did not exist in other parts of the world. All that began to change when the Europeans started their colonial expansion. As this took place, from the first steps of Christian missions in the sixteenth century up to the establishments of systems of colonial government in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they discovered 'religions' everywhere, that is, what they were already accustomed back home in the metropolis to identify as an essential and autonomous element of social life. A special role in this was played by the missionaries who converted to Christianity the people they encountered in the lands of which the colonists had taken possession. In his well-known 'Asadian' article Michael Lambek remarks in his discussion of the conceptual assumptions of the Abrahamic religions, that for representatives of Christianity and Islam '[c]onversion *to* implies simultaneous conversion *from*' [italics

in the original. — S.Sh.] [Lambek 2008: 124]. The definition of Christian missions as converting people to the true faith from ‘the darkness of heathen errors’ is a good example of such an intellectual procedure. In order to ‘enter’ our religion, the convert must leave his / her own, in this case paganism, behind. It does not matter that in a certain sense paganism did not exist before the arrival of the missionaries. They created it so that when their converts accepted Christianity they would be able to reject something.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth saying that it is not only missionary activity in creating religions and the suburban practical religious studies of the abstract average European trying to understand what religion was professed in a given non-European society that can be regarded as practices that produce a religion or religions. If we are to be consistent in our examination of the history of the European appropriation of the rest of the world from such a perspective, then academic religious studies will also appear before us as an instrument of colonial dominance. It will, moreover, function even better as an instrument of post-colonial compulsion, because postcolonial compulsion is above all discursive compulsion. Following this logic, the historian of Eastern Christianity George Demacopoulos, examining the influence of Catholic theology on Orthodoxy and the traditionalist anticolonial protest against that influence, began his discussion by defining the nature of postcolonialism. He wrote that people who are forced to live in postcolonial conditions cannot define for themselves who they are in this world: other people speak for them, and establish social roles and conditions of existence for these people by means of their own language [Demacopoulos 2017: 475]. Looking at the situation from that point of view, one might see religious studies as a legitimate object of social criticism: ‘Religion as a [category for the] description of human behavior was created through colonialism and its governments, its sciences, and its theologies. [Therefore] [t]o be trained as a scholar of religious studies is then to practice a postcolonial methodology of a profoundly colonial subject’ [Lofton 2012: 384].

In many ways Asad changed the ideas of the epistemological foundations of social research into religion (or so-called religion) with his critique of the conceptual toolkit of religious studies. One may have various attitudes towards these changes, but it is more or less obvious that his critique of the academic categorial apparatus was essentially one of many critiques of dominant discourses and an attempt to challenge the very fact of the dominance of the modern West in the sphere of vital social classifications. It is no surprise that this critique made Asad a prominent political figure: his ideas fit in

<sup>1</sup> This sort of creativity went beyond inventing heathen religions. On the role of Protestant missionaries in the formation of the concept of Hinduism see: [Oddie 2006].

well with the requirements of other activists in the sphere of the most seemingly diverse social initiatives to challenge the right of the dominant — white Europeans (heterosexual males and Protestants) — to impose their normative understanding of reality on the rest of the world.

### **The critique of concepts and ethnic activism**

When he indicated the modern European origin of the concept of 'religion' and the problems of applying it in non-modern-European contexts, Asad did not see, and, it seems, could not have seen one important prospect for the development of this topic. In modern society the definition of the concept of religion in the system of coordinates both of everyday common sense and of academic study is not only an instrument of oppression by recognised institutions — the academy or the structures of dominant faiths, but also a means of resistance to that oppression on the part of representatives of minorities and new projects in the sphere of religion, both new religious tendencies and proponents of the reinterpretation (re-description) of existing tendencies and traditions. We can see intellectual protest being made against cultural dominance of the public sphere by religious and academic professionals who use a Christianity-centred treatment of this concept as a basis for their evaluation of non-Christian (or, more widely, non-Abrahamic) religions. We can hardly have any reason to say that this protest is a consequence of the penetration of Talal Asad's ideas into the activist milieu. It is more a matter of a general tendency in modern society towards a critique of the dominance of established classifications becoming a fact not only of academic reflection (and, incidentally, of the policies of certain academic institutions). People who have never belonged to the academy but who are looking for ways to legitimise their protest initiatives through the authority of science (admittedly, usually 'new' or 'alternative' science) are becoming involved in the public discussion of the necessity of reappraising established conventions. This last circumstance, of course, gives these gestures a particular character, which, I think, should not hide from us the prospects for looking for common points in the tendencies of the development of academic practices and of religious protest activism.

As an example of the realisation of (originally) non-academic protest I shall take the book by Daurbek Makeev, a student of religion and at the same time an activist of a nativist religious project which is being pursued in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation, North Ossetia–Alania.

I have been collecting ethnographic material on Ossetian traditionalism since 2004 and have had the opportunity to observe how



the movement for reviving what is often called traditional Ossetian religion (or faith) had over the last fifteen years become quite a noticeable phenomenon in the republic. Its representatives and sympathisers, who include some quite prominent and highly placed individuals, are interviewed on local television and print their articles in the newspapers. Other people who occupy an important place in the public space of the republic, although not directly involved in the movement, do a lot to further the perception of the Ossetian ethnic faith as an objectively existing phenomenon with a long history. Among these last is the leader of the 'High Council of the Ossets' ('Styr nyxas') Ruslan Kuchiev, a person considered by many as a protégé and fellow thinker of the former head of North Ossetia, Vyacheslav Bitarov. For example, in a recent article discussing interfaith harmony, Kuchiev spoke of certain principles that 'form the basis both of the world religions and of the traditional faith of the Ossets' [Kuchiev 2019]. We should note that what is referred to here is not Ossetian religion (these nuances are very important in certain contexts) but faith, though for most of the population of the republic this difference is not so relevant, particularly when the words quoted, by comparing and contrasting the faith of the Ossets with world religions, make it to be understood in the same categories as those religions themselves.

For many reasons, which must be discussed separately, both the ideologues of this movement and many of its ordinary members construct their public presentational policy on the opposition between this religion and Orthodox Christianity (or, less often, Islam). They understand Christianity not only (and not so much) as a colonial project of the Russian Empire (and, for earlier periods, of the Byzantine Empire and Georgia), although this is mentioned from time to time. Traditionalists like to quote the historian and publicist Soslan Timirkanov, who wrote at the beginning of the 1920s about Russian Orthodoxy imposed in Ossetia 'by police methods' (see, for example: ['Ofitsialnyy otvet...' 2018: 136]). They also remember the words of the writer and collector of folklore Mikhail Gardanti, who in 1947 recalled projects for the creation of an Ossetian national state in the late imperial period and asserted that these projects presupposed the deliverance of the Ossets from 'religious dependence': 'Always, as history shows, religious subordination leads a people to political subordination' [Gardanti 2007: 409].

It is usually a somewhat vaguely defined West that is cast in the role of the colonising subject in this context. The West is understood as the abode of some secret powers (often this role is ascribed to the Jews), who use Christianity as a means of secret influence on the ethnic cultures of non-Christian peoples, that is, as an instrument of Western (in the very widest sense) imperialism or colonialism.

Of course, the terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ are not often heard in this context. Much more widely used is the concept of ‘information wars’ (see, for example: [Makeev 2017b: 139–169; Totrova 2017]).

Orthodox polemicists are trying to resist these accusations and point out that the activists of Ossetian traditionalism are amateurs, naïve dreamers who have invented some sort of ethnic religion out of nothing: ‘[I]ndividual representative of the Ossetian creative intelligentsia are trying artificially to create a sort of new pseudo-religious system — and each of them fashions it exclusively according to his own understanding, experience and level of education’ [Abaev 2016]. From the point of view of the sort of respectable Orthodoxy supported by the Russian state, the Ossetian nativists are just a group of dilettanti, lovers of antiquity who are taking their hobby too seriously. Naturally, the nativists’ attempts to apply the term ‘religion’ to their project are regarded by Orthodox priests and laity with condescending disdain (and lately also with annoyance, as the nativists are winning the sympathy of young intellectuals). I shall quote the discussion of this point by Mikhail Mamiev, who is known for his efforts to strengthen the position of Orthodoxy in North Ossetia.

*I dislike the term ‘paganism’, as it is unscientific and does not convey the real nature of the processes that are taking place, especially since Ossetian popular tradition is distinguished by a consistent monotheism. But unfortunately we have no alternative term at our disposal to designate such quasireligions that arise in modern secularised societies, particularly on post-Soviet territory. The self-professed ‘traditional’ (variants: ‘original’, ‘true’) Ossetian religion that is being thrust upon contemporary society is one of these. Its followers are usually called ‘traditionalists’, although their relationship with actual traditional culture is highly mediated [Tyurenkov 2019].*

### **Going academic**

As they put their revivalist project into practice, the activists of the Ossetian ethnic faith, which is called by various names (Iron Din, Wac Din, Æss Din) pursued their activities in two directions. Firstly, they started to register their communities officially as religions organisations. Secondly, their ideologues began to re-examine the very meaning of the term ‘religion’. The aim of this revision was to prove that it was only from the point of view of narrow-minded Christians and Muslims, unaware of the results of modern scholarship about religion, that their project was not religious. It is obvious that an important aspect of this critique was a protest against cultural colonialism on the part of religious and academic professionals who use a Christianity-centred understanding of the subject as a basis

for their evaluations of non-Christian religions. So as to have something serious to oppose to the conceptual apparatus of their opponents, the ideological leaders of Iron Din had to become professional specialists in religious studies and master the relevant discursive skills. They started to publish books that are discussed by the local historians and folklorists as scholarly works and not missionary publications.

One of the authors of these books is Daurbek Makeev. He is over fifty, an agronomist by education, but has worked for most of his life as a children's judo instructor. Makeev is the head of the religious organisation of the Ossetian ethnic faith in the town of Mozdok (incidentally, the first traditionalist organisation to be registered at the republic's Ministry of Justice) and at the same time an author who actively writes about questions of Ossetian spiritual culture and the national religion. He is not the only theoretician and apologist of the traditionalist religious project in the republic, but he has become better known as such than anyone else. His third book, *Æss Din. The People's [Ethnic] Religion* came out in 2017 in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia [Makeev 2017b]. In comparison with the previous ones [Makeev 2002; 2007], particularly the first, which was a brochure put together in an unprofessional manner, this work looks like a very solid publication and produces a corresponding impression. It is not only that the recently published volume has been formatted by a professional designer and has had a technical editor, nor even that it contains the requisite apparatus of references to the literature cited. The most important thing is that although he never had any specialist education in the humanities, Makeev has written a book which corresponds according to many parameters to the accepted standards in comparative religious studies.

Daurbek Makeev's entry into the social field of scholarship is not limited to his complete mastery of the technique of compiling a reference apparatus. He is also acquiring other skills which transfer his activity from the field of religious activism into the sphere of academic practices. He speaks at various academic conferences. He writes texts together with Zaur Tsoraev, who has a higher doctorate in philosophy and teaches at the republic's main university. In recent years Makeev, who has been interviewed extensively on local television, has been positioning himself not as a representative of Ossetian religion, but as an expert in religious studies.

In his 2017 book, as in his other texts and speeches, Daurbek Makeev demonstrates a good knowledge of certain approaches in this field, and, what is particularly telling, a loyalty to the academic corporation of students of religion. He says outright that religion must be studied from an academic point of view, although at times he complains that the predominant Weltanschauungen in 'academic' scholarship

are ‘influenced by the philosophical tradition of materialism and the Abrahamic religions’ [Makeev 2017b: 194] (the sarcastic inverted commas around the word ‘academic’ are in the original). In addition, Makeev calls his colleagues (and, evidently, also himself) to an awareness of the importance of the social role of the academic — the religious studies specialist, the anthropologist, the historian — in the transformation of the world. Correctly conducted research has an exceptionally positive effect on social processes. In his interview for the Askr Svarte (Icelandic ‘black ash’) site,<sup>1</sup> the authors of which represent it as a pagan resource, Daurbek presented his vision of the situation thus.

*I think that an increase of knowledge in the field of religious studies will inevitably lead us to a realisation that we are all one. A profound study of the mythology (or, more precisely, the remnants of the mythology) of many peoples convinces us that all cultures have a single root. We only have to identify it and pay attention to it. I am sure that a return to our roots will beautify our lives by returning people to the brightness and diversity of ethnic cultures, where the folk rituals themselves, the songs and the dances used to have a sacred religious meaning, supported by that religion which thanks to a combination of circumstances has been preserved in Ossetia.*

*To consider oneself an adherent of that religion one has only to keep the folk traditions and culture, which exclude any aggression towards other peoples. Imagine a situation when people have rejected the universalisation of cultures and are converted to their traditional folk culture which, essentially, is the spiritual tradition and practice of that ancient religion where there is a thousand years of experience of ordering life, where there is colour, joy, festivals and good relationships with each other. Difference in cultures in that case will only add harmony, as different sounds form a melody [Nechkasov 2017].*

It is significant that Makeev, altogether in the spirit of modern positivist scholarship, is sure that religion, as a universal phenomenon for all humanity, exists in reality, apart from our social imagination. And in that case, this phenomenon can and should be given a reliable definition.

### **Redefining ‘religion’**

We find this definition, and also a serious commentary on it, in the book *Æss Din. The People’s [Ethnic] Religion*, in the paragraph ‘On Religion and Religious Studies’. The definition is not by Daurbek

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a garbled version of the Old Norse for ‘black ash tree’, *svartr askr* (see: *English–Old Norse Dictionary*, comp. by Ross G. Arthur. Cambridge, Ontario: s.n., 2002. <[https://www.academia.edu/6438662/English\\_Old\\_Norse\\_Dictionary\\_compiled\\_by](https://www.academia.edu/6438662/English_Old_Norse_Dictionary_compiled_by)>).

Makeev himself, but by Evgeny Torchinov, a professor at St Petersburg State University and an authoritative specialist on a non-Abrahamic religion, Buddhism. It may be this circumstance that gave Torchinov's opinion special weight in Makeev's eyes, as guaranteeing that his view of things would not be centred on Christianity.

*This scholar [Torchinov] made it his aim to identify a single defining feature of all the religions that exist. To achieve this he needed not only a theoretical knowledge of religious cultures, religious studies, theology and psychology, but also a practical knowledge of religious experience. On the basis of extremely extensive material he gave a general definition, which looks like this: **religion** is 'a complex of ideas, beliefs, doctrines, elements of the cult, ritual and other forms of practice, based on **transpersonal experience** of one form or another and assuming a setting for the reproduction of this base experience' [emphasis in the original. — S.Sh.] [Makeev 2017b: 19].*

The author explains the term 'transpersonal' for the benefit of the reader unfamiliar with it by quoting the [Russian] Wikipedia article on transpersonal psychology:

***Transpersonal psychology** is a school of psychology that studies transpersonal experience, altered states of consciousness and religious experience, combining modern psychological conceptions, theories and methods with the traditional spiritual practices of the East and West. **The main ideas** on which transpersonal psychology is based are **nonduality** and the **expansion of consciousness** beyond the usual limits of the Ego [emphasis in the original. — S.Sh.] [Makeev 2017b: 20].*

There are several interesting elements in this definition of religion. For example, beliefs and ideas do not lie at the foundations of the phenomenon of religion as a whole, but are epiphenomena in relation to experience (cf. elsewhere: '[T]ranspersonal experience is the foundation of any religious doctrine' [Makeev 2017b: 39]). Remember that in both everyday and academic discursive usage the understanding of religion is tacitly based on its being connected with the supernatural (i.e. with 'an interior state of assent to certain truths', as it was defined by the well-known student of Buddhism Donald Lopez Jr. in the context of what he called 'the ideology of belief' [Lopez 1998: 103]). At the same time, formulations may change, and instead of belief in the supernatural we may put 'ideas of ultimate reality'. In any case this formula preserves a certainty that it is belief, whatever we may call it, and not, say, facts that direct and justify religious practices.

It is evident that concern with questions of 'belief' (a creed), understood as adherence to a system of convictions about what the nature of 'ultimate' reality is, is characteristic above all of Christianity [Ruel

1982; Harding 2019: 45]. If we try to get away from a vague concept of ‘Christianity’ in favour of a critical deconstruction thereof, this ‘credocentricity’ becomes not simply the result of a fortuitous combination of historical circumstances, but a direct consequence of the establishment and consistent maintenance of a certain intellectual discipline by various spiritual institutions responsible, for example, for catechising and for the struggle against heterodoxy.

In this way the definition of religion chosen by Daurbek Makeev solves the problem of the use of Christianity, treated in a particular manner, as a model for the understanding of all religions. Remember that the overall problem of knowledge within religious studies is that this model is projected onto non-Christian religions, making people look for (and find) elements of the prescribed model in these social worlds, and then join them together to form some sort of local religion. Such elements are usually sacred texts, the figure of the founder of the religion, a corporation of priests, sacraments (rituals), and places of worship, not to mention religious dogma, without which, from this point of view, it is impossible to imagine the existence of a religion (or religions).<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the quotation under discussion, I would note that in order to understand Makeev’s logic it is particularly important that he indicates that Torchinov derived his definition not only on the basis of theoretical, i.e. speculative knowledge, but also from the personal, albeit also transpersonal experience of immersion in Eastern spiritual practices. Such religious experience is understood not as learnt or inculcated, not as dogmatic, but as experienced and lived, personally verified by the individual. While being individual, transpersonal experience assumes ‘unification’, the establishment of a connection between the individual and the surrounding world and the removal of the opposition between the internal and the external, the believer and God, which the author considers to be immanent to, for example, Christianity and materialism.

*The state of consciousness which religious literature describes as ‘unification’, is attained in religious cultures through special practices. The aim of these practices is to attain a relaxation of consciousness to the point of a sensation of unity with the surrounding world. This is not sleep and not distraction, but rather a simultaneous ‘looking’ left and right and forwards and backwards and up and down and inwards. During such ‘looking’ a feeling of unity between a person and the infinite world about him is attained. At the physical level the*

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, Makeev explicitly expresses his critical attitude to such inertia (without, however, touching on the question of the presence of a particular doctrine as the basis for any religion): ‘It is easy to deceive people by using certain stereotypes of perception. For example, they use the stereotype of necessary features of religion being “the book”, “the temple” and “preachers wearing vestments”. Those religions which do not have such “features” are declared not to exist’ [Makeev 2017b: 143].

person ceases to distinguish his Ego from the Infinity of being [Makeev 2010].

This rejection of the idea of ‘the duality of God and creation’, in Makeev’s opinion, emphasises the progressiveness and ultramodernity of the definition of religion that he uses by comparison with those that are Christian or centred on Christianity.

It is interesting that this definition excludes from the basic field of its meaning ‘incorrect’ or inadequate religions, which is almost inevitable in such acts of classification. Here Christianity, Islam and Judaism appear as such, religions whose representatives regard Makeev’s religion as something that is not serious, for example a modern invention (such criticism is common in Ossetian society, and Makeev is doubtless aware of it). In this context these ‘Western’ religions are themselves some sort of not entirely adequate formations, since the operational use of Torchinov’s definition displaces them from the centre of the semantic field of the concept of ‘religion’ to its periphery. In this act we should see an act of the ‘provincialisation’ (well known to the contemporary postcolonial critique [Chakrabarty 2000]) of something seemingly universal but in fact Western, in our case Christianity.

*In reality many contemporary religions lag far behind pure transpersonal experience. In contemporary religious studies such religions are defined as dogmatic. In them doctrine — ideology (the instrument of government) is predominant over pure experience, and on occasion even entirely obscures it. Therefore some religions may be regarded rather as instruments of government than as ways to the discovery of the mysteries of consciousness. Contemporary religious studies regards the so-called Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, as dogmatic religions [Makeev 2010].*

It must be noted that Makeev follows Torchinov in specially stressing that within these dogmatic religions there is a place for transpersonal experience as well, but the practices for attaining it are the province of free-thinkers and / or the elect — religious virtuosi among whom, one might add, our authors include the founders of Christianity and Islam [Makeev 2017b: 21, 27–28]. On the whole, however, ‘transpersonal experience is not here [in the dogmatic religions] conditioned by their view of the world’ [Ibid.: 23], and so it does not determine the overall state of affairs.

### Real ‘religions’

Against these imperfect (or spoilt) dogmatic religions, which lead people away from the supposed main aim of a real religion, ‘discovering the mysteries of consciousness’, are set real religions, which are based on pure transpersonal experience. ‘Among the

religions of pure experience are certain Eastern doctrines, and also the ancient traditional popular mythological religions' [Makeev 2010].

Elsewhere Makeev writes about one idea which, in his words, is present 'in all religions': the need for a person to attain 'a state of consciousness, when the relation of cause and effect between things and phenomena will be revealed to him.' True, if we rely on his apophatic argumentation, it turns out that some religious doctrines (he calls them Eastern, but it is evident from the context that the Ossetian tradition is also included amongst them) are much more valuable than others, among which we may recognise the 'dogmatic' Christianity and Islam. So, if that idea is represented in all religions, then clearly to different degrees.

*The value of religious doctrines is not in the worship of something or someone, and not in the fear of something or someone, and not even in good and virtuous laws, but in the attainment of a pure state of consciousness in which there is not need to proclaim moral laws or codes [Makeev 2017b: 114].*

It is obvious that here again we are dealing with a critique of the conception of religion centred on Christianity, which assumes a particular kind of relationship between the believer and God (or the gods), and with a desire to propose as an ideal kind of religion something orientalist, supposing a reliance on mystical doctrines and esotericism (when certain 'adepts' are mentioned) and practices of union with the pure divine consciousness — the impersonal Absolute [Makeev 2017b: 114–115].

The idea of the primacy of transpersonal experience (which, in fact, 'is "religious experience"' [Makeev 2017b: 19]) with regard to religious outlooks is correlated in a rather complex manner in Makeev's constructs with the religious Weltanschauung ('foundations of a view of the world'), a concept which is important to him. This complexity is connected with the fact that in his treatment of the phenomenon of religion, the author remains true to two common assumptions. Firstly, he starts from the fact that every religion is based on a particular doctrine, which determines its character. Effectively, the doctrine is the religion.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the topic of spiritual leadership and elitism is quite important for his vision of the general picture of how religious systems function, for example he remarks at one point that transpersonal experience 'is not accessible to everyone'.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The religious doctrine on which the traditional culture of the Osset people is built conceals within itself a profound knowledge of questions concerning society and existence in general' [Makeev 2017b: 17].



*In the East <...> as in the West, an integral (religious, mystical) understanding of the world is inaccessible to ordinary people. Only advanced adepts and mystics understand the mystery of the integrity of being, and they fix this understanding in religious practices and texts [Makeev 2017b: 28–29].*

Evidently the religious life of other people, who are not ‘advanced’, is determined by their *Weltanschauung* — ‘the totality of the views, values and principles that determine a general <...> understanding of the world’ [Makeev 2017b: 41]. But it is precisely the reception of the correct fundamentals of the *Weltanschauung* that ‘within [Ossetian] tradition aids a natural penetration <...> into profound transpersonal experience, assisting the concentration of consciousness’ [Ibid.: 50]. In other words, in the ideal case the absorption of ethnic tradition in the course of the individual’s socialisation makes transpersonal experience and / or an integral understanding of the world accessible to everyone: ‘A follower of the tradition (doctrine) understands that he is inseparable from the surrounding world and connected with some forces or other, manifest or not, towards which his consciousness is attuned’ [Ibid.: 51].

As we see, both the student of religion and ethnic activist Daurbek Makeev and his real or potential opponents are convinced that religion as a constant and persistent component of social life (culture) is a universal phenomenon. At the same time he aims — quite explicitly in the form of his definition, and implicitly in the form of his statement of seemingly obvious information about various religious traditions, doctrines, texts and practices — to revise the accepted understanding of the nature of religion which has been criticised by many social scientists from completely different positions. In the course of this revision he begins with the assumption that all human history is the history of rivalry between great coalitions of religions. On the one hand these are the Indo-Aryan religions and other ethnic religions that are typologically similar, and on the other, the Abrahamic religions. (Incidentally, Makeev sees in secularism and atheism an inevitable stage in the natural evolution of these latter, which correlates in a paradoxical manner with Talal Asad’s ideas about the formation of the sphere of the religious through the separation of the sphere of the secular in modern Christian Europe.) He regards the first type of religion as primordial, natural and therefore with a beneficial influence on the preservation of the diversity of ethnic cultures. He calls the second type ‘invented, extraterrestrial religions’, and ascribes to them the opposite qualities — inventedness / artificiality and an aggressive impulse to level out the specific features of ethnic cultures.

### **‘Religion’ as heritage**

There is another aspect to the intellectual protest by Daurbek Makeev as a representative of ethnic religious traditionalism against those schemes of classification that do not suit him, consideration of which may add further nuances to the discussion around the problems linked to the concept of ‘religion’. Talal Asad and like-minded writers have often described the content of this modern European concept and proposed several variants of its genealogy. In so doing they assumed that the concept was relatively stable and more or less the same everywhere. However, even in modern Western European society there are different ways of conceiving of religion [Laughlin, Zathureczky 2015] and determining what is ‘real religion’, correlating it with something that is ‘non-religious’ or ‘only apparently religious’. Examples of the latter are extremely diverse and various in character. Thus we can speak of religion, comparing it with spirituality, superstition, sectarianism and even cargo cults. All these concepts, and many others, form the space in which the term of which we are speaking functions [Fitzgerald 2017]. In our case we can see that in many contexts religion is perceived not only as the object of the personal convictions of a particular individual who has freely chosen a faith for himself / herself on the market of spiritual services, but also as part of his / her ethnic culture, which (s)he had to receive together with some components of his / her social identity. That is how many Russians and Eastern Europeans, in whose minds ethnicity and religious adherence are mutually determining, understand the meaning of the term ‘traditional religion’.

Makeev, discussing religion as such in general terms, starts with the fact that it is religion that above all determines the nature of ethnic cultures and the prospects for their stability. When it comes to ethnic religions, the following idea (or intuition) seems to him self-evident: being the total determinant of the whole social life of early humans, their own (native) religion is the guarantee of the survival of ethnic groups (in this case, the Osset people) in the hard conditions of the ‘religious information wars’ or ‘long-term informational aggression from systems of seeing the world with a divided understanding of reality’ [Makeev 2017b: 29, 31]. From this point of view it is natural that the aggressors have as their primary and immediate aim the destruction of the religion of the people that is to be enslaved.

*From the earliest times there has been an understanding that a people’s traditions are connected with their beliefs and religion, and tradition is in fact an expression of religion, the purpose of which is to bind the people together and make them one. It is the religious tradition that is the first target of informational aggression [Makeev 2017a].*

Daurbek Makeev connects the Ossets' faithfulness to their ethnic religion ('national religious tradition' [Makeev 2017b: 99]) not only with the prospects for preserving the nation, but also with maintaining the existence of the entire world order. Analysing one of the songs of the Ossetian Nart folk epic, he comes to the following imperative: '[D]eviation from this tradition is faithlessness to the just Divine order and must be understood not only as faithlessness to one's own people <...>, but also to God.' And he adds that the continuers of this tradition bear 'a particular responsibility in the pursuit of universal order and justice' [Ibid.: 100]. Moreover, in accordance with the outlook of contemporary ethnic traditionalism, the religion of the ancestors, which must be preserved and / or restored, is seen by him as a sort of protoscience, a perfect knowledge of the world, which has an exclusive value.

*[T]he religious knowledge of our ancestors was not a primitive proclamation of rules and laws and the worship of absolutely anything, but a profound understanding of Being on the basis of a profound self-knowledge, a knowledge of their own Divine nature, free of material attachments and passions [Makeev 2107b: 117].*

The nostalgia for a lost complete religion that imbued all aspects of the life of society leads the activists of nativist religious initiatives to call upon their fellow countrymen 'not to seek for knowledge somewhere else, but to turn to the heritage of their ancestors, their elders' [Makeev 2017b: 117]. Again and again, they look back to their people's distant past, or rather look into the most diverse historical, folkloric and ethnographical sources (and sometimes, in the words of the local wits, derive 'their knowledge from the depths of the sacred Youtube and REN-TV programmes'<sup>1</sup>). Using the methods of comparative religious studies, and sometimes of so-called alternative history, the authors of traditionalist research reconstruct more and more new ancient cult meanings for traditional ritual and narrative practices — those meanings that they put into the conceptual basis of the ethnic religion of the Osset people.

Here we encounter the following paradox. Daurbek Makeev and many like-minded people, not only contemporary Ossetian nativists, use two different understandings of the social nature of religion at the same time. For them, as an element or even the foundation of ethnic culture it is something that is naturally present to members of a particular ethnic group and is absorbed almost automatically: '[T]here exist practices that are more natural for the people, which are not perceived by the people as special practices, but lie at the root of the culture of a traditional society,' being 'from the point of

<sup>1</sup> From the page of a fictional Facebook user from Vladikavkaz, Aguvzhy Kabitsovich Triaty: <<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100028321416967>>, posted 13 October 2019.

view of religions of pure experience' forms of spiritual (religious) life [Makeev 2010]. However, at the same time religion remains the object of personal choice by each individual, rational or made under the influence of nativist sentiment. And as they represent their traditionalist projects, the authors count on persuading their readers to make that inner choice. At the same time they evoke not only people's attachment to their native culture and their fear of losing, along with their ethnicity, their access to a unique resource of solidarity and security (by virtue of the natural diversity of national cultures), but also prospects for individual self-improvement and psychological stability. Daurbek Makeev takes on the role of personal development coach and tries to convince his audience that 'in the most ancient religious doctrines <...> the nature of the human psyche and mechanisms of its working invisible to the outside observer are quite profoundly expounded' [Ibid.] and that a grasp of these doctrines, which are available to our contemporaries in Ossetian religion, which 'is of course the most ancient religious culture' [Makeev 2014: 274], can help anyone to 'perfect' his / her consciousness [Makeev 2010].

It seems to me that it is the attempt to combine two different understandings of religion — as an individual and superindividual phenomenon — that has determined the use of the concept of 'transpersonal psychology' in Daurbek Makeev's constructs, and that in this way he has abandoned the individualistic understanding of religious experience in the spirit of William James. Besides, he has a quite subtle grasp of the general tendencies in the critique of the conceptual apparatus that has been accepted in social studies of religion. Thereby he has not only responded to the challenges facing his own nativist project, but also proposed a platform affording an equal right to speak to religious activists and representatives of what he and many other proponents of the idea of a fruitful dialogue between science and religion represent as 'modern science'. There is quite a diversity of authors among the classics of this science, from Fritjof Capra, the author of the New Age classic *The Tao of Physics*, to Alain de Benoist, the ideologue of the European New Right [Makeev 2017b: 24–26, 73–75]. Their ranks also, naturally, include representatives of that same transpersonal psychology which has not only opened new horizons in the study of religion, but has itself, in some people's opinion, become a new religious movement [Ozhiganova, Filippov 2006: 232–241].

\* \* \*

As we see, the postcolonial critique of religion proposed by Talal Asad and developed by a whole range of other researchers has a curious double in the form of the intellectual project proposed

by certain activists of new religious projects, to change the rules of the game on the battlefields of classification and definition.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, these doubles would not recognise each other if they met. The Foucaultian Asad, with his emphasis on the disciplining function of practical Christianity, and the mystic Makeev, who sees the basic function of real religion as removing the person from the control of the institutions of power, see their subject and their tasks differently. The first of them relativises the concept of religion, while the second essentialises it, inasmuch as he naturally takes over the discursive practice of representing religion as a universal phenomenon. He and many others treat the phenomenon of ‘ethnic religions’ within the same essentialist tradition. These are created by the ‘missionary projection’ of the Christian principle of belonging to a religion onto colonised non-Christian societies. According to this understanding, in order to be converted to Christianity one must reject some other religion, tacitly understood not to have that which is in Christianity, but to have something of its own.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a nativist initiative, this principle remains, although the evaluation of the action in the ‘change of religions’ is changed to the reverse: if someone is converted to ‘foreign’ Christianity, then the convert is deprived of something of his / her own, and that something is also a religion.

The operation of this mechanism is clearly visible in the following argument of Ossetian nativists, which in recent years they have often used as a proof that a particular Ossetian religion existed in the past and is not, therefore, a modern invention. This proof is constructed around the use of the term *osqopila*, meaning literally ‘ex-Ossetian’, in Georgian documents of the eighteenth century. This is how this fact is treated in an article which is an extensive polemical commentary on an interview given by Archbishop Leonid, who is the head of the Orthodox diocese of Vladikavkaz. Among other things, the archbishop said that the ideas of the existence of a special Ossetian ethnic religion ‘do not stand up under criticism’ [‘Osoz-nanno i perspektivno...’ 2018: 3]. In response the following argument was made:

*The Church not only knows, objectively, of the existence of Ossetian religion, a phenomenon with no connection to Christianity, but quite obviously acknowledges this fact. This is so certain for the Church that they call new converts from among the Ossets osqopila, literally ‘an*

<sup>1</sup> Obviously this is not confined to the concept of ‘religion’. Thus some Ossetian religious activists have not given up hope of reinterpreting the term ‘paganism’ (Lyudmila Makeeva), others are engaged in quite subtle work to divorce the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘belief’, and yet others persist in representing what other people assign to the sphere of religion in terms of ‘the new physics’.

<sup>2</sup> This is directly correlated to the conceptualisation of conversion to Evangelical Christianity from an ethnic religion which was constituted in the course of and by means of that conversion, for example in the Altai [Broz 2009].

*ex-Osset*. The term *osqopila*, an ‘*ex-Osset*’ is the same as the concept of ‘a proselyte’ (or *neophyte*), but specifying the origin of the proselyte. Thus the Church itself, by its activities, clearly demonstrates and proclaims the position that an Osset, by accepting baptism, comes under the power of the Church, and ceases to be an Osset, that is, an adherent of the Ossetian religion, and becomes a Christian, and *osqopila* [‘*Nykhas...*’ 2019: 3].

We shall leave aside for the moment the question of whether a term used in Georgian documents of the eighteenth century can be considered a natural part of the discursive practice of the clergy of the modern Russian Orthodox Church. It is more important to understand what that word meant to the clerks of Georgian chanceries and whether it can be treated as a recognition of the existence of an Ossetian religion. If we look at the context in which the word is used, we find that the term ‘an *ex-Osset*’ did not mean a person who had changed their religion, but one who had come from certain mountain regions and had had no religion at all (idol worship, unlike Islam and Judaism, was not regarded as such<sup>1</sup>), but had obtained one by accepting baptism (usually in order to become the subject of a Georgian sovereign or to pursue a career in the Church). Along with their faith (or, more precisely, by means of its acquisition) such ‘*ex-Ossets*’ obtained legal status, that is, became, in James Scott’s expression, ‘visible to the state’. From that point on the ‘new Christian’ could become the property of administrators. The ‘*ex-Osset*’s’ new Christian name was registered in the church books, and that allowed him to contract a legal marriage (in the Georgian legal system), own land, have heirs to whom they could legitimately transmit property, etc.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, leaving the system of Georgian Church and state administration left a person, a community or a whole region ‘without a faith’, which allows certain contemporary Georgian authors to speak of processes of ‘Ossetification’ of certain mountain Georgians. This Ossetification of Georgians is understood in terms of their religious conversion from Orthodoxy to the Ossetian ethnic religion [Japaridze 2010: 455–476]. In other words, two and a half centuries ago these transformations were understood as a transition from unbelief to belief (or from non-religion to religion) or vice versa (and belonging to a faith was understood in terms of institutional discipline). Now they are rather understood in terms of a transition from one religion to another. In the latter case the transition is understood as a change of ontologies, presupposing a reconfiguration

<sup>1</sup> Thus a Georgian writer of the middle of the eighteenth century, describing the religious condition of Alania, which lies to the west of Svanetia, remarks ‘The inhabitants are idolaters, without religion. Originally they were Christians’ [Bagrationi 2007: 95].

<sup>2</sup> For examples (but not discussion) of such use of the word *osqopila* see: [Japaridze 2010: 422–424; Togoshvili 2012: 287].

of the convert's social nature — his / her axiological structure and fundamental system of loyalties.

This habit of assigning a person to one or other religious 'idiom', together with an exclusivist understanding of ethnic identity (see: [Lambek 2008: 857, note 14]), reproduces the principle of the exclusion of double or multiple loyalties. This logic is equally present in the sociological imagination of the Christian missionary striving to bring the peoples inhabiting overseas colonies 'out of the darkness of paganism' and in the modern scholar reckoning up how many Christians there are in present-day North Ossetia and how many adherents of the traditional Ossetian faith [Takazov 2008].

It may be concluded from this that the nativist project that I have described continues to be pursued within that system of coordinates, imperceptible to the majority of its participants and critics, which is defined by the modern European understanding of religion. But a sense of intellectual wheelspin should not conceal the fact that the modern postcolonial world does itself offer those who want to loosen its joints the instruments to do so in the form of alternative languages for the description of reality. A switch of codes, and expansion in the sphere of action of those which only recently seemed too bizarre, is quite capable of shaking the discursive monopoly of certain revered institutions on the production of socially legitimate accounts of visible and invisible reality. The language of the academic disciplines that study 'religion' and 'religions' sometimes helps to redescribe the world in a quite unexpected fashion. And then the spiritual institution that has for centuries served Western intellectuals and ordinary people as the natural template for understanding other societies and governing them, appears as 'a totemistic cult that consists of reminiscences of ritual cannibalism and collective marriage, which is what Christianity is from a scientific point of view' ['Nykhas...' 2019: 3].

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