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The Vissarion Cult - an Attempt to Create a Cultic State in Siberia

Muhammed Shapiev lived in St Petersburg with his wife Svetlana and their three little children. One day he realised that his wife had become very interested in the teachings of a certain Vissarion, who called himself the last incarnation of Christ. Her father, some years before, had become a follower of Vissarion and had gone to live near him in the remote rural area of Central-South Siberia. Now his daughter - the wife of Muhammed - started to attend meetings organized by the group of Vissarion adepts. Mr. Shapiev did not pay much attention to it – he had to work hard to provide for his large family. His work involved some business trips, usually not more than a few days. Once in the late fall of 2009 he returned home from such a trip and found that his wife and children were gone – they had gone to live in the community founded by Vissarion.

It took Mr. Shapiev several months to locate his family, and to try to contact it. In the Spring of 2010 Muhammed left for the city of Abakan, hoping to bring back his family. It took him four days by train to get to the town, but from there he still had to get to the rural area to which his wife had moved. It was about hundred more km to the village of Kuragino – the administrative center of the district where Vissarion's colony in the area was situated. The colony was dispersed among several villages and a large section of taiga, where, as Muhammed has learned, an entirely new settlement, called the City of Sun or the town of the Masters was being constructed. Apparently during last twenty years many thousands of Vissarion adepts have moved into the area, bought houses and settled there. At present, it is said that there are about five thousand inhabitants there – more than the original local population.

Mr. Shapiev had to change three buses, bumping slowly along dirt roads, the wheels sinking in deep, sticky mud. When the chief of the local police heard Muhammed business, he said, it would be impossible for him to see his wife and kids, because it would traumatize the kids and the Master would not allow this.

- "He strictly forbids to harm children", concluded the police officer.
- "But who is this Master?" – wondered Muhammed.
- "Why? It is Vissarion, the New Christ. The one you stubbornly refuse to recognize as the Saviour."
- "But don't we live in Russia? There are laws which we have to follow. I am father and I have a right to see my children. Such are the laws of our country."
- "I strongly advise you not to insist on that", – came the answer. "There will be plenty of witnesses who will testify that you behaved violently and attacked the police officer, which, according to Russian law, is a serious crime. You had better go home right away."

Muhammed went to the recently elected mayor of the village. But there he saw a portrait of Vissarion on the wall and received more threats. He had to travel eighty km to Minusinsk – the regional center and file a complaint there. Eventually he was able to approach a half ruined hut where his family now lived. However, his wife stood at the door and refused to let him in. He was allowed to have a glimpse of the children – but only through the window.

Mr. Shapiev is now in the middle of a process to obtain custody of his children. However, the sheer distance and counter actions of the local Vissarionite authorities in the Zone (a code name of the Vissarionites) for their settlement) make the case nearly hopeless.

If Muhammed had known the history of different cultic movements, he could have remembered the story of the town of Rajneeshpuram (a. k. a. Antelope) in the Oregon where the cultists came to power and attempted to win over the whole county. They failed. But Vissarion's followers have succeeded: and the district over which they rule now, though scarcely populated, can be compared in size to such countries as Denmark or Belgium.

Vissarion (real name Sergey Torop, born Jan. 14, 1961) is the founder and head of the “Church of the Last Testament”. He calls himself the founder of the teaching of Unified Faith, the Word of God and Christ.

Mr. Torop was born in the South of Russia but soon his parents divorced, and his mother after moving several times finally settled in the city of Minusinsk. As he grew up, his mother had changed partners several times and had a daughter by one of them. Sergey grew up as a member of a street gang. Yet, he always aspired to greatness. When he was eighteen, in one of his letters Sergey wrote: “If I do not become world famous, I will not live on this Earth”.

After his military service, Sergey changed profession several times, including the one of traffic policeman. In 1989 he was dismissed from police for drinking while on duty. He joined a local UFO club and began taking active part in several ongoing occult seminars.

In 1991 he started preaching, calling himself Vissarion. At first he proclaimed that he was guided by Christ from the Earth's orbit but later he identified himself with Christ. Before 1994 he had also claimed that he had lived in Judea under a name of one Prophet Jeffley. (? A. D.).

In the years that followed Vissarion travelled extensively across the former USSR countries, as well as in most of Europe and the USA, preaching his message and collecting new followers. The teaching is very eclectic and comprises several sources: the collective work of the leaders of the ufological club in Minusinsk, some neo-pagan personal ideas of Sergey Torop, and a concoction of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Theosophy, and Marxism – all in a very popular occult interpretation.

The cult has its own chronology and calendar, according to which the Era of the New Dawn began on the conception of Vissarion, i. e. from 1960. They celebrate three holidays: April 14 - the Day of Mother-Earth (also – day of Vissarion's Conception), August 18 – the Day of the Fall of the Kingdom of Power and of Good Fruit (also the day of the August coup in 1991 during which, according to a falsified tale told by a witness, Vissarion began his preaching in Moscow), and Jan. 14 – Birthday of the Vissarion Christ.

In 1992 Vadim Redkin – a former drum player from a popular Russian pop-band joined the cult and became the official chronicler of Vissarion. The story began as small booklets which by now have grown into a nearly 1000 pages (and is constantly growing) book of the “Last Testament” – the holy writ of the cult.

About the same time the first followers of Vissarion from Russia and other countries began to gather around him in the Krasnoyarsk Territory in Siberia. In 1994 they registered officially as the Community of the United Faith, and in December 2000 they re-registered as The Church of the Last Testament.

In 1993-94 the cult looked very much as a reformist neo-Communist movement: communal life, red clothes, paramilitary games, worship of Vissarion's personality, and in the evening around the camp fire, guitar of idealist romantic songs.

In the Spring of 1995 Vissarion began a new project which for outsiders was called "Eco-noospheric settlement Tiberkul", but inside the cult it became known as the «City of Sun» consisting of the "Abode of Dawn" (the residence of Vissarion) or the "Town of Masters" (area where his followers live). The local government had given the cult 250 hectares of taiga for this project by the lake Tiberkul. In August 1997 "Eco-noospheric settlement Tiberkul" became a member of "International Socio-ecological Union" through which it began a hunt for grants. It was claimed that this so called "ecological commune" has been receiving grants from both Russian and European ecological foundations and perhaps even from some EU and the COE structures.

As of 1992 Mr. Torop travelled extensively round the globe, preaching and recruiting new adepts. The most devoted of them sell their belongings and come to the Krasnoyarsk province where they buy property and settle in the Zone. Usually a large donation is required on arrival.

For the last 10 years Vissarion allowed (or even prescribed) polygamy, which helps the cult to control single women which constitute the majority of the cult's adepts. He himself lives a rather adventurous sex life, often changing partners. There were some scandals because of that. For example, in 2001 Vissarion tried to rape a minor Bulgarian girl Checha, after which the entire Bulgarian community of his followers immediately left. Eventually, Vissarion's wife and mother of his five children unable to cope with his insatiable sex appetite, left him, after which he, at nearly 50, married a 19-years old girl.

From the beginning of his mission Vissarion preached that technical progress leads to the self-destruction of humanity. He was threatening potential adepts with the end of the world, which originally was supposed to be in 2003. By that time all the population of the Earth was supposed to believe in him, and the human body would have been reprogrammed. But even before that, around 2000 the Comet Nibiru would crash on Earth and our planet would be almost entirely smothered by sand (except where Vissarion lived), while in Nevada all nuclear warheads would spontaneously explode. Obviously, none of these catastrophes occurred. After that Vissarion preached that the end of the world would start in 2003 and would end in 2013. So, this year could be critical for him (However, to be on the safe side, Vissarion, quite typically for cultist practices, now forbade his adepts to read his early texts).

The world will be destroyed in the technogene catastrophe. Vissarion teaches that in the coming end of the world only those will be saved who live near him and follow his instructions «to the letter». The genotype of these people will change to such degree that they will be able to breathe nitrogen instead of oxygen. Here are some of these instructions:

*Every cult member has to pay a tithe which usually quite exceeds 10%. Moreover, Vissarion says that if you remember your donations, they do not count. The only way to donate correctly is to forget about it immediately.

*Since adepts have to believe that Vissarion is the Second Incarnation of Christ, they believe in his omniscience and are totally unable to take independent decisions. Even very small things have to be determined by him.

*The colonists constantly watch one another and write denunciations about one another to their bosses who report to Vissarion. This knowledge helps the "omniscience" of Vissarion.

*The adepts have to work very hard but the allowed diet is strictly vegan, with food prohibitions including alcohol, mushrooms, nuts, and sugar, while some other products can be eaten only seasonably (i. e., potatoes are prohibited after February).

*One of the most bizarre prohibitions is drinking water, which is supposedly polluted. Vissarion himself claims never to drink water – only freshly squeezed fruit and vegetable juice. The average adept, who, naturally, cannot afford it, is offered a merciful solution: to start each day by drinking a glass of his own urine which supposedly has the power of neutralizing the negative effects of water.

*In reality, according to witnesses, in private Vissarion does not deny himself any of the forbidden products. He eats meat, drinks alcohol, and in general, denies himself nothing. He owns several luxurious houses built by his adepts.

*Some adepts developed dystrophy, become handicapped, committed suicide. The majority having sold everything, have nothing left, live in utmost poverty and starve. Many of them were diagnosed with calcium and animal protein deficiency, which caused many illnesses among the settlers. Some of them suffer from cancer and even AIDS, but do not see a doctor, since Mr. Torop forbids it. He believes in aesthetotherapy – the beauty of Siberian wild nature is supposed to make miracles and to heal the sick. But the surest healer is Vissarion himself who heals by the touch of his hands.

About ten years ago when the stream of new adepts coming to Siberia has begun to dry out, Mr. Torop announced the creation of “The Family” – a sort of inner elite circle of the cult. It became clear that real salvation could only be reached in the Family. The members of this group are told to sell their house in one of the villages in the Zone, donate the money to Vissarion, denounce any private property, and move to the Dry Mountain where, on the top, is the most possible holy place on Earth – the Abode of Dawn, where, surrounded by his bodyguards, Vissarion lives.

Down below the Town of Masters was built. It consists of several dozen of wooden huts and about hundred army tents where the adepts live throughout the year – even through the harsh Siberian winter. They live communally and share everything – though there is not much to share.

However, it is announced that to join The Family is a great privilege. To be invited to do so has to be deserved – and it is a matter of strife and envy among cult members – who will allow himself to be robbed a second time.

The territory around the Mountain is holy – and no machine is allowed within five km round. Trees have to be felled and houses raised by elbow grease only. Vissarion, however, perched on the top has a diesel generator, solar batteries and an internet connection.

Twice a year, the builders of the Town of Masters feel very important. It is when mass pilgrimages are led to the "Abode of Dawn" – the top of the mountain where Vissarion lives. Then cult members walk up the mountain, gather right under the summit, and listen with reverence to long and confused sermons of the Last incarnation of Christ, who has recently been preaching about the very last choice soon to be made – whether his followers will stay with him to the very end or will betray him and defect to eternal death in this wicked world.

But, at the same time he knows how to deal with this wicked world. Some his adepts have become excellent carpenters and build beautiful summer dachas for important people of Krasnoyarsk territory, who, naturally, feel obliged. At the municipal elections Vissarionites were

able to present their own candidates to many important positions in all the districts where they live. And, as we saw, it could be very serious.

The problem is that now the Zone is different from all other localities in the Russian Federation. The main difference is that the authorities control this area only inasmuch as the cult allows them to do so. In other words, it is an area closed from the inside by the only man who has the real power there – Mr. Torop.

For example, the authorities know virtually nothing about the method of wood felling in the Zone, and amount of the wood felled. According to some reports, the ecological situation in the “Eco-noospheric settlement Tiberkul” is close to disastrous, but is beyond control of the outside world.

We know the story of Muhammed Shapiev who lost his wife and children to the cult and the authorities proved helpless. Some individual cases of deaths from lack of medical care in the cult are known, so are cases of children who died from malnutrition. Perhaps there are more of these deaths than “some”? We have no ways of knowing...

And every year more and more people are invited into The Family, which means that they are leaving their villages and disappearing in the depth of the Taiga – in totally uncontrollable territories. What Mr. Torop decides to do with them next, remains a mystery, and a very sinister one.

So, in this particular case, the State, unable to protect its citizens, has proven its impotence. It is very scary, especially as we know that Vissarion’s cult is by far not the only one which organizes its settlement. But, after all, is not every cult – a totally uncontrollable territory?

I believe that if we want democratic states to survive, this has to change.