

*J. Urbańczyk***LAST TESTAMENT CHURCH —
THE POWER OF UNANIMITY¹**

Last Testament Church² (LTC) is the official name of a Russian indigenous new religious movement more commonly known as the community of Vissarion, Vissarionovtsy or Vissarionites. Its origins go back to the beginning of the 1990s when 29-year old Sergei Torop (born January 14, 1961) realised he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God³. He started to preach in March 1991 and then continued to spread his teachings travelling throughout former republics of the Soviet Union [Община Виссариона 2002: 3]. The first followers of Torop, from then on known as Vissarion, started to gather in Siberia, in the south of Krasnoïarskii kraï — initially, in the town of Minusinsk (near Abakan, the capital of Khakassia), moving later further east to the village of Petropavlovka (Kuraginskii raion), to finally start the construction of an entirely new settlement, Abode of Dawn (*Обитель Рассвета*) in the taiga, near the lake Tiberkul at the foot of the Sukhaia Mountain [Ibid.: 5]. The latter is the current dwelling place of Vissarion and his family as well as around 250 of the most engaged members of the community.

The total number of Vissarion's followers in the south of Krasnoïarskii kraï, living mainly in villages of the Kuraginskii and Karatuzskii raions, is estimated at 4 to 5 thousand people⁴. They come

¹ This research, including fieldwork in the community of Vissarion in the years 2012-2013, was funded by the National Science Centre of Poland (NCN) — decision number: DEC-2011/01/N/HS3/06213.

² Церковь Последнего Завета.

³ Cf. Vissarion's interview recorded on 19 August 2004: *Беседа Виссариона с Аркадием Атарик 19.08.04*, DVD-16 Петропавловская видеостудия, 2011.

⁴ This number has been repeated since the early 2000s [e.g. Panchenko 2004: 121] and any more exact estimation is difficult. Firstly, there are no strict criteria of

mainly from various parts of Russia and former Soviet republics; however, there are also some representatives of Western Europe, a relatively large community of Germans being the most prominent among them. Attracted by Vissarion's teaching they have moved to what they believe to be the Siberian "Promised Land" to create an ideal society of the future based on money-and-violence-free relationships and focused on spiritual development and balanced relations with the natural environment.

In this research report I focus on the issue of interpersonal relations within the LTC community as it occupies a special place in Vissarion's teachings, and consequently — in his followers' life. One of Vissarion's main messages is that it is necessary to counterbalance the current emphasis on material, economic and technical progress and to focus on the spiritual development. He criticizes contemporary civilisation for its purely materialistic orientation and disintegration of social and interpersonal bonds¹ and preaches about the necessity of establishing a new quality of relationship between people. The community's informational "Photoalbum" published in the year 2002 quotes Vissarion saying that building houses and temples should be a matter of secondary importance for his followers, while the main aim of the community is an attempt to create proper personal interrelations:

«Чтобы что-то строить, строить дома, а тем более пытаться думать о возведении храмов, попробуйте построить отношения друг с другом. Если это будет получаться, то храмы

membership in the movement. Secondly, with new people coming to and some leaving (permanently or temporarily) the community villages, the situation remains dynamic.

¹ *«Отношения людей меж собой выстраиваются в зависимости от материального благосостояния. Люди заключают союзы в поисках экономической и политической выгоды, продолжая чувствовать себя чужими. Увеличившийся на землях России хаос, влекущий распространение великого холода и развала, вынуждает признающих лишь свои животы идти к раздробленности, а значит, и к еще большему отчуждению меж собой»* [Last Testament (LT), vol. 1, Book of Appeal 16: 53–56]. All quotations from the Last Testament (containing Vissarion's teachings) come from its electronic version available within the browsing programme Bible Quote 5.0 Bibliologia Edition. The Last Testament is also available at the community's official website: www.vissarion.ru (vol. 1–4 and 7–13 out of 14 that have been printed so far).

встанут на этой земле. Если не будет — давайте разойдемся» [Община Виссариона 2002: 5].

What it exactly means to create “proper” relations with each other is a common topic of Vissarion’s preaching — systematically published in successive volumes of the Last Testament (14th volume published in 2013) considered within the movement as “the source of the only Truth” — and quite often discussed by Vissarion’s followers, especially with the newcomers whom they want to acquaint with the everyday life of the community. As it was often explained to me by the community members they aim at the establishing of relations that are free of aggression, selfless and full of love and understanding for each other’s imperfections and errors. One of the regularly recurring topics was the struggle with one’s egoism as a necessary effort that should be undertaken by every individual. Both in Vissarion’s teachings as well as in the everyday conversations of his followers a lot of attention is also paid to the avoidance of negative thoughts — much more difficult to control and eliminate than negative actions or words, but equally hindering for the spiritual development of the individual, the community and, eventually, the whole of mankind.

It is hardly surprising that in the community thus focused on the quality of interpersonal relations one may find a vast array of diverse ways in which people seek to both maintain day-to-day order and pursue their ideal concept of society. The Last Testament is a rich source in this respect as it offers an elaborate set of directions for proper behaviour of every believer (*верующий*). In spite of the book being multi-volume and describing thousands of highly nuanced situations, there are some general rules known to all LTC members which constitute commonly accepted principles of proper day-to-day conduct and which are supposed to ensure a smooth everyday cooperation within the community. One of such fundamental rules is that one should restrain from criticizing others and from giving them advice when not asked to do so. Vissarion explanation to this rule is that too often an overt motivation to help others covers the deeper motivation to criticize, to express one’s discontent, to show one’s expertise or to make others behave in accordance to what the person

giving advice believes to be “the right way”. In fact, there is a whole separate area of teaching and analysis within the community concerning when and how to give advice (*подсказка*) and when definitely not to, general rule now being to refrain from giving any suggestions or tips without being asked for them and, first, to change oneself before trying to change others.

Another principle behind the community’s struggle for the establishing of a new, better society is the focus on the agreement, and consequently — avoidance of conflict. Agreement between all members of the community was often presented by them as the highest priority. One of the examples I was given was the decision on what kind of seeds to sow — the issue which may prove crucial for the survival of the community. Consensus is considered as most important — it was explained to me — even when it is possible that a common decision will result in choosing seeds that give poorer harvest than those recommended by any single member of the group. If the choice of the best seeds would entail disagreement and divisions within the community it is seen as better to reap a less abundant harvest and have less to eat but remain unanimous and united.

All the principles of proper conduct – that is how to properly act and react to actions of others – can be found in the Last Testament. However, while it is considered within the community to be a comprehensive source of answers to any kind of existential questions that “along with the global truths considers the particular, everyday situations in an incomparable amount”¹ (if there is no answer yet, a new question is presented to Vissarion), there is still the problem of diverse interpretations leading to the corruption of ideals preached by the leader which, in turn, poses a threat of disagreement within the community². In order to limit this possibility all the followers of Vissarion are engaged in pursuing the ideal goal of the “common

¹ See the community’s official website in English: www.vissarion.eu/en.

² *«Каковы бы ни были благие устремления, всякое распространение раздробленности есть воздействие сил тьмы. Помните! Как бы уважительно вы ни относились друг к другу, — имея разные взгляды на истинное развитие, никогда не пойдете по нему. Так будьте едины! Мир вам и счастье. Аминь»* [LT, vol. 1, Book of Appeal 16: 64–66].

understanding” (*единое понимание*) – that is a situation when all will share a common perception of the world around and develop a shared disposition towards life with all its diversity and nuances:

«Ежели верующие разделены меж собою разными понятиями об единой Истине, то они подобны разноязыким в сердцах своих. Разноязыких собрать вместе можно. Но чтобы создать одну семью способных вести гармоничное совместное проживание и совместное созидание великих творений, необходим один язык, един дух и единое понимание» [LT, Vol. 1: Vadim’s Narrative Part 5, 23: 27–29].

Vissarion links the goal of achieving common understanding with the one of establishing one “united family”. He often uses the latter term to describe the future ideal society, which his followers are supposed to create through their everyday pursuit of self-improvement and spiritual development. “The United Family” (it is the community’s official translation of *Единая Семья*) is also the name for the organisations within the movement to which belong, on a voluntary basis, its most active members. While the aim to seek “common understanding” refers to all followers of Vissarion, the United Family provides a more institutionalized (and also more demanding) path for those who feel ready to engage more deeply into the endeavor of building a new society founded on a new quality of interpersonal relations¹.

Implementing the strategy of small steps, the followers of Vissarion have established several smaller communities of this kind. Therefore, presently, there are many United Families within the movement — one for every village inhabited by the LTC members, each with its own individual structure, slightly distinct rules and its own daily and weekly routine. Becoming a member of the United Family is an individual decision (it requires the consent of current members) and in every village there are many people who consider themselves followers

¹ *«Создание единой человеческой семьи — вот главная задача Общины. Важный принцип семьи: голодных и неухоженных быть не должно. Но самое главное — на базе совместного труда строятся новые взаимоотношения, основанные на любви и терпимости друг к другу, свободные от жадности, страха, зависти и корысти»* [Община Виссариона 2002: 5].

of Vissarion but, for different reasons¹, decided not to join the local Family. The Abode of Dawn is an exception in this respect as each of its permanent inhabitants has to belong to the “Mountain” Family.

While the anticipated ideal society is supposed to be entirely equal without any kind of hierarchy, supervision or leadership, for the sake of current needs – as it was explained to me by one of the community members – all working groups within the United Families (responsible for such issues as education, children affairs, common work or gardening) have a person in charge, chosen by members themselves, whose decision is binding on others. Vissarion states they will be no longer necessary in the future when humankind reaches a higher level of development. Currently, however, they are indispensable for the smooth progress towards the common goal of creating the model community:

«И первые Мои подсказки: единая Семья — это все то, что объединяет, приводит к единству, а не просто делает объединение единоличных проявлений индивидуальностей. Она ведет к более серьезному объединению, соединению внутреннего мира вашего до той степени, когда в дальнейшем ваше общество может естественно существовать без каких-то управленческих, организаторских проявлений среди своих ближних... Они будут абсолютно бессмысленны. Вы будете двигаться таким образом, когда вовремя всегда будете делать то, что нужно всем, даже не зная этого плана. Вы сами это сделаете. И никакого хаоса никогда не будет» [LT, Vol. 2, Vadim’s Narrative Part 8, 55: 88].

Joining the Family involves, on the one hand, an access to the community meetings, where all the decision-making takes place, but also implies many obligations and responsibilities — including those on the spiritual level. As I was often told — the more one

¹ Some reasons I was given were: a spouse who does not want to join the Family, the need to earn money outside the community and resulting lack of time to take active part in the Family undertakings, husband’s love for fishing (both hunting and fishing as well as eating meat or fish are forbidden within the Family) or dislike for the Family meetings — their frequency (too often), discussed topics and their organization.

knows about “the Truth” the highest his/her responsibility for obeying its laws (*исполнение законов Истины*), improving relations with others and pursuing inner growth. Therefore, becoming a member of the Family ensues gaining access to more “insider” knowledge (e.g., possibility to listen to the recorded meetings with Vissarion without the necessity to travel to the Abode of Dawn), but it also requires a more strict adherence to the Last Testament. According to its teachings, the members of the United Family are those who are more than others ready to analyze their “inner life”¹ and, as one young member of the Family in the village of Petropavlovka explained to me emphatically, “when you join the Family you cannot even think about any other person negatively!” — the responsibility is extended from one’s actions towards others to include the level of thoughts as well.

The membership in the United Family involves also an access to a well-organized system of solving any existential dilemmas or disagreements that may arise, concerning both the more mundane problems of everyday life as well as issues of a spiritual nature. The procedure begins at the level of a particular village Family as members can present their doubts and ask questions during regular meetings (there are several every week)². If it is impossible to provide a satisfying answer or solve the problem at this level, the question goes under the consideration of the United Family in the Abode of Dawn, which holds special meetings for the purpose of the selection of

¹ «Это все заинтересованные более, чем другие, вот так массово рассматривать то, что у них внутри находится» [LT, Vol. 2, Vadim’s Narrative Part 8, 57: 51].

² The organization of each United Family is based upon “Family meetings” — divided into separate meetings for men and women as well as “general assemblies” for all the members — which are the main space for thought-exchange, discussion and decision-making. These are supposed to secure consensus on any question or problem that may arise within the particular “Family” and help to reach agreement upon common goals and direction of further endeavours. If there are any new recordings of Vissarion teachings they are played at such meetings twice a week, exclusively for the Family members (while others have either to take part in the meeting with Vissarion in the Abode of Dawn or wait a year or two for the particular meeting to be printed in the next volume of the Last Testament).

questions that should be asked to “the Teacher”, as Vissarion is usually called within the community. If it is decided that the question was not asked before and no answer can be found in the existing volumes of the Last Testament, the one who asked is allowed to personally present the question to Vissarion at one of the Sunday meetings “on the Mountain” (i.e. in the Abode of Dawn). In more urgent situations the question may be passed to Vissarion before the meeting for the more immediate answer.

Apart from regular Family meetings, the community offers as well separate meetings for the study of Last Testament — called *единое понимание* — where those who choose to attend look for the answers it provides to their current questions and problems. There are also meetings for the study of the Last Testament specially dedicated to school children. In the village of Petropavlovka they start each working day with a special “worldview lesson” (*миропонимание*) during which, divided into two age groups (12–14 and 15–18 years old), they deepen their knowledge of Vissarion’s teachings and learn to analyze everyday life situations from its perspective looking for directions for proper reactions and behaviour.

I had an opportunity to participate in several classes for the younger group (grades 6-8). Every week was devoted to one particular topic, for instance: “how to behave as a guest and how to receive guests”, “the art of being helpful”, “thankfulness towards other people” or “responsibilities within the United Family”. In order to make his classes interesting for young pupils, often very sleepy and far from focused in the early hours of the morning, the teacher creatively designed lessons to introduce some diversity. Despite the general avoidance of rivalry within the community, every Monday he divided students into two teams, each with a leader, and organized a quiz-like competition. The teacher presented to students fragments of the Last Testament with questions that had been posed by the followers during meetings with Vissarion and the two teams had one minute to brainstorm and choose one person to give an answer, desirably as close to the real answer given by Vissarion as possible. When both teams proposed their solutions, the teacher read out Vissarion’s real answer from the Last Testament and assigned points (from 0 to 2) to

the teams depending on the accuracy of given answers. The teacher often consulted his decisions with the students or another teacher (if any was present) so that nobody would feel assessed unfairly.

Unsurprisingly, children (majority had spent at least several years in the community, some were born in it) were quite accurate in proposing their solutions to given problems, and they visibly enjoyed the competition aspect of the activity. As well “trained” as they seemed to be in the Last Testament teachings, it was clear that they often distanced themselves from the answers they so skilfully produced. They sometimes adopted a rather ironic tone of voice or joked between themselves when asked to elaborate on the answer. The general atmosphere was always rather playful with no particular attempts on the part of the teacher to make it more serious as he did not criticize laughter or comment on jokes as inappropriate. Only sometimes he reminded his students that the answer to a particular question might prove crucial for them sometime in their future life.

This short overview covering some of the most important institutionalized practices offered within the structure of the Last Testament Church for the analysis, discussion and improvement of interpersonal relations¹ gives an insight into the role this subject plays in everyday life of the movement’s members. While the presence of directions concerning the proper attitude and behaviour towards others in the teachings of any religious movement’s leader is hardly surprising, in the case of the community of Vissarion these are supplemented by an exceptionally elaborate set of more and less formalized strategies and practices which are supposed to support their realization in everyday life. Every single week the LTC members attend various kinds of meetings in order to make what they believe to be another step towards the far-reaching goal of perfecting their relations and establishing the ideal society. Moreover, their shared concern for this aim does not limit to those most institutionalized strategies and their everyday life outside of numerous community meetings also abounds

¹ See a very interesting analysis by Alexander Panchenko [2011] who points to the cultural and social continuity of some of the LTC members’ practices with the collectivist practices of the Soviet period.

in moments of self-reflection and less formalized attempts at working on the self¹ and their relations with relatives and neighbours².

This seemingly unceasing effort becomes easier to understand when we look closer at what is actually at stake in this struggle for the members of the movement:

«Вы — то реальное начало, о котором будут уже говорить и на которое смотреть прежде будут. И поэтому вы несете на себе ответственность чрезвычайно великую, просто немислимо великую, большую ответственность за все человечество. Это не просто что-то, чтобы потешить вашу гордыню. Это должно, наоборот, еще более беспокоить вас о том, что же вы делаете в этом случае. Ведь каждый ваш шаг по-своему отзывается и в среде энергийной, окружающей вас, а значит, и влияющей на все человечество» [LT, Vol. 3, Vadim's Narrative Part 9, 7: 227–228].

The practical realisation of the ideal of harmonious and conflict-free society is believed by the LTC members to be vital not only for the spiritual well-being of every individual but, above all, as a necessary condition for the survival of mankind on Earth endangered by the uncontrollable development of modern civilization founded on violence and greed³. According to Vissarion, the crisis is imminent and

¹ See the very thorough analysis of the Soviet, as well as Orthodox (and more generally Christian) origins of the practices of self-examination and self-perfection in Chapter 6 of Oleg Kharkhordin's "The collective and the individual in Russia" [Kharkhordin 1999].

² Apart from formal meetings or lessons that constitute a regular element of daily and weekly routine of the members of the community (mainly those most engaged who decided to join the United Family) there are also less institutionalized practices — recommended by Vissarion — that are supposed to support people's everyday struggle for unity, conflict resolution and harmonious everyday interaction with each other. For instance, one of Vissarion's recommendations (given to his followers in the end of the year 2012) was to make an effort to clarify any current misunderstandings or conflicts on the very day when they arose.

³ *«Если эти эгоистические качества не держать под правильным контролем, то цивилизации нельзя позволять развиваться научно-техническим прогрессом. Это будет обязательно самоуничтожение, и очень глобальное, ибо что такое обидевшийся человек, способный метать молнии? Что такое он обиделся, сегодня настроения у него нет? Тогда и всем остальным настроения*

inevitable and the only hope for avoiding the ultimate catastrophe is not an accumulation of goods and wealth, nor any sublime knowledge, modern technology or power; the only guarantee of survival is supposed to be the ability to live together peacefully and reach common decisions without coming into conflict or creating divisions. Hence the members of his Siberian community believe in one power to secure their safe future — the power of unanimity.

Primary sources

Last Testament (*Последний Завет*). Digital version available at: <http://vissarion.ru/studies/index.htm>

Vissarion's interview recorded on 19 August 2004: *Беседа Виссариона с Аркадием Атарик 19.08.04*, DVD-16 Петропавловская видеостудия, 2011.

Bibliography

Община Виссариона в Сибири: фотоальбом [The Community of Vissarion in Siberia. Photoalbum] / И. Колчева (ed.). Курагино, 2002.

Kharkhordin O. The collective and the individual in Russia. University of California Press, 1999.

Panchenko A. New Religious Movements and the Study of Folklore: The Russian Case // *Folklore*. 2004. 28. P. 111–128.

Panchenko A. Morality, Utopia, Discipline. New Religious Movements and Soviet Culture // *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia* / ed. J. Zigon. Berghahn Books, 2011. P. 119–145.

Abstract

This research report is based on a long-term ethnographic field-work conducted in the years 2012-2013 in the Siberian community of Vissarion (Last Testament Church) — a Russian indigenous new

не будет на другой день, потому что он взорвет эту планету» [LT, Vol. 3, Vadim's Narrative Part 9, 42: 133].

«Сейчас научно-технический прогресс и многие моменты, которые связаны с развитием общества, ставят в такую активную фазу видоизменения, что это подорвет психику человека, сделает ее неуравновешенной и очень слабой. Но если вы при этом имеете огромные технические потенциалы, то вы легко можете уничтожить свою цивилизацию» [LT, Vol. 8, Vadim's Narrative Part 14, 19: 260].

religious movement whose origins go back to the beginning of 1990s. I focus on the LTC members' everyday struggle to establish a new quality of interpersonal relations in their attempt to create a model society of the future. I discuss some of Vissarion's teachings, as well as practices of the movement members that are supposed to support their self-improvement and ensure a smooth everyday cooperation within the community.