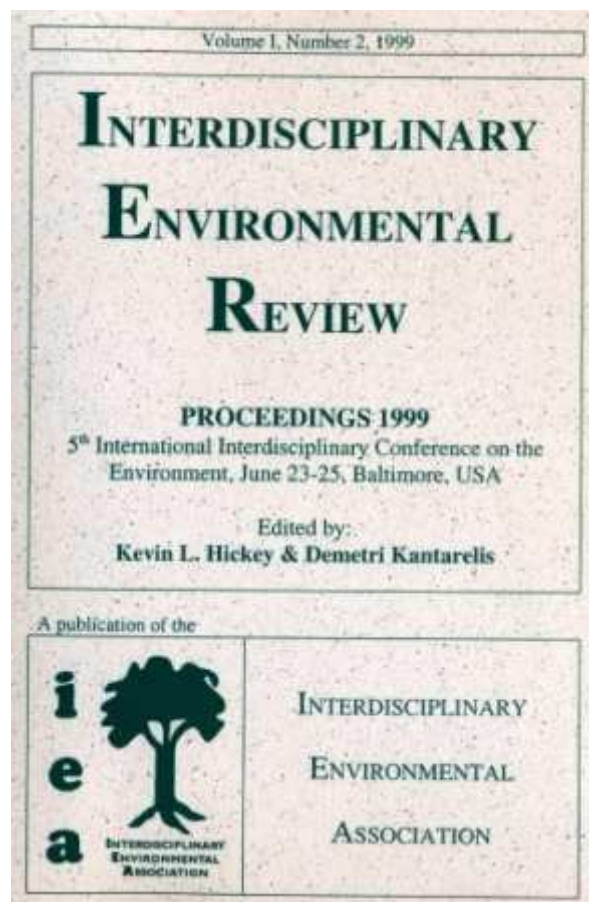


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Greening of new religion in Russia: Tibercul case study

ABSTRACT

The Tibercul case study explores how a religious cult, the "Commune of Vissarion", which considers natural disasters resulting from global climate change as a possible reality in the near future, is building an ecological community in South Siberia, Krasnoyarsky Region, Russia. This paper is a result of qualitative social research conducted in the field during October-November 1998. This paper explores ecological and ethical aspects of the communes' religious conception, the description of the settlement and peoples' way of life, ecological practices, relation to nature, gender roles, and health issues.

I. METHODS

Field research was carried out from 02.11.1998 to 15.11.1998. Participant observation and interviews took place in the "Church of the Last Testament" in Kuragino; 4 villages: Cheremshanka, Petropavlovka, Zharovsk, Gulyaevka; the towns of Town of Sun (Gorod Solntsa), [other names: Town of Masters (Gorod Masterov); New Jerusalem (Novii Ierusalim); The Hill (Gora)]; a special part of the town Down Dwelling (Nebesnaya Obitel) [the other name: Dwelling of Sun Raise (Obitel Rassveta)]; the town of Minusinsk.

Research has been conducted using these methods: in-depth, semi-structured, biographical interviews; participatory observation, including daily general meetings of community members; travel notes were kept. The choice of respondents was carried out according to the "snowball" method. We conducted a total of 48 interviews, 18 with women, and 30 with men:

- 24 with 12 complete families, where husband and wife were questioned separately;
- 20 with community members, who do not have family relationships;
- 1 with Vissarion;
- 2 with representatives of the local authorities - head of the administration of the Cheremshanka village council and the forestry' officer of the Cheremshanka tree farm.
- 1 with Vissarion's aunt in Minusinsk.

In addition we conducted 2 group interviews - at a meeting in Gora and in the community house in the village of Petropavlovka. A survey was also

conducted among local residents about relations with commune members. 39 interviews were conducted with commune members living on the territory of the econosphere-settlement (I) "Tiberkul", 6 with commune members living outside this territory.

Print record analysis has also been conducted: the newspaper "Zemlya Obetovannaya", books of the Last Testament, published by St. Petersburg Vissarion's Center, video and audio cassettes with recordings of Vissarion's sermons.

II. RELIGIOUS CONCEPTION: ECOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ASPECTS

This econosphere-settlement is based on the belief that Vissarion is Christ, come to earth in accordance with prophecies about the salvation of all humankind or, if this is not successful for reasons of freedom of choice, the consolation of the remnants of humankind. Up to the age of 30 Vissarion was an ordinary person and his name was Sergei Torop. Then he was granted consciousness of Christ and realization of his mission to bring to people the Word of the Heavenly Father. Sergei Torop, who bears the religious name Vissarion Christos, is beginning to distribute the Doctrine, under the title "Last Testament"(2), using literature, audio- and video-cassettes, the mass media, sermons and public appearances, and is registering his religious organization under the name "Church of the Last Testament". His followers regard him as the Word of the Heavenly Father and the Truth on Earth. For them he is the Teacher.

If in the previous Doctrine of Jesus Christ, people's attention was directed primarily toward the relations "person-person", "person - god and the light powers of heaven" and "person - devil and the dark powers of hell", then in the "Last Testament" another theme began to resound quite powerfully too, the need to achieve harmony between the human being and Mother Earth and Nature. Last Testament contains an idea about the indignation of Mother Earth at the non-ecological behavior of people, which leads to their premature death and the destruction of cities.

So that this will not happen, according to its statements, it is necessary to change man's relation to Nature and his behavior on Earth. Bellow are samples from instructions of the Heavenly Father, given by Vissarion Christos, which the residents of the econosphere-settlement "Tiberkul" strive to carry out and which can be considered ecologically friendly: "5) You can kill a representative of the animal or plant world only when there is a weighty necessity. If the good from this exceeds the loss to Nature. But throughout

your life, strive to restore even the slightest loss to Nature. 18) Strive to achieve the Heights of Spiritual Love. It arises between the human being and the world surrounding him, both with people, and the animal and plant world. This Summit is inevitable for everything that rises. 23) The greatest sufferings will be experienced by the one who is more attached to a life on the basis of taking but not giving. 36) Strive to achieve harmony with the Godly and Natural principles in your essence. Reason was given to you in order to create this harmony. After that it can truly develop by itself. 38) The human being should know only what helps to develop his true capacities for harmony with the surrounding world."

From among Vissarion's followers who carry out the instructions of the Most High, according to their declarations, the One People are formed, with the One Faith in such concepts as the One, Spirit of Life, Father-Son, Holy Spirit, Mother-Earth, Jesus Christ, the Cosmic Mind and one perception of the world, culture, language, traditions, etc., different from those now existing. They think that this One People will survive the impending cataclysms and at first settle West Siberia, and later the whole land.

III. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ECONOSPHERE SETTLEMENT "TIBERCUL"

The researched econosphere-settlement has several territories for settlement. There is the territory which does not belong to the econosphere-settlement. This is an extensive territory, where people who have come from cities to Vissarion have settled in various existing villages. These settled points for the most part are situated along the road from the district center Kuragino to the village Cheremshanka. These are the villages Podgornoe, Zherbatikha, Imisskoe, Mozharka, etc., and the village of Zhuravlevo, on the closest railroad. In these villages the people have settled according to their own discretion, waiting for the opportunity to move closer to Vissarion's house. Those who remain here for a long time are for the most part single men and women, single mothers, homeless people, those returning from places of imprisonment, and other marginal groups, and problematic families and parents who have come without faith after children.

There is the territory of the econosphere-settlement "Tiberkul" itself - the villages of Petropavlovka, Cheremshanka, Gulyaevka, Zharovsk, Tiberkul. In order to attain residence in these five villages, the consent of the Teacher Vissarion is necessary. For the most part complete families with or without children live in them, believers, and incomplete families, where one of the members is a skilled worker or responsible for a certain area of

community work. In the future this territory is supposed to become part of a preserve. About the boundaries and status of the preserve negotiations are now being held with the regional and Russian Federation administrations.

There is the territory of Gora, comprising Gorod Solntsa, (or Gorod Masterov or Novii Ierusalim). Only complete families, confirmed in the faith, receive Vissarion's blessing to settle there. As they told us in their interviews "according to the degree of spiritual maturity". The country road goes as far as Sukhaya Gora, passage is difficult for automobiles. A steep narrow path, 12 km long, leads across the hill to Gorod Solntsa, passable only for people. There is a path for horses, longer and less steep. All loads reach the hills on horses or in backpacks. In winter, after the soil and marshy areas are well frozen, the winter passage is in operation. The track ("kamaz") passes along it as far as the warehouse, the place where the community food is stored, standing on the outskirts of Gorod Masterov. The use of machine technology in Gorod Solntsa is not planned, although in exceptional cases it is permitted. For example. Vissarion allowed the use of 5 petrol-powered saws for the felling and clearing of 60 hectares of forest, intended for construction and heating of houses and public buildings in the settlement of Sukhaya Gora. According to plan Gora is divided into three further territories. There is the territory of the public buildings and workshops; the territory of the orchards, kitchen gardens, parks, flower beds; and the territory of virgin forest, where settlement is not planned.

Vissarion lives at the territory of Sky Dwelling (or Nebesnaya Obitel, or Obitel Rassvet). There are the houses of the apostles, priests, the "Stone of the Heart", the "Simvol Very" (Symbol of Belief) church, and other cult structures.

IV. HISTORY

In the second half of 1994. an initiative group of Vissarion's followers came out with the proposal to create a settlement in the taiga, by Tiberkul Lake, and to form as a preserve a territory with an area of about 300 square kilometers with five already existing villages. An ecological program was initiated and a tract of land of 250 hectares was allocated on the hill near Tiberkul Lake. In August 1997 the non-governmental association "Econoosphere-settlement "Tiberkui" " became a member of the international Social-Ecological Union under the name "Krasnoyarsk Regional Section "Tiberkul." In addition to the non-governmental association, the community owns the AO "Tabrat" company in order to carry out general economic and cultural activity. Even earlier, in 1991, they were registered as a religious

association, "Church of the Last Testament".

Different people from different cities of Russia and the Newly Independent States come to "Tiberkul". Before coming all of them have to familiarize themselves with Vissarion's doctrine, believe in it, and be ready to build a new life in the "Promised Land", as Vissarion's followers call this part of Siberia. A minority followed their closest relatives without having any special faith, wives after husbands, husbands after wives, parents after children, children after parents. Many became believers after arriving. Among the community members there are people of various professions: teachers, doctors, musicians, artists, engineers-technicians, economists, many former soldiers, pilots from the missile forces, and research workers with academic degrees. Most commune members are people with higher education. Practically all of them came from far away, were urban residents, did not know handicrafts or the skills of agricultural work.

People who have come to "Tiberkul". as a rule, were engaged in a spiritual search before coming to Vissarion. They read esoteric literature, participated in different associations, many became interested in, and themselves experimented with, non-traditional health and fitness methods or practiced healing methods, most went through the influence of "Agni Yoga". All respondents, in reply to a question about why they rejected their passions and came to Vissarion, noted the impossibility of practically realizing their ideals in the worldly society. They think that it is possible at "Tiberkul". Many respondents connected their spiritual development with life in nature. We would like to provide some examples from the interviews:

"Why am I in this eco-settlement?... To learn to perceive the world as purely beautiful, good, to forget sorrow, forget fear, forget hate. That's the ecology of the soul. Exactly that is necessary now for nature. It's exactly that which she's suffering from more than from everything that man is doing with his scientific-technical progress. And that's what we came here to learn, to learn."

"Life in harmony with nature is the inalienable part of our spiritual development. It's impossible to be in harmony with nature and not to develop your soul. In the first place it's necessary to purify the soul and those processes, those very actions, they will be natural."

When they arrived they had to master the rural way of life. Many men learned construction skills and mastered trades, several became skilled workmen. The skilled workmen are a basic and very respected category of "Tiberkul" residents.

V. LIVING IN NATURE

On the basis of interviews with commune members and representatives of the administration, it became clear that at the beginning of their life in Tibercile, the people made many mistakes. There were some violations of Russian environmental regulations. In building the town on the hill, the weak soil was damaged, since a 6 km path was made. Birches were cut, petrol was kept by the river, and illegal felling was done for fences. In laying out the winter path, with the all-terrain vehicle, they damaged the moss and soil. They destroyed 0,04 hectares of cedar, in the villages they did illegal felling for fuel wood and fences. However, these and several other violations took place for the most part in the first phase of the communities' activity.

At present, as both the forestry officer and the head of the administration noted, the situation has become normal, the mistakes were corrected. Moreover, the community members planted 125 hectares of cedars, they cleaned up another 250 hectares of cedars to display the very good quality, about 80 people participated in this activities. The commune members cleaned a stream between the Tabrat River and Tiberkul Lake and freed it of many fallen logs, thus creating normal conditions for spawning. In order to heat the houses, ordinary wood stoves are used. They are quite uneconomical. We were witnesses of how the housewife, in the process of cooking the meal for the family, raised the temperature in the house to higher than 25-30 C and then opened the window or door in order to lower the temperature by ventilation. In general community members use living birch fuel wood, considering it to be waste wood, and frequently use green fuel wood, since most of them do not have shelters and sheds in order to preserve fuel wood. Heated winter premises have a rectangular shape. We saw only two commune members with homes built in hexagonal form. The rectangular shape creates an excessive load on the living environment.

The interviews show that people who have come to Vissarion gave first priority to questions of faith, cleansing, and spiritual development, and second to their interaction with nature and the environment. Many, especially those living in villages, in general don't think about the ecological soundness or unsoundness of their lives and their actions. Several, well knowing the commandments concerning relations to nature, in fact only study, but barely try to apply them in life. However, there are those who are seriously concerned with creating an ecological life within the separate family and the settlement as a whole.

The most ecologically sound life is organized on the Hill and in the village of Zharovsk, where there is no connection to the united electric

supply network. In Zharovsk solar batteries, thermal batteries and a petrol battery are used for the work of the video recorder, in order to watch video cassettes with Vissarion's talks.

Some respondents feel comfortable living with nature and are not afraid of wild animals. For example one of the respondents told us: *"A lynx with a cub let me come close, only the cub was scared and ran away. Such a big lynx. Earlier I didn't see any lynxes at all. I thought they were just bigger cats... I didn't feel that she had any aggression against me. It feels like cooperation"*.

The way of life includes various everyday adaptations which make life more ecologically sound and promote a break from money. This happens especially on the hill and in families where money is irregularly on hand. Lye is used instead of laundry detergent, instead of soap and shampoo blue clay is used, and an infusion of various wild-growing herbs are used to replace tooth paste.

VI. BY THEIR OWN WORDS

"I washed with lye, you take the ashes from the stove... !t ferments and it increases so the water is soft like soap. Approximately one glass per basin. And in general the children's diapers can all be laundered very well like that."

"When there were nettles in the summer, I picked them, let them soak for two days, on the third day, we heated them up, washed ourselves and washed our hair. When the nettles are soaked, the water becomes soapy, that is, soft. The hair becomes light, it falls out less. "

"Now we're discovering for ourselves some clay with amazing qualities, by means of the clay it's possible to satisfy the needs of the flesh, to satisfy the need for calcium. We don't have enough calcium, fluorine, manganese, bromine -microelements that are abundant in the clay, ! sit in all the meetings, I have a little white clay on my tongue, the blue clay tastes even better, we have deposits of blue clay here. It's very tasty. "

"We make shampoo from clay. Use lye, add nettles, add birch, add clay, add down, several more ingredients, and prepare it in proper quantities. Anyone who wants can come, take ajar of this shampoo and wash their hair. I tried twice in the bath to wash myself simply with clay. It's so soapy, it forms so much lather. "

"In the morning I wash myself with snow, all the pores are opened. Someone uses birch leaves, someone boils nettles (for tea), someone washes with clay."

'We steam the fir branches, until they're soft, simply soak them in boiling water. You can use this water to wash your hair or your body. It smells wonderful, you know that if you add a few drops of fir oil to the bath it's already wonderful, and here it has an absolutely vital effect...The wood of the fir. the spruce, remove negative energy. Aspen, fir, spruce, these trees. "

VII. AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Community residents proclaim that it is necessary to depart from the monetary unit, therefore farming and gathering are becoming the principal sources of life support. One of the respondents said to us: "In general, we supply ourselves with food, usual natural farming, private plots, still. If there's not enough, we buy something." Other respondent *"Before we asked, how say, actions, to the gifts soil. We'll spend half mushrooms, plant we pray... and this is just the question which you we can live without money. Well this is our idea, as the , programs: to get rid of money as soon as possible. Thanks of nature, Mother Earth, where we can plant, work the have grain... nature teaches us how to relate to her, I can an hour with each root... and so with everything, with berries, with horses, with trees. "*

The main type of farming now both in the villages and on the Hill is kitchen gardening. But the commune members already have started to use common fields. For example, this year they successfully sowed buckwheat. In the future the importance and number of community fields is supposed to grow. Communitarians plan to sow the fields in traditional places, close to the villages, on the former state farm lands. In kitchen gardening they use a method which is traditional for these areas, growing in hot beds. That is, they spread decayed matter (manure, compost) on the beds, and all the weeds are placed in a furrow on the bed, around its perimeter. This method is used by the majority of respondents.

On the Hill there are two small greenhouses that work round the clock. One of them is like the veranda of a residential building. In the greenhouses residents cultivate tomatoes, lemon trees, and banana trees. As yet the greenhouses do not bear a real functioning crop for the inhabitants of the community. After gathering in the harvest, the commune members redistributed all the main foods among themselves, depending on need. Part of the produce is stocked up for the hill for common use, the villages help the Hill. In the villages themselves there is not yet a general distribution of produce but this is planned for the future.

VIII. NUTRITION

Only vegan food is accepted in the community. It provides for excluding meat, fish, eggs from the diet, dairy products are permitted only for children, pregnant women and nursing mothers in small quantities, fats are practically excluded, even vegetable oils. Vegetable oil is permitted only on Sundays. The use of wheat and products made from it is restricted, wheat flour is replaced with rye flour. Bread, since it is baked independently, without yeast, is used in limited amounts. It is recommended that drinking is limited, black tea and coffee are not used. The principal foods are potatoes, buckwheat porridge, vegetables in season and preserved, sauerkraut, and mushrooms. Respondents describe how they are gathering berries, mushrooms and herbs.

"We pray, ask Mother Earth for forgiveness for picking these berries. And you know, such unique things happen, it's as though there weren't any berries. And you approach, it's as though the leaves raise themselves up. and there are the berries. You came with good intentions, you didn't come to take away from her (not to plunder her). It's even as though we have a rule: you don't take everything, down to the last berry. That is, you must leave 1-2 berries on this bush..."

"Everything is here contact with the chipmunks, and a bear running across (he path, and hares, and black grouse, and prayers, and trees. And there's an enormous number of herbs, that you can use as food, that nobody knows about... That's how we live".

One of the respondents describes his motivation for vegan nutrition: "On the Earth there are many associations, which try to come into harmony, to a harmonious life, to themselves, on Earth. So, let's say, vegan food, intercourse with nature, the aspiration to life, toughening your body".

IX. GENDER ROLES

Women who earlier occupied an active position in the society, who hold prestigious positions in a "real" world, in Tibercul manage the household and master the technique of cooking on wood-burning stoves. The kitchen gardens are also primarily taken care of by women. Several do sewing and engage in needle work. The bulk of their time goes into working in the home.

Gender roles in the eco-settlements are very much polarized, women strive for femininity, men for masculinity. It is considered that women should develop intuition and be responsible for the link with nature and follow the man, who is responsible for spiritual development, the link with God, and should have reason.

In order to be more feminine, women in general wear long dresses or

skirts, which for the most part they have sewn themselves in an original style. It is accepted that women wear their hair long, and wear on their heads adornments sewn or plaited from birch bark and head-dresses. Men also observe an original style in clothing. In time free of heavy work, on holidays, at meetings they wear tunics (long shirts with slits at the sides and waist). It is also accepted that men wear their hair long.

X. FROM THE INTERVIEWS

"Here girl could go the girls' way, that is, she becomes as it were a potential bride, having mastered as it were, so to speak, the rudiments of housekeeping, mastery of a woman's secrets. And all this is related to Mother Nature: the elements of water, air, earth, fire".

"With regard to the fact that our women look so fine, the man does what is predestined by God, strives to be a man. A man in the first place is the one that a woman boldly goes after. Because she always senses who's a man and who simply puts on a jacket and tries to look the part. So, conquering his weaknesses, a man becomes naturally stronger, he becomes stronger in spirit. And a woman should live on this spirit. And being filled with it, she blossoms. The man looks at her and admires her, becomes stronger still, the woman becomes still more beautiful".

"But it turns out so agreeable to be weak, to be beautiful, to be the kind of woman that the husband, the brothers admire. That's why I don't know, maybe if they haven't gone through it, business women don't understand how pleasant it is".

"... working on the soil is an enormous pleasure for woman. You gain such strength. Especially the mystery, when you work in a long dress When the skirt is down to the ground, it's like a cupola, and all the energy comes and the women., go barefoot and never get sick. That's the mystery itself".

XI. CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Practically all women in the eco-settlement bear their children at home, in water, in the presence of the husband or midwife. Children are educated at home. In 1998, in the village of Cheremshanka, an attempt was undertaken to establish a community kindergarten. Children of school age learn at home for the most part and study other subjects externally in the local public school. Since the school is located in Cheremshanka, several community children study there, a community school up to the 5th grade exists here. Here children study in a specially established program, they try to remove from the learning process all knowledge which, in the opinion of the commune

members, bears elements of destruction and aggression. The program on history and literature is revised especially vigorously. There is no special environmental education at school. However, children are raised in nature and on the opinion of our respondents, this kind of ecological education is the best.

Our respondent described: "A boy was born here, he started growing up. At an early age, a year and a half, two years, he ran around in the herbs and brought herbs to us. He himself ate herbs, and gave some to his parents. He had this internal feeling with him. This happened on Lake Tiberkul. He taught them [parents] to gather herbs".

XII. BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

At this phase in the eco-settlement there is a process of creating a united family. Daily there are community meetings in each village (general, economic, moral-ethical, men's, women's). At the meetings, questions are resolved that are related to the community's economic life (for example, the question of preparing fuel wood, common work, etc.). They consider conflicts between the united family and the personality, contentious, conflictive issues in families. People try to give each other suggestions as to how best to get out of a situation. As a rule the meeting participants do not come to a single opinion, therefore they formulate questions for Vissarion and send envoys to him. The answer is recorded on an audio cassette and everyone listens to it together, it is taken as absolute truth. The objective of creating a single family is that all its members come to a single understanding of the truths of the Last Testament, to a simplification of relations among people, based on love, faith, a relation to one's neighbor like that to a close relative, the creation of a single economic structure, supporting the life of the family. One of the respondents described:

"The base of our presence here is not only intercourse with nature. The most important factor is that of people associating among themselves as a unified, integral, harmonious organism, present on our planet. Because we people living on the Earth are a unified organism. We're children of one God, the one God. And here people of different beliefs have come together, people of different nationalities, they came from different places."

XIII. CONCLUDING REMARCS

As we can see Tiberkul community represents an intentional community where people live together intent on the realization of their beliefs in practice. They have a common purpose to create a new environmentally friendly

society on the land, where people will be able to survive natural catastrophes and disasters. They have shared values, shared beliefs and see their neighbors as extended family. All these characteristics correspond with those described for intentional communities the Western countries, as well (Questenberry ,1996; Bouvard, 1975; Kozeny, 1996). The same as in other intentional communities around the globe, described by Kozeny, Tibercul residents' shared values include creativity, self sufficiency, environmentally friendly technology, equality, personal growth, cooperation and peaceful social transformation toward a sustainable way of living (Kozeny 1996).

In terms of its scale, Tibercul can be assigned to the category' of mega-settlements. A mega-settlement is an alternative settlement, consisting of many hundreds and even thousands of people (Shubin, 1998: 9). The Tibercul settlement numbers several thousand people and is prepared for unlimited growth in numbers. In addition it is a settlement with a complex structure, uniting in itself six population centers. It represents a "team of eco-villages" spread in a vast territory. Such a structure, according to Oilman (1983), can be considered as very effective.

Tibercufe has much in common with US religious intentional communities described by Bouvard (1975). The same as what she terms the "US religious movements," the Tibercuie community displays puritanical attitudes, strong family values and simple lifestyle. The Tibercul community has many similarities with the US Anabaptists. The same as Anabaptist movement, described by Bouvard, Tibercul community represents an intentional association of believers fully committed to god. Contrary to Free Church communities in the U.S., Tibercul residents are allowed to compromise with ethnicity and encouraged to join all nations and nationalities. Like the apostolic church of early Christianity, the Tibercul community sees its purpose as missionary for their own particular beliefs. In these beliefs, the word of the Heavenly father was commanded to Vissarion as a reborn Christ who dictated a revised Last Testament to an evangelist scribe.

It was stated in western literature that religious communities are the most successful in their development all over the world (Kanter, 3972). Tibercul community also can be considered the biggest and most successful in terms of organization and development in all of Russia. Their religion gives communitarians the necessary commitment and strength necessary to overcome difficulties in building the community in a situation of Russia's transforming society. However, their dependence on Vissarion as a charismatic leader makes people wary about the future of the eco-settlement.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Noosphere is the social-cultural sphere which according to the Russian scientist Vernadsky surrounds and influences the world's ecosystems.
2. All references in the article to the Last Testament refer to the version proclaimed by Vissarion.

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