

# EVANGELICAL SILENCE IN A KOMI VILLAGE

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Becoming an Evangelical Christian has much to do with mastering Evangelical rhetoric, but there are also non-verbal aspects that are substantial in constituting the Evangelical self. Focusing on a rural Evangelical community in the Komi Republic of Russia, this article discusses ways in which participation in distinctive Evangelical verbal practices can be challenging or even undesirable in a pro-Orthodox environment. By looking at how, when and what Evangelicals leave unsaid or convey by means of emotions and embodied practices, I analyse different silences that are created and employed by group members and also used as proselytising tools. I propose that the intertwining of emotional and embodied features of faith and the specific environment that is unwelcoming to non-Orthodox believers produce a kind of Evangelical silence.

*Keywords:* Evangelicals, Russian Orthodoxy, embodied faith, Evangelical silence, Komi Republic

Talking about becoming a Christian and testifying to one's conversion are considered to be of central importance among Evangelicals, and scholars and believers alike often conceptualise Evangelical Christianity as the religion of talk. However, while narrative forms of being a believer are conventionally emphasised and readily available, not all individuals have the confidence or willingness to follow these patterns. In this article, I explore how, in addition to refraining from particular words and narrative templates, Evangelicals conceptualise faith in terms of displaying certain emotions and embodied features. I suggest, furthermore, that these non-verbal manifestations can be seen as having priority over verbal claims of religious commitment, especially in a predominantly Orthodox environment that regards Evangelicals with strong scepticism. Under such conditions, a certain kind of silence can be a strategic choice: while it leaves a person on the fringes

of the Evangelical community, it also facilitates interaction with the wider community and movement between the two communities.

The ethnographic material presented in this paper<sup>1</sup> has been collected over the course of several short-term fieldwork trips to villages of the Kulömdin District in the Republic of Komi since 2008.<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Komi, with a population of about 900,000, is situated in the north-eastern part of European Russia. While the indigenous Komis constitute about 25 percent of the republic's overall population, they are a majority in the Kulömdin District. A small Evangelical congregation in the village of Don is the focus of my doctoral research. Don, with about 500 inhabitants, is situated some 15 km from the district centre. In 2003, a missionary team consisting of an American named William and the Russians Andrei (later to become the group's pastor) and Semyon settled in Don and a congregation formed around them.

About 10 to 15 people usually attend the weekly services in the Don congregation. A few more people are loosely tied to the congregation; for example people who say they have come to God in the group but now live elsewhere still sometimes visit, and there are also other random participants. It is somewhat difficult to pinpoint the exact size of the community as there is no formal membership and some churchgoers are affiliated with other churches as well. I consider it reasonable to regard people who say that they have come to God in this church, take part in the congregation's life and relate to the Evangelical message as a community. The majority of the members are middle-aged and elderly women, which coincides with the composition of Orthodox congregations. Apart from the missionaries, few other men have participated in the church life with any consistency. The churchgoers come from both Don and nearby villages, from where Andrei and Semyon bring them by cars. In addition to Sunday services held in a private house adjusted for this purpose, home Bible study meetings are organised in other villages.

In the Komi Republic, as in Russia more broadly, Russian Orthodoxy is considered a kind of "by default" religion popularly and often by officials as well. While the variety of churches and religious groups in the Russian religious landscape quickly multiplied after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many critical voices have accompanied this diversification. Religion is frequently perceived to be closely connected with ethnic and cultural belonging and thus foreign missionaries and people converting to a "non-traditional" (i.e. non-Orthodox) faith are regarded with scepticism and even hostility. People generally have little knowledge of different Christian denominations and most non-Orthodox religious groups are popularly referred to as "sects". The concept of "sect" has absorbed many of the negative meanings Soviet ideology projected onto religion in general and this word has ultimately come to signify the "dark other" of post-socialist religious life (Broz 2009: 21). Thus, in spite of the official religious freedom and plurality in post-Soviet Russia, different faith groups have not "competed" on an equal ba-

sis. Both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and lay people often invoke the notion of tradition when justifying ROC's privileged position in Russia.

Evangelical Protestants, in turn, have frequently criticised the idea of traditional religion as in their view faith is not something one can inherit (see e.g. Elliott 2003). They disapprove of the common state of affairs in Russia that a person considers him- or herself to be Orthodox but has a vague comprehension of its teachings and never goes to church. High ritualisation in the Orthodox tradition and pervasive vernacular practices have also received condemning assessments from Protestants. However, the Don Evangelicals who are the focus of this study generally tend to avoid openly criticising Orthodox believers. That is to say, while there are occasional disapproving comments about certain aspects of (popular) Orthodoxy, critique of the Orthodox is not explicitly part of the mission discourse, nor is it routinely incorporated into sermons.

Indeed, in the Russian context, a quite distinct and remarkable feature of the Don congregation is their non-denominational ideology. Non-denominational Christian churches and congregations are historically Protestant but do not officially belong to any specific denomination. The character of the group is similar to the "new paradigm" or "free" churches increasingly common in America (see Miller 1998). Unregistered and called simply the Christian Community of Don (*Donskaia khristianskaia obshina*), the group welcomes Christians of all denominations. The congregation members usually refer to themselves as simply Christians or Evangelical Christians. Most of the people in the group have had some sort of personal contact with vernacular Orthodoxy and some still consider themselves Orthodox. The pastor has a background in a Charismatic church but does not regard himself as a follower of any specific denomination and strongly pursues an ecumenical approach. While open to different forms of worship, emphasis on the importance of individual and conscious conversion and mission activities places them firmly in the Evangelical tradition.

In my analysis, I draw on interviews conducted with nearly all of the people who have attended ser-

vices at the Don congregation with some regularity, but also on casual conversations and personal observations at church events and other occasions. Most people have been interviewed more than once, both individually and in situations where several believers were present, whether in someone's home or at the church. In regard to recognising silences in social interactions, group conversations have sometimes turned out to be more informative than interviewing a single person. Situations where several group members are present provide an opportunity to examine the ways believers present their narratives to other believers and how they subtly guide each other in presenting these narratives. Analysing such situations also makes it possible to better detect when, in what circumstances and how silences are produced. It is important to note that silence does not mean only a lack of speech, but also noncommunication, avoiding saying certain things or saying things in a certain manner (see Tuija Hovi, this issue).

### Conversion beyond the Narrative Lens

Within Evangelical Christianity, "conversion" is a central notion. While theoretically conversion can be understood to be any kind of religious change (Rambo & Farhadian 1999), in mainstream Evangelical discourse it usually has a rather specific meaning. Very often Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus as recounted by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9: 1–22) is taken as the primary model for conversion. This model combines ideas about sudden, dramatic revelation that leads to radical reversal of previous beliefs and is caused by external divine intervention (Bryant 1999: 181; Rambo 2003: 213).

Unlike the approach popularly conveyed by Evangelicals, scholars have tended to emphasise the processual character of conversion rather than viewing it as a distinct event (e.g. Rambo & Farhadian 1999). The process of conversion that leads to self-transformation takes place in the dynamic field of people and ideologies: it is not just a personal spiritual awakening but also an entry into a particular religious community, which makes it important to pay attention to the social and institutional dimensions of conver-

sion (Bryant & Lamb 1999: 12; Wanner 2007: 149). One element in the conversion process is the public display of commitment to the Evangelical faith and community (cf. Rambo & Farhadian 1999: 31). This commitment is most saliently mediated through a narrative form.

A conversion narrative or testimony is a story of one's life before and after conversion. It is supposed to present the total change in a person's life that is brought about by realising the truth about God and the acquired knowledge of being saved (cf. Lawless 1983). Being able to testify to how God has changed one's life can be viewed as a ritual expression of the person's new status as an Evangelical Christian (Hovi 2000: 375). Elaine J. Lawless (1983) has argued that the conversion is not actually complete until a narrative recounting of the experience is presented by the one who experienced it, as the narrative functions to articulate the belief. Telling the personal story or, especially, being asked to tell one's narrative to outsiders signals membership by conveying the sense of belonging strong enough to carry the message promoted by the community (cf. Cain 1991: 232).

Certain specific words and phrases are employed to describe one's new mode of understanding the world and how this comprehension came about. Because of "shared elementary language" (Harding 2000: 19), conversion stories are paradoxically both personal and stereotyped. Tanya Luhrmann (2004: 522) has pointed out that this combination of very personal and stereotyped narratives is not unique to Evangelical Christians. For example, the recruitment of shamans has been described as exhibiting an analogous combination of cultural expectations and personal experiences. Also, in a very similar manner, Carole Cain (1991) has described the way members of *Alcoholics Anonymous* learn to place the events and experiences of their lives into the general model provided by the group, and how telling the appropriate story makes it possible to demonstrate and gain validation for one's AA identity.

The conversion story as a specific genre or category can thus be said to provide a general framework in which individual stories can be seen as concrete examples that verify the group's general dogmas

(cf. Cain 1991: 227). This framework for verbalising one's religious experiences and coming to God is acquired from the examples of more experienced believers who, by narrating their own stories, instruct novices on how it ought to be done. Certain stereotyped expressions help to formulate interpretations of individual experiences and convey these to other believers so that they can relate to and understand them. While common expressions can be appropriated in a personally meaningful way (cf. Lindquist & Coleman 2008), stereotyped language can also offer useful words to people who for some reason lack their own words or feel that these are somehow inadequate. As my case study of the Don congregation suggests, as people have very different motivations for joining the group, sometimes the formulaic following of stereotyped language stands alone and there is no active personal interpretation.

Scholars studying different branches of Evangelical Christianity have paid special attention to the role and importance of specific language practices in constituting the believer's identity. Whereas Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (1999: 30), for example, see rhetorical practices as one feature of immersing the converting person in the new religion, other scholars have suggested that converting in essence can be described in terms of acquiring a new language (cf. Harding 1987, 2000; Stromberg 1993). Susan Harding (1987) has argued, based on the example of fundamentalist Baptists, that rhetoric is the principal vehicle of conversion.<sup>3</sup> According to Harding (2000: 59), speaking is believing: becoming a born-again Christian involves joining a particular narrative tradition to which one submits his or her past, present and future as a speaker.

Compared to the attention scholars have paid to Evangelical language ideologies and speech practices, the role and presence of silence along with sensuous aspects of Evangelical faith have received much less consideration. Still, several scholars have recently criticised approaches that ascribe a fundamental role to language in the process of conversion. Tanya Luhrmann has emphasised the importance of emotional and sensuous aspects of the conversion process. She claims that the transition from non-

believer to believer is not likely to occur simply by acquiring new concepts and words, suggesting that the convert must emotionally come to believe that those new concepts and words are true. According to Luhrmann (2004: 519; see also Luhrmann 2012: xxi, 131), "believers learn to identify bodily and emotional states as signs of God's presence in their life, identifications that imply quite different learning processes than those entailed by linguistic and cognitive knowledge."

Joseph Webster (2013: 107) has similarly questioned the contention that conversion occurs solely or even primarily through language, pointing out that this approach ignores the roles of embodiment and emotion. In his discussion of language in the construction of the Charismatic Protestant identity, Simon Coleman (2007: 167–168) has indicated that Harding's analysis leaves out two important elements of the conservative Protestant use of language. Coleman argues that, first, the deployment of language can reconstitute not only the listener but also the speaker. Second, language cannot be divorced from sensual forms, since the power of words is often demonstrated by their effects on and constitution of the material world, as well as on the born-again person.

This article aims to contribute to this recent body of scholarship that broadens perspectives on understanding conversion. I seek to demonstrate how the particularities of social and cultural context can influence the manner in which language is or is not used by members of a specific religious group, as well as the functions and meanings ascribed to non-verbal communication and expressions of faith. My suggestion is that, in addition to the general Evangelical ideology, conceptualising emotions and the use of language in the small group considered in this paper depend significantly on the environment that regularly challenges the acceptability of Evangelical mode of believing. Under such conditions, a certain kind of silence can be a strategic choice made to facilitate interactions with the wider community and movement between the two communities.

## Challenging Narrative Templates and Deficient Language

In the Don group, a believer is often defined along the lines of “one who talks spiritual words and brings people to God by talking his word” (W, b. 1977)<sup>4</sup>. It is presumed that having been converted means that the person has to start working on converting others. And one of the central means by which adherents are expected to contribute to bringing others to God is by recounting their personal stories. However, despite this obvious and expected emphasis on the constant verbal articulation of one’s faith, readily available narrative models remain inaccessible for some members of the congregation and conversion can be an ineffable experience.

Community members’ conceptions of an ideal conversion narrative have been greatly influenced by one of the founding members of the congregation, the American missionary William. William’s account is that of a man who was a hopeless alcoholic and a drug addict for years until quite suddenly his life was completely changed by converting and “taking Jesus into his life.” As an American’s presence in a Komi village is locally newsworthy, many non-Evangelicals of the Kulömdin District are aware of the Don group because of this curious connection. Stories about William have appeared in local media and spread among the villagers by word of mouth. Consequently, even though William left Kulömdin for another district in 2011, in the outsiders’ perception he continues to function as a kind of emblem of the whole congregation due to his popularly known dramatic conversion story and “exoticism”. In a way, his narrative is an archetypal example of its genre, being very similar to countless other Evangelical conversion stories. But for the Don Evangelicals William’s decision to move to Russia and become a missionary, to dedicate his assets and abilities to serving the needy people in this specific geographic location, demonstrates in a very concrete and compelling manner the power of God and his care for people in Komi in particular (see also Koosa 2013).

Another often-referenced conversion story in the Don group is that of the local woman Nadya, who was an alcoholic for years but came to God in the

Don church, repented and was able to quit drinking and drastically change her lifestyle. Such exemplary narratives are used to push into the background accounts that present conversion in less dramatic terms. Perceived to be more effective for proselytising purposes, they tend to acquire independent existence. Both William’s and Nadya’s narratives have become detached from the individuals whose experience they narrate: even when the central character is absent, I have often witnessed others using the stories to substantiate their own arguments. Moreover, excessive drinking is an acknowledged and often bemoaned problem in the villages and both William’s and Nadya’s stories convey the message that it is possible to get rid of alcoholism, which adds to their relevance in this specific social context.

Although William’s story in particular is often repeated and referred to as an example, only a few members of the Don group actually attempt to present their personal narratives in similarly dramatic terms. While some do present the sins of their previous lives as if through a magnifying glass, more often than not people tend to speak of their lives in terms of continuity. That there is some kind of break from the previous life is often briefly remarked on or glossed over with the formulaic statement of now “going in a 180-degree different direction.” While life after joining the Evangelical community is described in overly positive terms, this does not necessarily mean rejecting the former self or conceptualising the previous life in completely negative terms. As I will demonstrate in more detail below, this preference for continuity is also tied to the non-denominational character of the Don congregation and its members’ self-positioning in a predominantly Orthodox society.

Even though giving testimony of the works of God is considered to be the duty of every believer, Don Evangelicals have ambiguous attitudes about the nature of human language and do not view verbal claims of one’s faith in a straightforward way. To begin with, language can prove to be deficient in that it fails to offer sufficient vocabulary to allow for adequate expression of what one goes through by realising the divine truth and accepting Jesus in his or

her life (cf. Tuija Hovi and Pihla Maria Siim in this issue).

Nadya (b. 1976): The day of [my] repentance was for me...

Inga (b. 1974) (interrupting): Unforgettable.

Nadya: ... unforgettable day.

Inga: A spiritual rebirth. [You are] born again.

Oksana (b. 1971): Yes, these processes, internal, deep, spiritual... it is not possible to convey in words.

Inga: A person who has not lived through it can't understand it. He can't understand it.

Oksana: And it happens not by your will, well, how to say, not simply because...

Inga (interrupting): ... because you want it.

Oksana: Yes, yes. That you want or that it was your own will, your wish. You are drawn to God. But this process itself, how the Holy Ghost works, it is not possible to convey in words what is happening in the soul of the person.

Inga: You come in front of all the people, fall on your knees, it's very interesting, yes (laughing), and you don't even feel ashamed. [You] throw such a burden off yourself...

Oksana (interrupting): this lightness and joy, gratitude to God for releasing you from your sins, [from] wicked life. It is such a state, such a feeling that is not possible to convey.

In a sense then, the conversion experience is said to be clearly untranslatable to non-believers. In addition to demonstrating the idea that only insiders are truly able to grasp the meaning of conversion, there is another interesting aspect in this excerpt from a group interview. Namely, it is actually recently converted Nadya who has been asked to tell about her coming to God: the others urged her to do so. But as soon as there is a short pause in her narration, as she is looking for words, the more experienced congregants wade right in to help her to formulate her statement. In fact, most of her conversion experience is put into words by other women, while Nadya remains silently smiling and nodding in agreement. In addition to conveying the idea that the conversion

experience is experienced similarly, this example demonstrates the implicit way in which the Evangelical discourse is taught to the newcomer, and the role of submissive silence in this process. But still, it cannot be seen only in terms of teaching the neophyte: the eagerness with which the women interrupt each other's sentences demonstrates the excitement they experience upon remembering their own conversion.

The somewhat ambiguous attitude towards language is also connected with the concept of empty words and with the idea that human words can be deceitful. Speaking properly is not enough; one must constantly substantiate his or her words by acting properly as well:

[A believer is] one who believes and lives with God, and does not just talk. Well, how to put it: some say that they are believers but live in sin. [...] If I live with God then as God is holy, he makes me holy too and I can't sin. It seems to me that this is what a believer is like. That is, a real believer. [...] A human can't judge whether one is real or not real. Well, with some people you can see right away; it is clearly visible who is a believer. But otherwise only God can know whether someone has indeed given his heart to the Lord. (W, b. 1984)

Faith without deeds is dead. [...] Only talking about being a believer, without deeds, then it is a dead faith. But when there are deeds, then the believer doesn't have to say anything at all. Because the other person can see it from the deeds. (W, b. 1971)

As words cannot always be trusted, the Don Evangelicals place significant importance on proper behaviour. Indeed, from the beginning, greatly influenced by William, their agenda has been to proselytise through practically reaching out to people (see also Koosa & Leete 2014). Intriguingly, direct verbal contact between William and the local people has been very limited as they lack a common language and the pastor Andrei has had to serve as an interpreter for William. Thus, most Komi Evangelicals are familiar

with William's story not from a first person account but through translation. Moreover, William did not consider his oratory skills to be very good and thus wished to serve and witness for God through a social mission. This means that evangelising has been carried out with an emphasis on providing practical help to the socio-economically deprived. According to the Evangelical logic, this kind of work leads to the spiritual growth of the believer, as it is pleasing to God. Evangelicals' engagement in good deeds and selflessly helping the needy is also thought to cause non-Evangelicals to contemplate the motivation for acting and thus initiates a process of conversion.

### Emotional and Embodied Faith

There is thus a certain tension around the idea of a verbalised account validating the conversion experience and the notion of language and verbal claims as being insufficient. Hence, great significance is attached to non-verbal communication through good deeds. Another important aspect of expressing the Evangelical self and conveying the Evangelical message concerns the managing of emotions. Luhrmann (2012) has thoroughly examined the ways Evangelicals learn to attend to their thoughts and emotions so as to experience the real and external presence of God in their lives. Among other techniques, she has identified specific emotional practices that believers employ to achieve this (ibid.: 111). Amy C. Wilkins (2008) has also focused on Evangelicals' conceptualisations of mental states by demonstrating how Evangelicals can come to perceive positive emotions such as happiness or peace as central to their Christian identity. According to Wilkins's analysis, happiness is understood to signal moral righteousness, and displaying positive emotions and friendliness is utilised as a proselytising tool. I have observed similar tendencies in discussing and conceptualising certain emotions among the Don Evangelicals as well, which attest to the need to examine non-verbal expressions of belief. In comparison to Orthodoxy, the Evangelicals frequently stress the importance of accepting faith consciously and with full understanding. At the same time, they often highlight the role of feelings and emotionality in the process of

coming to God. Women are conceptualised as being more emotional and this is thought to make accepting God easier for them:

Because with his mind and with reasoning a person cannot logically accept these ideas and truths. (M, b. 1978)

Women are kind of more sensitive emotionally and they evidently react to the fact that there is a living God. (W, b. 1966)

The emotionally and bodily felt aspects of faith are frequently discussed and emphasised. Accepting Jesus in one's life is commonly described in terms of experiencing the disappearance of a previously felt void in oneself or as getting rid of a physically felt burden. Moreover, the change brought about by conversion, although sometimes hard to put into words, is not understood to be exclusively internal or subjective: it is something that is possible for external observers to detect as well. Characteristically, the manifestation of genuine belief is described in terms of positive emotions. The person feels happy and calm, does not get agitated or angry about things that used to bother him or her before the conversion and the fear of the uncertainty of the future is gone.

Before there was this anxiety. As if you're waiting for something bad [to happen]. But now you're as peaceful as a boar! I don't even worry what to prepare for dinner tomorrow or what to wear; [all] this somehow works out by itself. (W, b. 1959)

Evangelicals talk about how becoming a believer has not only transformed their behaviour and habits but has also given them a kind of special general appearance or "aura", which is said to be noticed by non-Evangelical people as well. For example, a woman described how she was able to remain calm when everybody else got upset in a tedious everyday situation:

[T]here was this long, long queue, I stood there for two hours and the sales clerk said afterwards

that I was the only one to be so calm (laughing); everyone else was so angry and irritated. She said to me that I was so calm, [that] it's so interesting. You see – it is good that people already see the difference [in me] and it feels good too. (W, b. 1971)

From the discussion between two Don congregants quoted below it appears that the almost transcendent joy said to beam from a true believer is sometimes in fact judged to have priority over the verbal expressions he or she does or does not make:

Larisa (b. 1949): He [a Christian] never says a bad word...

Semyon (b. 1978): No, I think it's something else.

Larisa: No?

Semyon: The face – joy...

Larisa: Aa! Yes, the face.

Semyon: The person's eyes shine joyfully.

Larisa: Internal joy.

Semyon: Yes, one can see that this joy comes from within, a kind of love comes from within. At least I can tell the difference. Not always, but very often. Whether one is a Christian or not, it is visible.

Larisa: God is love and he gives this love to his children as well. This love even spills over. It is in the eyes and everywhere. They [Christians] love people.

Semyon: A person's face glows.

The excerpt illustrates how the more experienced believer – although younger in years – influences the discourse of the novice Evangelical. As Semyon interrupts Larisa and directs attention from the external to the internal, Larisa accepts this and subsequently only repeats and elaborates on the viewpoint Semyon has expressed.

On the one hand, the love of God is said to radiate from a believing person and the good emotions and proper way of behaving are sometimes described as automatically accompanying conversion. On the other hand, Evangelicals actually quite consciously make efforts to cultivate the Christian self. Part of this project is certainly controlling and silencing unwanted emotions in everyday situations as described

in the following quotation, where there is also a reflective remark on how it is consciously thinking differently that makes one feel different:

It's as if I'm not growing older, but rejuvenating with prayers. And I say that if it's because of self-suggestion, then thank God. I'm as glad as a little child. I've never been so happy [since coming to God]. And sometimes it happens that we argue, sometimes between ourselves; [my] husband tries to prove something – [then for me] it stops and that's it; my eyes are closed to all the bad things. And I said [to my husband] "come on, I will not argue with you over this nonsense." He turned around and went to his room. I say it is as if I could jump for joy that my life has turned out like this! (W, b. 1956)

As part of concentrating on positive emotions, one is supposed to refrain from or silence reactions and behavioural patterns that are perceived as negative and un-Christian. At the same time, to become a truly good Christian it is actually necessary not simply to avoid complicated or uncomfortable situations. In fact, it is the opposite: one must learn to cope and react in a way suitable for a Christian by not avoiding difficulties or possibly challenging encounters with other people. Pastor Andrei once explained at a service that this is one of the reasons one must participate in communal life:

Sitting on a couch, watching TV, and occasionally opening the Bible, it's easy to learn to love – no one irritates me, no one's socks or armpits smell and no one bothers me with their comments. You can't learn to love if you're torn away from the churchly communal life, sitting at home or fishing. [Or] Even [when simply] gazing at stars and contemplating God's might. (M, b. 1979)

It appears then that in addition to a certain pattern of talking "properly", there are also "proper" emotions that accompany conversion. Feeling and displaying good emotions is a sign of being a good Christian. Correspondingly, there are certain emotions a good



believer is not supposed to feel or display. The mainstream discourse stresses a kind of instant, spontaneous change in emotional and behavioural conduct that coming to God brings about; at the same time, conscious and sometimes arduous efforts one does to achieve what is perceived as the good Christian self remain taciturn. Furthermore, it is my suggestion that in addition to the inner logic of Evangelical ideology that puts emphasis on certain emotional and embodied practices, the socio-cultural setting that complicates implementing the narrative mode of proselytising and expressing one's faith verbally also enhances focusing on these aspects of faith.

### Difficulties in Speaking and Negotiating Continuities

When asked about their coming to God, several members of the Don group said that they "don't know how to speak (yet)." Different reasons and meanings of such a claim can be recognised. In some cases such a remark is indeed followed by few comments on (religious or other kind of) experiences. This is more likely to happen when a more seasoned congregation member is present. For example, during our first visit to interview Lidia (b. 1966), she suggested calling over another Evangelical woman, Albina (b. 1951). As Albina had started to visit the Don church through Lidia, this situation could be interpreted in terms of Lidia demonstrating her success in fulfilling the duty of bringing new people to God. We began by discussing briefly the aims of our work<sup>5</sup> and local religious life in general. Upon hearing that neither of us was baptised, Lidia started to talk about how life with God did not automatically make the hardships of life disappear but it did make them much easier to handle. She gave some examples from her experience and ended by indirectly urging us to consider our own spiritual state and also pointing out that such insistence was the duty of a true believer:

It is written that now is the time to repent, to be saved. One mustn't delay with repentance, as then it will be too late. And this is why we're called to witness about God and the gospel to all people (laughs).<sup>6</sup>

Lidia then paused and suggested that perhaps there were some more questions they could answer. When Lidia said that maybe Albina could add something, the latter promptly announced "I don't know how to speak yet. I cannot talk like this yet," to which Lidia responded by laughing kindly. In this instance, although otherwise quite talkative, Albina was apparently intimidated by the idea that she needed to present an account similar to Lidia's talk: well composed, combining references to the Bible, specific examples and more conceptual arguments. The few extended contributions Albina made during the conversation all generally followed directions prompted by Lidia. In comparison to Lidia's discussions, Albina's comments were more specific to the region's or her own family's history. Lidia for her part tended to place particular examples into the context of Biblical reality to make a more conceptual point. It seems plausible to assume that it was the presence of Lidia, fluently demonstrating the Evangelical discourse, that silenced Albina's less conceptualised and perhaps more ambivalent perspective.

Lidia: [...] It is written in the Gospels that Jesus said "I was persecuted and you will be persecuted." [...] That means that, indeed, true believers are not tolerated much, they are so-to-say persecuted. [...]

Albina: The Orthodox really were persecuted. You see, even here [...] they saved the icons [during Soviet times], these believers. [...] There were persecutions but there were always believers and they passed on everything, from generation to generation.

[...]

Albina: There was the revolution in [19]17. [...] And the mother and father [of my mother] died the same year. And they [the children] were given to different orphanages. But how, at that time, in [19]17, were they raised in orphanages? It was done without God. And that's how they grew up.

Lidia: Yes, yes, yes. Then there were those kinds of times.

Albina: Then there were those kinds of times.

Lidia: And now we ask what about those who

didn't know anything about living God [...] And in the Bible, there is a place [where it's written] that [they will be judged] according to deeds. They will be judged according to deeds, according to conscience. [...] These people who had not heard of Christ, they will be judged according to the conscience.

While Albina acknowledged Lidia's role in bringing her to the Don church and to God, she also declared some kind of continuity in her spiritual life. Although she was also baptised in the Don church, she did not articulate a clear break from her previous life, which rendered her religious identity somewhat ambiguous:

For about three years [Lidia Nikolaevna] spoke to me and I listened. And now I have been driving there [to the Don church] for two years already. And I'm very pleased that I indeed came to God. Through Lidia Nikolaevna. [...] I always considered myself a Christian, an Orthodox Christian. All your life you believe in something anyway. But I went there and listened and understood that God is one.

On the other hand, there are examples from my fieldwork where a statement about not knowing how to speak can be regarded as a disclaimer of performance (Bauman 1984: 21–22) for it is followed by a rich narrative account of a person's life. For example, when asked how she had become a believer, Matryona first announced that she did not know how to speak, but then quite smoothly went on to tell her life story, paying attention to different, including Orthodox, religious encounters throughout her life and to their significance. Finally, after speaking for over half an hour, she recalled:

Oh, I didn't tell you how I repented. In general, I went to the church for about a year. [...] But then William [the missionary] asked "if you die, where do you think you will end up?" I said, "well, I will go neither to paradise nor hell. I'm not that bad, and I will end up somewhere in between." He said

that there was no third option, no middle ground. Said, "repent!" I said "I'm not ready. How can I repent if I smoke and swear?" [...] [He told me] not to worry, that I'd manage. I said that I didn't even know what words to say. And William told me to repeat after him. So I thought I would try. And he talked and I repeated. And when I came out of the church I immediately quit smoking. Even though I had repented somehow without understanding. I mean, in words it was not understandable. I didn't understand a thing. And the Lord immediately cleansed me. (W, b. 1957)

During several conversations I had with Matryona, the above-described repentance experience did not seem to have too much importance in her everyday narratives about personal religious experiences and development. However, it seems she here tries to follow the example the "exemplar" members of the community have set by tying her conversion to a specific event. At the same time, Matryona refers back to her grandmother, who was the first to acquaint her with some religious principles, and she does not express any kind of exclusive commitment to the Don community:

[My] grandmother was Orthodox. But the Lord is anyway one and the same. I listen to the [Orthodox] Soyuz channel: Andrei teaches us exactly the same. The Commandments are the same, the Lord is the same, everything is exactly the same. [...] If our church weren't here, but there was an Orthodox church [in our village], I'd go there. (W, b. 1957)

From Matryona's account another interesting and ambivalent aspect of Evangelicals' attitude towards language emerges. In general, the Evangelicals try to avoid distinctly ritualistic formulas in their speech. Especially when addressing God in prayer, the emphasis is laid on using one's own words to make the utterances meaningful. However, in the situation described by Matryona it is apparent that sometimes certain words can be effective even when the speaker repeats them without deep comprehension.

Simply saying certain words – asking for repentance – proves to be sufficient for the divine force to bring about a transformation in the speaker.

Besides the more seasoned congregants, Evangelical literature, TV-programmes etc. also teach the new members of the group the specific style of conversion stories. Expressing hesitation about one's ability to narrate or to do it "properly", can be seen as a kind of meta-narrative device that establishes an interpretive frame according to which the listener should understand and judge the narrative (Babcock 1984: 70–71). As the group members are well acquainted with the genre of the conversion narrative, and it is recognised as performance, the speaker assumes responsibility for performing in a socially appropriate way (Bauman 1984: 11). In addition to creating an interpretive frame, proclaiming incompetence in speaking also reaffirms the idea that there indeed is a "correct" way and thus upholds the conventions of the genre (cf. Bauman 1984: 21). The Evangelical narrative pattern is not directly challenged.

In the case of Albina and Matryona, it can be said that the phrase "I don't know how to speak" signifies the worry that they have not learned to express their religious experiences in such a compact narrative following the kind of discourse that is understood to be the "proper" template. But at the same time they both seem to indicate a connection or continuity with the Orthodox tradition. The phrase thus seems to signify the fact that the individual has not actually personally felt the kind of drastic change in her life that she feels is somehow expected by the more experienced believers. Compared to the "exemplar" Evangelical conversion narratives, the overall nature of narratives in the Don group tends to be much more ambivalent, not presenting any sudden rupture in the narrator's spiritual life. Most people in the community understand their coming to God as a continuing process that began before they actively thought about religious matters and continues after the conscious decision to live with God. To an extent, there is a certain culturally motivated resistance to the specifically Evangelical form of being a believer. For people with an Orthodox background,

articulating some kind of total break from the previous understandings of the world is not always considered desirable. Rather, people prefer to see and speak of their spiritual lives in terms of continuity.

Ambiguous narratives that do not follow the supposed Evangelical discourse are superseded by focusing attention on the "exemplar" narratives, such as William's or Nadya's. Narrators who find it difficult to formulate their experiences as well remain on the periphery of the community. However, while at the margins of the Evangelical community, these people are somewhat better positioned in the larger village community as they – at least partly – still carry the Orthodox identity and follow locally approved religious habits.

The ecumenical approach promoted by the Don group provides an accommodating environment for such a positioning. For example, while denominational Protestants (e.g. Baptists and Pentecostals) can be suspicious of attending even other Protestant churches, in the Don community it is quite acceptable that members also go to Orthodox services. It is the congregation's non-denominational character that allows space for somewhat ambivalent positioning and enables people to fit in even without a narrative stressing of a drastic change. But also, the diverse religious background of community members supports the non-denominational ideology.

### Strategic Silencing

While there exists a generally acknowledged narrative form that a good Evangelical is supposed to follow, one aspect of this skill is learning what is not supposed to be talked about. Silencing can be used to fashion the Evangelical self, but being taciturn is also used with non-Evangelicals with the aims of proselytising, avoiding conflicts and finding common ground. A kind of strategic silencing serves multiple, sometimes overlapping purposes.

From the perspective of cultivating the Evangelical self, there are themes and words one is expected to avoid (see also Tuija Hovi in this issue; Hovi 2014: 86). First, there is an obvious stylistic side: a believer is not supposed to use swear words and foul language. Refraining from specific speech practices

such as gossiping is part of becoming a good Christian. Certain things or processes perceived as negative are downplayed in believers' accounts in order to control the surrounding environment, and shape it according to Christian ideals (see also Tuija Hovi in this issue).

Compared to the clearly explicated need to renounce vulgar language and cursing, silencing or avoiding particular themes – doing things with silence – is somewhat more difficult to notice. One topic that is usually not addressed is lapsing from faith. Even when the community members admit that there are people who have joined the church and then left it, these occurrences are softened. For example, the aspect that even in their case the Evangelical message is still spread is emphasised:

It seems to me that those people who were members and then left the church are a half-success [in evangelising] in the sense that now the people kind of know the other side, another alternative in life. (W, b. 1980)

Minimising and silencing negative or unpleasant things and highlighting positive aspects is used to see their activities as meaningful even when confronted with apparent failure.

Another important topic that is approached rather carefully concerns interdenominational problems. While most people have personal experiences of negative encounters and attitudes because of their belonging to an Evangelical community, it is quite common that these issues are not talked about – at least to outsiders – without being directly asked about them, and even when talked about, such difficulties are regularly minimised. For example, when recounting how the initial relationship with the local Orthodox priest was terminated by the bishop, the account is framed with softening remarks:

Everything is good. [...] We communicated with him very closely. [...] Simply later on he was restricted by the bishopric. He was told that people had complained about him [for communicating with Evangelicals]. [...] But otherwise we, we still

see him, everything is very good. In the beginning, we even drove around the villages with him. (M, b. 1978)

Actually, experiencing discrimination can also be utilised in identity building: encountering hardships because of their faith affirms Evangelicals' concept of themselves as true Christians (see Koosa 2015). However, in terms of aiming to create a positive image of the group, directed both to the members and outsiders, conflicts and problems are likely to be silenced and more positive aspects emphasised.

In the following excerpt, Lidia condemns the Orthodox followers who disdain Protestants but also emphasises that Protestants should not focus on problematic issues:

If you believe in God, you must above all radiate this love of God, whether you're Orthodox or Protestant or Catholic. You must always love God and love your neighbour. And we have no right to turn people against each other. This is not in accordance with God. (W, b. 1966)

It seems that there is a dual logic behind avoiding mentioning conflicts and disagreements. This is supposed to avoid or lessen quite sharp confrontations with the Orthodox. Remaining taciturn about articulating problems helps to avoid the occasional accusations that the Evangelicals criticise the Orthodox and create discord in the community. Concentrating on the negative is also seen as hindering developing a good Christian self. Also, downplaying the interdenominational disagreements and difficulties is important in terms of the ecumenical agenda of Don Evangelicals as it helps to maintain the idea of overall Christian unity. As the different aspects are intertwined, it is not always possible to discern whether there are ideological or social reasons behind silencing certain issues.

But silencing of certain topics is also in a more straightforward manner employed to facilitate creating a suitable environment for proselytising and relating to non-Evangelicals. Conscious efforts are made to control language use so as not to utter spe-

cific words that are very likely to alarm their audience in the particular cultural context within which they operate. As a means of encouraging potentially sympathetic, or conciliating sceptical outsiders, and diminishing the felt estrangement concerning the non-Orthodox, the Evangelicals commonly prefer to avoid mentioning specific denominational names. Rather than speaking about being a Baptist for example, people identify themselves as (Evangelical) Christians or Protestants. While this use of words is certainly in accordance with the ecumenical mindset, it is also clearly determined by the specific cultural environment. The pastor commented on this strategy as follows:

Basically, in the Protestant Churches there is now the tendency to get rid of this label of their names. It's because these labels are intimidating for many people. There's the First Baptist Church – [and the people would say] ooh, Baptist! – I will never go to a Baptist church! [Imitating an agitated tone of voice]. But if you call the Church, for example, I don't know, Church of the Home of God [Dom bozhii] for example or, well, I don't know, Church of the New Generation [Novoe pokolenie] or the Friends of Jesus Church [Druz'ia Iisusa], a kind of totally neutral name, for some people it is better. Apparently they would rather go there than to some Baptist church [...]. (M, b. 1979)

There is also a certain tension between the Evangelical assumption that one should verbalise his or her spiritual experience and locally conventional modes of self-expression. In the Orthodox tradition it is not customary to accentuate individual experiences of the transcendental or to seek a personal relationship with God; rather, God is addressed through different mediators. The concept of publicly conveying one's deeply personal experiences and thoughts also departs from Komi villagers' conventional practice. Furthermore, popular discourse interprets the dramatic change of a person as "brainwashing". Moreover, Orthodox critics sometimes speak of Evangelicals as if they "hypnotise" people with their talk. There is a widespread idea that Evangelical Chris-

tians are "zombified" sectarians who go about trying to lure new members into their sect. For example, a woman who was the only Protestant in Don before the missionaries' arrival characterised a typical reaction to her attempts to witness as follows:

And as soon as you start to speak [about faith], everyone will point to their temples and say that you have gone mad, [that] Baptists are sectarians, Baptists are altogether horrible people [...]. (W, b. 1966)

Thus, in the Komi village environment the general opinion of their Orthodox neighbours is that Evangelicals are unwanted "sectarians" (see also Koosa 2015). Broadly, this has a twofold effect. By prohibiting "religious propaganda" in public space, unsympathetic officials restrict Evangelicals' opportunities to spread the Word of God.

It's only possible for us to go from person to person; in this way you can evangelise without problems, that is, simply visit somebody. [...] But there can be no massive evangelising now, specifically here in this district. [...] And this all depends on the specific people in power there. As the boss says, so it is. Because of that, we of course continue the services; nobody prohibits you from believing, gathering in houses, at your own house. (M, b. 1979)

In school, for example, one isn't allowed to talk [about faith] at all [...] A directive was issued. By no means can one say anything [about God]. Because of this one feels that if it is prohibited, then it is prohibited. You can speak at home, but at school you can't. (W, b. 1952)

While officially directives about religious activities in the public spaces concern all faiths, it is common practice that Orthodoxy is treated differently from the others. For example, it has not been exceptional that representatives of the ROC visit schools or are included to official celebrations organised by local municipalities. Also, demonstrating one's

adherence to Orthodoxy is unlikely to get negative attention while quite the opposite holds true for articulating Evangelical affiliation.

Furthermore, people have encountered similar restrictions from their superiors at work. For example, when a member of the Evangelical church became the director of the village's clubhouse, he was explicitly cautioned to abstain from any kind of "religious agitation". So, to an extent, the Evangelicals are forced to submit to the silencing imposed on them from outside in order to avoid direct confrontation with officials or employers. Under such conditions, other kinds of means are conceptualised and implemented as instruments of evangelising. Individual members of the group can also be discouraged from sharing the gospel with their neighbours and acquaintances as they have already experienced or anticipate unfavourable responses. This kind of self-censorship is only reticently admitted to as it is not thought to be in the spirit of being a good Christian.

## Conclusions

Looking at how, when and what the Don Evangelicals say or leave unsaid, it is possible to discern different kinds of silence that are created and employed by the group members. The non-denominational character of the Don community allows space for quite a wide variety of personal dispositions in regard to talking or talking in a certain manner. While Evangelicals place great emphasis on narrative forms of being a believer, not all members of the Don congregation display confidence or willingness to participate in these narrative practices. In some cases people feel that they have not yet proficiently acquired the Evangelical language and are thus concerned with the possibility of saying something "wrong". But there can also be a conscious unwillingness to follow the Evangelical discourse that is demonstrated by the core members and, to an extent, expected by them. Even though the Evangelical message makes sense to people and they highly value their involvement in the congregation's life, they do not wish to conceptualise this belonging in terms of a typical Evangelical conversion narrative. As constancy and adherence to traditions are locally culturally valued, people can

find it undesirable to express their belonging to the group in a manner that accentuates discontinuity from the "tradition" or clearly contradicts it.

Furthermore, while talking is highly valued as a means of expressing one's identity and bringing new people to God, there are non-verbal aspects that are seen as important in constituting the Evangelical self. To a considerable extent, certain embodied practices and comportment are interpreted as reliable signs of people's religious commitment within the community. At the same time, these practices are employed as proselytising tools. Moreover, the emphasis on these embodied, non-verbal expressions of faith at least partially stems from the specific environment, which is often sceptical towards Evangelicals and their mission. These practices enable Evangelicals to better fit in with the pro-Orthodox environment and avoid conflicts with their fellow villagers, while approaching somebody with a straightforward proselytising discourse can often bring about hostile responses. Remaining silent in this context can be explained by the unreceptive stance of the potential audience and by the aim of maintaining good neighbourly relations and avoiding conflicts. It is a kind of constructive silence then, arising from recognising the implicit conflict and realising that reaching a compromise is unlikely. While refraining from explicit evangelising can help one to fit into the Orthodox surroundings and maintain friendly relations with neighbours, it remains a source of some tension for the Evangelicals, who see it as their obligation to testify. This tension is somewhat relieved through specific non-verbal forms of being and acting that are conceptualised as mediating the Word non-verbally. Practising these non-verbal forms involves consciously avoiding negative emotions and cultivating oneself to feel and react in a manner suitable to a good Christian. Excluding certain topics or even words from their discourse is also used to help establish the desired Evangelical self and to create a suitable space for approaching non-Evangelicals.

All of the members of the Don church assert the importance of embodied and emotional aspects of faith. However, while speaking constitutes the

principal religious practice for core members of the congregation, people who tentatively remain on the fringe of the Don group tend to conceptualise and communicate their religious commitment and experience through non-verbal means. As the emotional and embodied features of faith and the specific environment of a Komi village converge, it produces a kind of Evangelical silence. It is important to note that while this is silence in the sense of not following the obligation to speak according to mainstream Evangelical ideology, it is conceptualised as communicative and still bears the Evangelical message.

## Notes

- 1 This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PUT590 and the ERA.Net RUS Plus programme's project 189 (CORUNO), as well as by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory). I thank Elo-Hanna Seljamaa and Pihla Siim, but also Tuija Hovi for their thorough comments on the draft of this paper.
- 2 Fieldwork was carried out jointly with Art Leete.
- 3 In the Russian context, Laur Vallikivi (2009: 76) has also found that for the formerly animist Nenets, the conversion to Baptism primarily has meant learning to express themselves in a new language: "Baptist Russian".
- 4 Sex (W for woman, M for man) and year of birth of the speaker are added to the excerpts from interviews.
- 5 My fieldwork partner, Art Leete, was also present.
- 6 Here Lidia's laughter functions to soften her statement, which could be seen as rather critical of us: even more so as I had only briefly met her once before and for Art Leete it was his first contact with her.

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